December 2020

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Ecologies of Hope:
Understanding Educational Success Among Black Males in an Urban Midwestern City

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Black male students are often comparatively less prepared than White males for the rigors of college-level academic work (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Loury, 2004; Lundy-Wagner & Gasman, 2011; Palmer et al., 2009). Black male college completion rates are the lowest among all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education (Harper, 2005; Strayhorn, 2010). Researchers have turned to resilience theory in an effort to fashion remedies but have found time and time again that its flaws run deep and often reinforce negative ideologies and images of Black culture, communities, and children (APA, 2008; James et al., 2018; James & Lewis, 2009). For instance, the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents* (2008) reviewed the extant research on Black resilience only to conclude that a more culturally respectful and affirming model was critically needed. While the APA framework is a step in an affirmative direction, it does not address the intersection of race and gender, which reduces its applicability to the Black male experience (James & Lewis, 2014). The present study examines Black male educational development through the *blackmaleness* framework developed by James and Lewis (2014), a developmental theory and research methodology designed by Black male researchers to examine the complex lives of Black males in ways that recognize their voice and unique life processes to maturation and educational success.

For the present study, the researchers explored the experiences of seven Black male college graduates who attended Walker High School (pseudonym), located in an underserved community within a Midwestern urban-extensive city (Milner, 2012). This city has an approximate demographic population of 82,060 Black males with a 41% graduation rate. Such a low graduation rate has dire consequences for their access to higher education and employment (Schott Foundation for Publication, 2012). Moreover, Walker High School produced a college readiness rate of only 2% for Black males. While the statistics are dismal, the Black males from our sample persisted to and through higher education, despite attending a troubled high school. Yet, within this community-school space existed a nexus of resources, support structures, and know-how that promoted their success in life and in education. We assert that this nexus represented an ecology of hope.

Deficit-Based Frameworks

Historically, majoritarian narratives have supported a deficit-based framework for understanding Black male academic achievement. Deficit thinking has been defined by Skrla and Scheurich (2001) and Valencia (1997) as the governing epistemology that informs the quality of education and educational leadership for many economically, linguistically, and culturally diverse children in America. As a result, Black male students have been portrayed as incapable, unintelligent, disadvantaged, and at-risk to fail (Fries-Britt, 1997, Harper, 2009; Jenkins, 2006).

While the literature is abundant concerning factors that contribute to or predict academic failure among Black males (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), frameworks of potential and possibility to inform

educational reform are direly needed (James & Lewis, 2014). Reframing the educational success of Black males requires a developed awareness of the complex societal and educational underpinnings amassed against them. It also requires authentic insight into what it takes for these young men to navigate to and through institutional inopportunity throughout the course of their lives.

Institutional Inopportunity

Given the state of Black males in the US, justifiable cause exists to address institutional inopportunity or the ways in which individuals and social groups living out racist ideologies create interlocking institutional inopportunities that ultimately limit the positive growth of Black male youth. Critical connections between educational, economic, and prison systems in the US specifically entrap Black male youth (Mincy, 2006; National Urban League, 2007). These initial studies confirming the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline were further supported by Western's (2007) finding that Black males who drop out of school are incarcerated eight times more than their college educated Black males, thus only one in 25 college educated Black males were incarcerated as compared to one in three for African American male dropouts. Currently, African American youth constitute 43% of juvenile incarcerations, although they make up only 16% of the overall youth population (Sickmund et al., 2019). Past research also found that first time offending Black students were far more likely than first time offending White students to be suspended, even given the same offense (Losen, 2011). Additionally, the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), supervised by the Office for Civil Rights, reflects schooling outcomes for close to 100,000 public

schools throughout the US. An analysis by the United States Government Accountability Office (2018) of the latest CRDC dataset for 2015–2016 highlights the persistence of the discipline gap for African American youth, and Black male youth particularly. For instance, 18% of Black boys experienced out-of-school suspension, while only 5.2% of White males were suspended (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016).

These disparities in schools are entrance ramps into the school-to-prison pipeline, because suspension and expulsions are directly related to school dropout, which is correlated with youth imprisonment (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Muwakkil, 2006). James & Lewis (2014) identify four entry points operative within schools that push Black males into the school-to-prison pipeline, including disproportionate 1) referrals of Black males into the criminal justice system for school policy violations; 2) out-of-school suspensions; 3) school expulsions; and 4) high rates of dropouts among Black males. The dual impact of deficit ideologies and their systemic expressions in the form of educational inopportunity constitutes a severe opportunity gap that every Black male must navigate to varying degrees to achieve educationally.

Opportunity Gap

A strong argument can be made that America's imbalanced opportunity structure has sadly created substantial differences in the educational journey for students of color. The term *opportunity gap* shifts our attention from outcomes to inputs, to the deficiencies in the foundational and formative components of societies, schools, and communities that produce significant and lasting differences in educational and socioeconomic outcomes (Welner & Carter,

2013). Essentially, achievement gaps highlight symptoms, while an imbalanced opportunity structure focuses on root causes. Learning and life chances depend on key out of school factors such as health, housing, nutrition, safety, and enriching experiences, in addition to the opportunities provided through formal elementary and secondary school preparation (Rothstein, 2013). In sum, it is problematic to theorize solutions for Black males while ignoring deficit ideologies, educational inopportunity, and the opportunity gap.

Research Question

Within this context, the intent of this research was to present the counter narratives of Black males who successfully negotiated deficit-based societal challenges and institutional inopportunity to achieve academic success. Their voices inform efforts to promote success among Black males educated in urban environments. The overarching research question guiding this study was: How did community resources and networks influence the life development, college readiness, and educational success of Black males in a Midwestern urban city?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Blackmaleness

Anzaldúa argued that researchers examining underrepresented, marginalized groups of people should employ new theories to aid in the understanding of their experiences (Anzaldúa, 1990, as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In an effort to advance the dialogue about Black male success, it is necessary to explain the developmental and sometimes contradictory

processes that Black males undergo as they negotiate cycles of institutional inopportunity. Blackmaleness is the multidimensional, shifting, and oftentimes contradictory reality of Black males (James & Lewis, 2014).

James and Lewis (2014) synthesized Du Bois (1903), Woodson (1933), Ellison (1995), Cross (1991), and Baldwin (1992) through a *permanence of race* lens, a central pillar of critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Bell, 1995). The resulting blackmalesness theory reveals that self-actualization among Black males is a "transgenerational struggle, a quest through shapeless, boundless, and ever shifting social-psychological processes" (James & Lewis, 2014, p. 3). Furthermore, blackmaleness theorizes that Black males develop by consistently negotiating two competing societal extremes. First, the subtractive extreme of blackmaleness is "a nexus of social limitations, messaged and materialized as an inescapable … system of ideological, institutional, and individual inopportunities with the absolute disenfranchisement of Black males as a chief end" (James & Lewis, 2014, p. 273). These subtractive realities are opposed by the productive extreme of blackmaleness or "the transgenerational collective force, organized to contest, defy, resist, and persist, despite the presence of social barriers particularly constructed to make war with the potential of Black males in American society and education" (James & Lewis, 2014, p. 273).

In this theory, Black males regularly have experiences that are subtractive and productive, as ongoing cycles through these extremes of Black male reality are unavoidable. However, exploring how Black males effectively transverse the "void" between the subtractive and productive moments of life provides new insights. James and Lewis's (2014) analysis highlighted the importance of difference

makers (parents, extended family networks, community members, and progressive educators) as guides and stabilizing forces for Black males as they navigate between struggles and successes. Importantly, this framework highlights the need to center the lived realities and voices of Black males when fashioning research, policy, or educational practices purported to support the positive development of Black males.

Resilience and CRT Critique of the Field

Resilience is a popular research framework and has often been used with varying degrees of effectiveness to explore positive human development, despite exposure to risk factors (Gordon & Song, 1994; Masten, 1994). The past five decades have seen resilience applied as a framework to understand the development of children and adolescents coping with family and community violence (Straus, 1983), mental illness (Reivich et al., 2012), family dysfunction (Rutter, 1979), poverty, and drug abuse (Garmezy, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1977, 1992). Moreover, Waxman et al. (2003) concluded that "resiliency generally refers to those factors and processes that limit negative behaviors associated with stress and result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of adversity" (p. 2).

Given the aforementioned research, much of the resilience was derived from Eurocentric developmental theories and should include additional frameworks produced by Black males to analyze, theorize, and transform the realities of Black males. For instance, James (2010) employed critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997) to critique resilience research and concluded that resilience is based upon perceived deviations from a normative Eurocentric conception of success; thus, resilience research often results in predictive models promoting assimilation into Eurocentric norms. Supportively, resilience has been critiqued for disproportionately labeling students of color as "at risk" (Waxman & Huang, 1996); mis-identification of individuals as "at risk" when they exhibit normal behaviors associated with healthy adults (Howard et al., 1999); and the imposing of risk labels prior to any measurable academic struggles among students (Brown et al., 2001).

Resilience among African Americans has a complex history and research tradition, and includes the Black family, extended family, kinship networks, and the Black church (Hargrett, 2014). Yet, most resilience research fails to consider the cultural nuances in how resilience is developed, supported, or expressed in African American learners (APA, 2008). This work sought to address a gap in this line of inquiry, namely taking the APA's (2008) charge to examine African American development in a more holistic way. The researchers acknowledge the critical contribution of the APA (2008) framework but contend that their treatment of the role of the Black community in the development of resilience was limited to culturally based programs and racial socialization. The qualitative analysis explores how this Black community imparted a "transgenerational collective force, organized to contest, defy, resist, and persist, despite the presence of social barriers particularly constructed to make war with the potential of Black males in American society and education" (James & Lewis, 2014, p. 273).

Methodology

This study employed a critical race theory lens as a way to present the narratives and voices of academically successful Black males raised in urban environments (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Counterstorytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes (Decuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). The use of counterstories provides an avenue to challenge privileged discourses and amplify the voices of marginalized groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). In education, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) suggested that counterstories can be found in various forms, including personal stories/narratives, other people's stories/narratives, and composite stories/narratives.

Data Collection and Analysis

To understand the participants' assessment of how their urban schooling experiences impacted their overall academic success, a case study design was employed. Case study research involves the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting (Yin, 2009). As Yin (2009) observed, case study is a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon variables from their context. In this study, it was seemingly impossible to separate periods of educational inopportunity from the societal context from which successful Black males emerged. The unique contribution of a case study approach is that it provides the researcher with a holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon within its social context (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

This study was a secondary analysis of archival data the original researcher collected through in-depth interviews. The original study was conducted with graduates of Walker High School, an urban mid-Western public school in the United States. All participants who agreed to be interviewed were given pseudonyms. At the time of the data collection, Walker High reported a population of approximately 577 students, and 94.8% of the student population identified as African American. The primary researcher obtained a research agreement with a community service organization, the Rise Leadership Program (pseudonym), to assist in identifying individuals for the study. The Rise Leadership Program was founded in 1990 to link the education efforts of Walker high school to the broader community and improve educational and personal outcomes for Walker's students.

A secondary analysis using a previously collected dataset was conducted. The data were transcribed, coded, examined, deconstructed, compared, and categorized. The quality of data analysis depends on repeated, systematic searching of the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Repeat coding was performed to review interpretations in the light of new data gathered, and as new codes were generated, until no new insights were gleaned (Riley, 1990). The researchers searched for broad themes within the individual narrative data sets and reexamined the data for overlapping themes. Data were then reduced into themes through the open and closed coding processes, and two themes or parent codes resulted. The two emerging themes were conceptualized into a framework entitled the ecology of hope model, which is detailed in the forthcoming findings section.

Findings

The findings detailed two key emergent themes of *extended family* and *extended kinship support network*, which when taken together animated an *ecology of hope*. APA (2008) contended that,

because the extended family and kinship networks are seen as strengths for families, more research is needed in this critical area. In particular, psychologists need to understand how socialization processes with peers,

extended family members, and religious communities influence the identity development process. (p. 39)

The extended family describes a series of relations with blood relatives and adoptive relatives that form a vital set of support structures which contribute to positive identity development and productive decision making, enabling academic and life success. These relationships become instructive in many ways to the point that all other relationships are tested for a similar degree of safety, trust, and love. These wider relationships are referred to as the extended kinship support network and are marked by kinship or an ethos of collective uplift and care. The extended kinship support network for the participants consisted of churches and a particular school-based student support organization called Rise. These organizations became impactful because they provided points of human contact for the participants that exuded a kinship similar to their extended families.

Extended Family

The participants in this study consistently referenced how various family members contributed to their positive development. The prevalent theme of extended family included both blood relatives and adoptive family members, which remain a social-cultural strength in Black communities. More importantly, the term extended family for this inquiry centered the kinship bonds that existed between biological family members. This inner circle of collective support manifested in various ways as discussed by the participants. The support included moral guidance, inspiration, and leadership. Furthermore, for these Black males, the extended family were consistent sites for dependable advice and positive role models to internalize.

First, Kehlin spoke positively of his sibling and how her life decisions strongly influenced his positive behavior: "My sister was a great model for me also. She set a great example for me to stay on track and stay out of trouble." Likewise, Jamael, being one of the younger siblings in his family, observed his older brothers and sisters making life decisions that resulted in both positive and negative consequences. He was able to avoid excessive growing pains by listening to his mother's advice and by looking at the negative consequences experienced by his siblings.

> I do feel that because I had other brothers and sisters when I was born, I was always able to watch what they did and learn what not to do, if that makes sense. So, staying out of trouble was just a matter of me watching someone else getting into the same crap. I've been in a lot of stuff since I've been to college. Who hasn't? But, I was smart enough to learn to apply what I learned when I was growing up. I was still able to apply what my mother taught me to situations I dealt with.

Khalil echoed similar sentiments and credited the support of his immediate family for successes in life and an education. Khalil states, "Particularly, it was my mother and my brother. They stayed on me so much. My oldest brother was very supportive."

Jibril's family anchored and protected him from outside influence through their love and support. Jibril stated,

> For the most part, my family was very supportive. They gave me a lot of things that I needed and wanted. This was so I wouldn't need to seek help or attention from anyone else. Or, so I wouldn't get caught up in the wrong thing. With their support, I was always in the right place at the right time for the most part.

Kehlin's family members also demonstrated strong affection for one another and

dependable support for his views and life goals. Kehlin explained,

> My family is very supportive, and they are very consistent. They are very open to actually hearing my thoughts and feedback. They take into consideration my viewpoints of what I want to do. In my family, there was very good caretakers. We have people who actually care about each other in my family. Well, the strengths I see in my family is that we all stick together and support pretty much each individual. We support each other in whatever endeavors we want to do. And they just want to see the entire family be successful.

Additionally, the majority of the Black male participants mentioned their mothers as a key component to their success. The descriptions of their mothers suggest that, for these Black males, their mothers held a stable and consistent influence on their academic and social development. For example, Faris explained,

> In terms of strength, I think of my mom as a fighter. If she believes in something, she goes out to get it. Her predictions are usually right. I respect her a lot for this. She's very resilient, very much a fighter, and can make a dollar out of 15 cents. She's able to make something out of nothing.

Faris also recalled his mother's visible engagement within his school community. This level of participation from his mother demonstrates how influential the collaboration between teachers and parents can be when effective communication is prioritized. Faris recalled,

> I would say my mom was very involved very early on and throughout my primary and secondary education. She was at the school all the time, like involved in school councils. All my teachers and all my principals knew her.

> They knew what she looked like. They always threatened me with that.

Also, Jibril's mother was very positive, caring, and supportive:

> Every man loves their momma. My mother was just so positive. She is so strong and was always very present. She supported me, no matter what. I never felt like there was anything I couldn't talk to my mother about.

Lastly, Jamael respected the level of support his mother provided despite her lack of a college education. According to him, just because she did not hold a B.A. degree did not negate the value she placed on education and her son's academic training.

> Well, my mom, she's always there. She only has a high school education. She has a high school diploma. She may not know how to tell me about counseling and English or anything on that level. But, she definitely can encourage me to continue to do all that I can learn in order to be successful and do what I have to do.

Moreover, grandparents were also critical sources of wisdom and support for many Black males. Both of Aquil's grandmothers were firmly rooted in his life and supported him across various areas.

> With spiritual help, finances, and everything else, both of my grandmothers have been very supportive. So, if I have questions or need help with anything, I go to them. They have been my rock and supported me unconditionally throughout my whole high school, college, and graduate careers.

Also, Aquil observed his grandfather's work in the community as an expression of a shared sense of responsibility and collective care. His grandfather personified a hard work ethic and commitment to his community. This translated to Aquil in a

positive way and left a lasting impression on him.

> For a number of years, my grandfather worked for the park district and he coached basketball. Besides doing that, he would shovel snow from the entire block during the wintertime. During the summertime, he would cut the neighbor's lawn because she was unable to do so herself. So, he was very active in the community and expanded the notion of what a family is. Also, he taught us that although you have family, blood relatives, your community members and neighbors serve as your outside family. He instilled in us a sense of nature versus nurture and how they complemented each other.

Cousins also play a role in the lives of participants. For instance, Kehlin's cousin provided physical shelter, material resources, and academic advice that sustained him in times of need. Kehlin shared that

> the most influential person in my success would have to be my cousin, Corey. He has his Master's degree and we're the same age. He's so much further along that I am, academics wise. He's living his life, in his profession, and always makes me strive to do better. He always gives me good advice and tries to help me keep my head straight.

In all, the family ties that connected these Black males to various family members were built upon a solid base of communal understanding. Since consistent trust, respect, physical presence, and love were purposefully given by extended family members, the Black males in this study were encompassed by an ecology or web of familial support, even within a community plagued by social ills like crime and gangs. Too often, these communities are viewed narrowingly, through crime or poverty

statistics, which is dehumanizing. It is critical that the resilient nature of the Black extended family be highlighted as a counternarrative to stereotyping entire Black communities as dysfunctional. For the participants, these tightly connected bonds mediated their receptivity to constructive guidance from members of their extended family. The participants were able to apply lessons learned over the years from siblings' positive and negative examples, and replicate community diligence as demonstrated by their grandparents.

While the extended family is situated within a certain social radius and offers numerous developmental benefits, the tentacles of the extended family reach far. In fact, the connective bridges that provide Black males access to resources, love, and guidance are not limited to immediate relatives. The bonds between Black males and their extended kinship support networks are often just as powerful and influential to their development.

Extended Kinship Support Network

The extended kinship support network includes close kinships with individuals within community-based organizations. In this study, the key school-based organization was Rise, and the critical community-based organization was the Black church. These networks of relationships became powerful and influential only when the individuals representing these organizations exuded similar degrees of safety, trust, and love as the participants' extended family. These wider relationships are referred to as the extended kinship support network and are marked by kinship or an ethos of collective uplift and care. For instance, the Rise organization, according to the participants, offered authentic connectivity similar to the extended family. As a result, Black males appreciated the resources and were

motivated to perform well in school and in life as they interacted with the school-based staff at Rise. Likewise, the participants spoke at length about the various support and influence their church membership, spirituality, and individual members of their church family had on them. Overall, the extended kinship support networks provided increased academic support and spiritual nourishment, and expanded the participants' social capital.

Community Kinship Support

Within this Black community, there were positive kinship influences, and more complicated relationships with members of the community who took part in criminal activity, but still displayed devotion to members of their community. Being involved in the community allows one to take advantage of existing social networks that help promote success, but the nature of that network may be defined on a spectrum of devotion and deviance; individuals representing either extreme were critical supports for participants. Faris's family fostered strong community ties through community gatherings at the family's home, and represented the *devotion* extreme of kinships. Faris described this kinship:

> My family knew all the neighbors and all the neighbors knew them. They would all come over to barbecue. If one person had a barbecue, the whole neighborhood had a barbecue. So, everyone would come over. Everybody knew each other, and I think a lot of it was because of my grandmother. The house she lived in was the house she raised my mother and my mother's siblings in. So, they all grew up in that house, on that block, and all the kids knew each other. All the families knew each other. It's a little bit different now that everyone has moved away, but that

was the community life I experienced growing up.

Conversely, James noted that crime was problematic, but only some community residents took part in "deviant" behaviors, and many of these same individuals also displayed devotion to community members. James noted:

> I saw a lot of negative things growing up. My community was simply about drugs and sports. There weren't many community leaders out to support us or do anything that I can remember, to be honest. I occasionally remember books clubs, every now and then, or politicians coming around during election time. But, I don't remember any leaders other than the drug dealers. Speaking of drug dealers, these were some of my main supporters in the community. They believed in my sports ability. I was really good at basketball. They would take me under their wings and tell me I wasn't going the route they took. They told me I would achieve in college, and they would uplift me instead of trying to get me to do what they were doing. They would always say that, "That boy is going to college. He goin' to be something in life."

The communities in which individuals live and thrive are a living social system full of contradictions—devotion and deviance. The urban community, in this unique, dynamic form, can serve as a form of familial capital wealth (Yosso, 2005), yet the participants highlighted the role of individuals who had made the choice to take part in criminal activity, while encouraging others not to do the same.

School-Based Support

The Black men in this study found great benefit in being part of the Rise Leadership

Program. Aquil credited the mentors at Rise for helping him develop the endurance necessary to push through to success.

> Rise helped me develop the level of strength, courage, and tenacity to push forward, whether the obstacles were a mountain or a little puff. The Rise mentors all played essential roles in helping me develop outside of the academic strip and helped build my self-esteem. They prepared me to go to college ... showed me that to achieve excellence, had to put in hard work ... even if I fail, I have to get right back up and do it again. Without ... counseling, advising, and mentorship, I don't think I would be in the position that I'm in now.

The nature of their care and love mediated Rise's impact on Aquil.

> They were present throughout my whole process of high school and in almost every element of it. They showed that they cared. ... They helped our teachers understand us better and that helped break the ice. We became not just a number in the classroom. They helped our teachers understand that we had personality, aspirations, and dreams.

Khalil, who joined Rise later in high school, described the benefits provided by the organization once he decided to be committed.

> I knew of Rise, but didn't start collaborating with them until later in high school. They got my brother into college … and helped a lot of the upperclassmen. Rise was one of the exceptional groups and organizations that played an enormous role in my high school and college life. They were around, from day one, and have been there ever since. In my junior year, I devoted every single change I got to them, whether it was my lunch time or gym period. I believed in them and they believed in me.

Kehlin appreciated the accountability of the Rise staff. They pushed him to maximize his opportunities and follow up with specific tasks. He explains,

> My mentor, in Rise, always stayed on top of me and made sure I was handling the things I needed to handle. My Rise mentors stayed on me. They made sure I applied to as many colleges as possible, even some I didn't know. They knew about African Americans and African American males and the opportunities that we sometimes missed. They encouraged me to take advantage of everything available and pushed me in the right direction.

James became involved with Rise in the latter part of his high school years and immediately recognized the benefit of the program.

> Rise did an excellent job with providing a strong support system and helping us see our own potential. I think Rise is still doing well because they have been around for such a long time. Part of what they realize is that to tap into the lives of urban youth, or people in general, you must have a long history. People need to see the good times, the bad times, and the relationships that you've established and maintained. Rise establishes great relationships with students, helping them in high school and beyond. I came to them at the end of my junior year of high school and they started helping me immediately. Even after high school, they helped me understand how to operate in college and taught the importance of time management. They were a strong base of support during my college years, providing my basic needs (care packages), and staying in touch.

Jibril's high school experience was better once Rise began to support his goals. Rise held a powerful presence and served as a strong support system for Jibril.

> Rise was very present in my life and touched on every individual aspect of who I was. They were powerful enough to me that I wanted to listen to them and take into consideration what they were saying. They knew exactly who I was as a person. They represented a group of individuals with different resources who reached out to and helped a group of people that everyone wasn't willing to work with. They came from the heart. A lot of people want to achieve, but really don't have people to push them or help them reach out. Rise was that set of people in our community. They were consistent, they wanted to hear your story, and they wanted to get your story back to the community to help others.

Rise also gave Jamael an alternative safe space to be and converse:

> At one point, in high school, before Rise, there was really nothing to do. Many of my best friends were in a gang there, but I didn't associate with the gangs. My friends did and we would hang out sometimes. I knew that being a part of a gang wasn't something that I was interested in at all. When Rise came around, it gave me something else to do.

Community organizations are critical to supplement the love and care provided by families within Black communities, particularly in schools that are underperforming. If members of these organizations exude familial love, students will gravitate to them and apply the life lessons that organizations like Rise want to instill in Black male youth.

Church Family

Black males are supported by various people and places outside of the home and school environment (Baldridge et al., 2011). Participants explained how church members supported them in their goals to achieve success, further demonstrating the reach of their extended kinship support network. Faris's church relationships encouraged him and helped keep him grounded.

> Sometimes church can be a little restrictive, but it's certainly a community. I have a few good relationships with sisters at my church. They hold me accountable. They give their opinions, even when I don't ask for them. ... My church members were the people who helped me when I couldn't find a job. They told me I still had value when I didn't feel that way.

Jamael found a strong sense of family within his church. He experienced support every step of the way.

> My moral support was through the church, through the pastor and his family. The pastor's family was just as big as my family, so we're really close. Our church was more of a family church, it was not one of those big mega churches or anything like that. So, because it was a small church, there were a lot of more personal relationships, and that helped me a whole lot. My pastor and the congregation would always make sure my family was okay. They set us up with scholarships and did everything to boost our lives, whether it was personal, social, religious, or academic. My pastor is a good person, a really good man. He tried to step in once my dad died and did everything he could to help us. He never really gave up on me and always supported me.

Jibril's church family helped in different ways and were an integral part of his development.

> I come from a very supportive, church-going family. So, my church family is very involved in my life. My pastor worked in the community, so he would know when I would get in trouble at school. He would also come to the school to check on me. So, if he caught me doing something that I wasn't supposed to be doing, he would get on top of it. My pastor wrote recommendation letters for me for college. He was there to witness my development from youth to an adult. The congregation always came together as a team. There were a lot of people who had children my age, so everyone reached out to help one another. Members had different roles and jobs in society, so they were able to give advice. I know in my church we had like three teachers who are teachers in the community schools. So, they were able to help tutor us in areas we were struggling in and give us good feedback on the schools. My family was always able to go to the church if we needed help or support. Our church family was there for us. My church also helped me get a job.

As exemplified by Rise and the church organization, these two institutions mimicked a certain culture of care, guidance, and support also offered by the participants' extended family. It was this shared sense of kinship with these organizations that mediated participants' access and openness to use the resources and support provided to community members. This wider array of kinship support networks must have synergy with extended families and their ethos of love, support, and care. Taken together, extended families and kinship networks form an ecology of hope

protecting, preparing, and pushing Black males to life and academic success.

Discussion

The overarching research question for this study was: How did community resources and networks influence the life development, college readiness, and educational success of Black males in a Midwestern urban city? Their counternarratives provided a first-hand account of what it takes to be successful in urban environments; it takes the love and care of both extended families and kinship networks. The Black men in this study experienced interlocking beneficial connections within and across their communities that manifested into useful economic, cultural, socioemotional, and academic resources. In the present study, two major themes emerged from the lived experiences of successful Black males: extended family and extended kinship support networks. Collectively, these themes animate the ecology of hope model. Figure 1 illustrates the encompassing nature of the Black extended family and kinship networks which positively impacted the development of Black males in this study.

Figure 1

Ecology of Hope
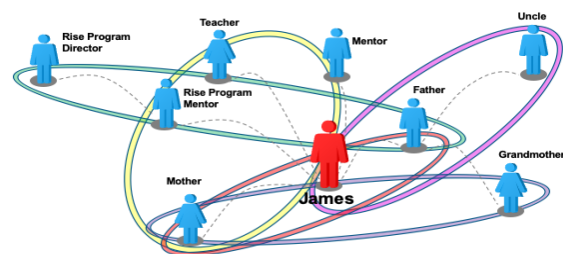
Ecology of hope describes a nexus of difference-making relationships in the form of immediate and extended family networks,

community members, parents, and community-based organizations, which supported Black males in this study to thrive and achieve positive academic outcomes (e.g., college graduates). Moreover, each individual described a unique ecology that protected, nurtured, and sustained them, despite the inopportunities associated with attending a high-need school and living in an underserved community.

Ecologies of hope advance and complicate the conversation concerning the supportive nature of the Black community, and its role in fostering optimal development among Black male youth. APA (2008) recognized the importance of the Black family, mentoring relationships, and the Black spiritual community and churches, but in the most general sense. The present work confirms this stance, while detailing the processes at work that make extended and kinship networks so critical to Black student development. James and Lewis (2014) spoke to the importance of difference makers during the formative years for successful Black males. The present research confirms but also details the impact of several types of difference-making relationships that are requisite for urban Black male optimal development. Yet, to truly draw empirical conclusions that can be generalized across urban communities and schools, and to African American males generally, future research should develop survey instruments for larger sampling. Such an effort will require researchers to operationalize measures for Black male's exposure to difference makers but also to measure the level of internalization of positive life skills and knowledge gained within an individual's ecology of hope.

Conclusion

Traditional resilience literature has been problematic and perpetuates the idea that something is inherently pathological with African American culture and communities (James & Lewis, 2009). The present study expands resilience literature through exploring the assets embedded within an urban African American community, and how these local resources were leveraged to counter educational and racial inopportunity. More importantly, these resources were organized organically to meet the unique developmental needs of individual Black males. The ecology of hope conceptualizes an asset-based approach to resilience that recognizes the importance of parental support, extended families, community kinship, church membership, and school-based support structures to promote optimum maturation among African American urban males. It is critical to note, as illustrated in Figure 1, that these resources overlap to form a nexus of advice, insights, encouragement, correction, and support. To conclude, urban African American communities are not devoid of agency, difference makers, nor loving and supporting relationships, but are a critical source of resilience that must be recognized, sustained, and leveraged.

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Appendix A

Figure 1

Ecology of Hope