

Original Paper

Introducing the Black Male Life Success Theory

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Received: May 1, 2020

Accepted: May 7, 2020

Online Published: May 21, 2020

doi:10.22158/jetss.v2n2p50

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jetss.v2n2p50>

Abstract

For decades, literature has described success for Black males as an unattainable phenomenon due to the nearly insurmountable hardships they face. Although this narrative has changed within the last 15 years, there are insignificant amounts of research on Black male life success. This study sought to identify and discover how 14 Black males in Central Virginia achieved life success. This study defined life success for Black males utilizing the psychological construct of well-being. This grounded theory study identified a framework for Black male life success which included a definition for life success as well as common attributes and circumstances of Black males on their journey towards life success.

Keywords

black males, African American males, life success, success, well-being

1. Introduction

Life Success is a combination of the well-being constructs life satisfaction and flourishing. Life satisfaction is an exploration and evaluation of one's happiness with their life (Cheung & Lucas, 2015; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2013). Shin and Johnson (1978) discovered that happiness is more than mere pleasure; life satisfaction is a positive assessment of life situations according to individual's unique needs and resources relative to the environment and culture in which they function. Diener et al. (1985) described life satisfaction as one's judgment of their circumstance in comparison to the standard that each individual set for themselves which has not been externally imposed.

Life success is multifaceted and difficult to measure (Griffin & Page, 1996). Bostock (2014) indicated, "the way that success is defined shapes our working lives. It affects how organizations perform, who progresses within them and how power is exercised" (p. 8). Additional research has attempted to develop theories to explain how a successful life is achieved, including but not limited to attribution, motivation,

achievement, and goal theories (Covington, 2000; Heider, 1958; Locke & Latham, 2002; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953; Weiner, 1972). With decades of research for multiple groups, there is a surprising lack of data concerning the pathways to or definition of life success for Black males beyond formalized schooling.

Diener et al. (2010) indicated that flourishing expands upon Bradburn's (1969) definition of psychological well-being as the balance between positive affect and negative affect. Further it has been described as, a combination of feeling good mentally and functioning effectively (Huppert & So, 2013). Flourishing is subjective, but not exclusively tied to emotion. Flourishing balances individual's desire to achieve with positive thoughts concerning choices they've made to get there (Seligman, 2011). Theoretical research combining both constructs of flourishing and life success known as the Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Motivation and Achievement (PERMA) Theory (Seligman, 2011) was instrumental in identifying successful Black males for this study. Ultimately, on their own, these studies have revealed very little about Black male life success.

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

Fourteen participants were selected for this study. These participants for this study identified as male, Black or African American, lived in the Central Virginia region, had at a high school diploma/GED, and were between the ages of 25 and 40.

2.2 Interviews

Data in this research were collected through semi-structured interviews. These interviews ranged from a minimum of 37 minutes to a maximum of 90 minutes. The interview questions were based on the interview protocol developed by Jordan (2014) utilized in her research concerning female educators breaking the glass ceiling. That interview protocol was amended to ask additional questions specific to the barriers for Black men, as identified in the research literature.

2.3 Measuring Well-being

At the conclusion of the individual interviews, a paper copy of the PERMA-Profiler was administered to assess the participant's well-being. The PERMA-Profiler (Butler & Kern, 2016) is an assessment tool utilized to demonstrate well-being in participants based on the PERMA theory. The PERMA-Profiler scored participants on a scale of 0-10, measuring nine categories including positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, achievement, health, loneliness, negative affect, and happiness. This 23-question assessment measured and described well-being through the multiple dimensions mentioned. The presence of the positive measures, along with the absence of the negative measures, indicates a profile of one who is assessed as well.

2.4 Data Analysis

Grounded theory coding typically involves three levels: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once codes and categories from each participant were identified, the

researcher conducted cross-case analysis among the participant codes to determine common themes between them. Themes and relationships were then synthesized into a theory that identifies the definition of life success for Black males in Central Virginia as well as a framework concerning the journey towards life success.

3. Results

This study revealed rich and descriptive data concerning the journey towards life success for Black males in the Central Virginia area. Several themes and categories were discovered in this study which ultimately led to the development of the Black Male Life Success Theory.

Seven themes emerged in the axial coding process: navigating hardships, development of positive relationships, receiving support, future orientation, self-efficacy, spiritual attribution, and an affirming community. Breaking down the emergent categories by themes and codes assisted with the description of the participant's journeys. One overarching theme, the navigation of hardships, was evident as the core category. Two subcategories, internal and external locus of control, emerged in the selective coding stage. The data below describes the results.

3.1 Core Category: Navigating Hardships

The core category, navigating hardships, emerged from the analysis of 1,094 interview excerpts from the 14 participants. These excerpts were instrumental in describing the phenomenon of life success for each of the participants. Just over 27% ($n = 303$) of the excerpts were related to the core category of the navigation of hardships. Through open coding, the 1,094 excerpts were analyzed into 101 individual codes, which were analyzed into the core category and two sub-categories. The following codes housed excerpts that led to the creation of the core category: identity ($n = 111$), discrimination ($n = 95$), education ($n = 44$), incarceration and absenteeism ($n = 27$), and socio-economic ($n = 26$).

3.1.1 Sub-category 1: External Locus of Control

Participants consistently mentioned locus factors which played a significant role in their journey of life success. Demonstrated in these external factors were a wide range of experiences grouped into three themes: the participant's affirming community, development of positive relationships, and the receipt of support. This study found that a combination of two of the three factors of an affirming community, positive relationships, or the receipt of support were necessary for advancement onto life success.

a. Affirming Community

All 14 participants (100%) acknowledged the Central Virginia affirming community playing a role in their journey to success. Only four of the 14 participants (29%) graduated from high school outside of the Central Virginia region. Each participant described the role Central Virginia played in their journey. Some participants believed that the affirming community found in Central Virginia directly attributed to their success. One hundred percent of the participants alluded to the affirming community as a factor in their success.

b. Development of Positive Relationships

The combination of the affirming community within the Central Virginia region and the development of positive relationships within the locality played a prominent role in 13 of the 14 (93%) participant's road to success. Participant interviews revealed that these positive relationships during their adulthood, were primarily found in the form of male mentors at work and members within the community.

Positive relationships with males within the community played a role in several participants' journeys as well. Ten of the 14 participants (71%) discussed positive community relationships with males.

Positive relationships developed in the Central Virginia region provided a much-needed connection to help participants within this study to thrive. These relationships not only served as positive connections, but they also, at times, doubled as support structures for the participants.

c. Receipt of Support

The combination of the external factors found: the affirming community, combined with positive relationships and additional support, provided the strongest foundation for the study's participants. Support was a consistent theme referenced for all 14 participants. Support was often received from immediate or extended family, friends, or community members spanning participant's childhood years through adulthood.

The lack of financial resources was evident for participants. Eleven of the 14 participants (78%) self-reported growing up below middle class with families supporting them the best way they knew how. External factors contributing to the successful navigation of hardships towards a successful life were extremely important. However, the affirming community, the building of positive relationships, and receiving support along the journey are low locus of control (Weiner et al., 1987). Internal factors leading to life success have a high locus of control and were an extremely crucial factor in the journey towards life success.

3.1.2 Sub-category 2: Internal Locus of Control Leading to Life Success (Success Mindset)

Factors deemed to be within one's control played a significant role in the journey towards life success for the participants. These internal factors were analyzed and reduced to one primary heading with three sub-themes. The primary heading identified was a "success mindset". This success mindset can be attributed to three sub-themes consistently found in participant's journeys: future orientation, self-efficacy, and spiritual attribution.

3.2 *Self-efficacy*

Believing in oneself is a key element of achieving goals (Bandura, 1986). In Whiting's (2009) Scholar Identity Model he described self-efficacy for students as those who consistently reject stereotypes imposed on them because they deem themselves to be intelligent and talented. While Whiting's (2009) study identified scholars within the academic arena, this study sought to identify the origin of some of that self-efficacy through the retelling of their journey. Participants revealed that their self-efficacy mindset originated with the positive and supportive relationships in their life while simultaneously rejecting negative stereotypes imposed on them.

Participants indicated that it is not easy to have self-efficacy due to constantly having to battle negative stereotypes perpetuated by others. Several participants described developing their positive identity through the desire to be the opposite of the negative statistics or stereotypes which was a significant difference from the life success and flourishing definitions of well-being found in the literature. This study found that participant's belief in their ability to achieve combined with the development of future goals contributed to the successful life journey.

3.3 Future Orientation

The prospect of the future played a significant role in the internal thought process for 100% of participants in this study. Participants consistently set goals, created expectations, or set individual development milestones for the future that they aspired to reach. The thought of reaching these goals motivated participants to continue along their journey despite the hardships that may have come their way.

Participants considered the future when making decisions along the journey towards life success. Participants described their goals in life when they were younger up to the present. Aspirations from childhood to high school included wanting to be a pediatrician, a rapper, a professional athlete, a state trooper, a business owner, a father, and an NCAA Division I athlete among other things.

Future orientation was critical to participant's life success. Participants were clear about what their future was to look like as they recalled their journey to success. Goals were set, which created individual motivation for each participant to have expectations for goal achievement. Participants did not expect to succeed only through future orientation and self-efficacy; they also attributed much of their success to their Christian spiritual affiliation.

3.4 Spiritual Attribution

Thirteen of the 14 participants (93%) in this study self-identified as Christian. For Black males who practice their spirituality regularly, the church has been a place where they can receive support and guidance (Robinson, Jones-Eversley, Moore, Ravenell, & Adedoyin, 2018). Many of the participants spoke in-depth, not only about the support they have received due to their spirituality, but also how their faith guides them along their journey.

3.5 Life Success

Determining the definition of life success by the participants was an important and integral part of this study in order to determine how life success was achieved. To make sense of the journeys and paths participants traveled in order to achieve life success, the researcher had to first determine what each participant's definition of life success was. "What is your definition of success?" was the first non-demographic question asked in each interview. Although the interview process was semi-structured, determining what success was to each participant enabled additional clarifying questions to help shape the definition. After interviewing 14 Black males from the Central Virginia region and synthesizing their definitions of success, life success within this study has been defined as follows: the act of achieving set goals, influencing goal achievement for others, discovering one's purpose, not falling victim to negative

statistics or stereotypes, and/or being content with one's current circumstances.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the Black Male Life Success Theory which illustrates the cycle by which life success is achieved, for Black men in the Central Virginia Region, beginning with the navigation of hardships and ending, potentially, with life success.

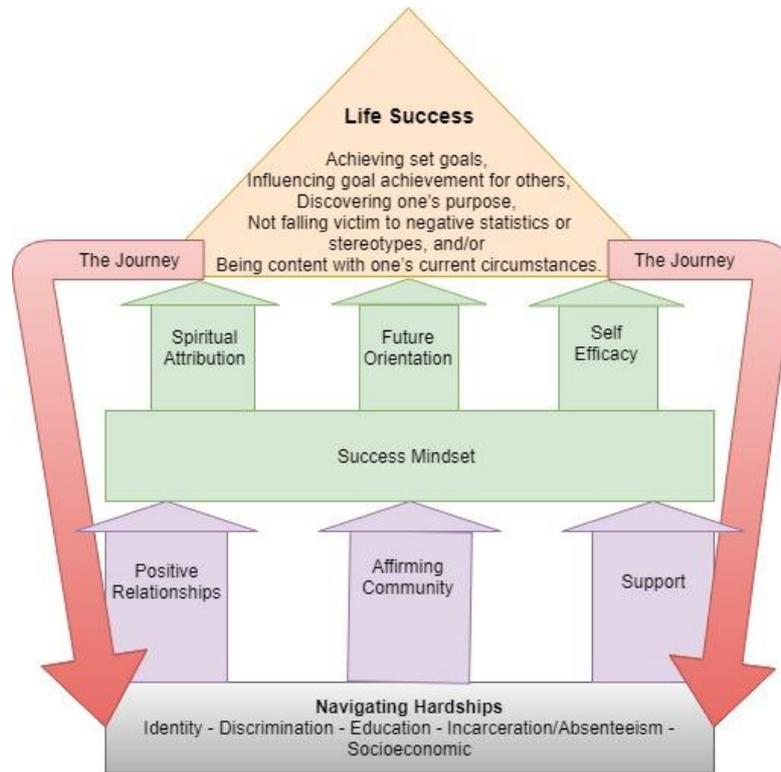


Figure 1. Black Male Life Success Theory

3.6 PERMA Validation

After each interview, Butler and Kern's (2014) PERMA-Profilers was utilized to measure Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory, a multidimensional approach to well-being and flourishing for each participant. Seligman (2011) suggests that five well-being constructs: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment can be utilized to determine well-being. This study utilized the PERMA-Profiler to validate the well-being of the participants.

Each construct pertaining to the PERMA theory i.e., Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment, was averaged and rated on a 10-point scale. Participants responded positively in 95% of those categories indicating a high value of well-being among participants. Four of the 13 participants (31%) indicated an above average negative emotion level. Additionally, three of the 13 participants (23%) self-reported below average health. In the figure below, each participant's results are displayed for all five constructs of PERMA including the additional Negative Emotion and Health constructs as provided by the Profiler.

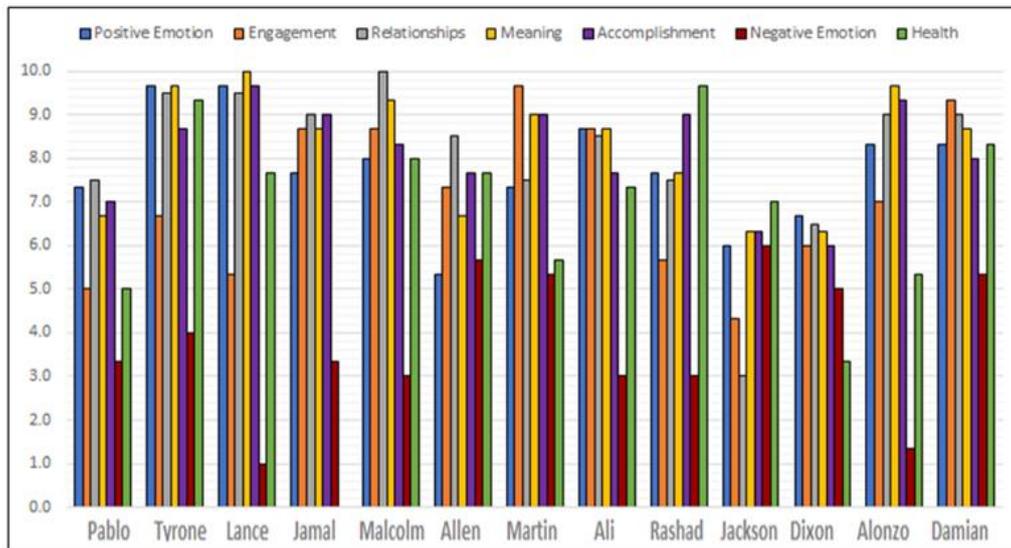


Figure 2. PERMA Profiler Participant Results

4. Discussion

The introduction of The Black Male Life Success Theory (BMLST) considers the impact of several internal and external factors on the life success of Black men who resided in Central Virginia. This grounded theory framework compliments concepts that have been found in research of thriving young Black males in the academic systems such as overcoming discrimination (Kim & Hargrove, 2013), general locality, (Bush & Bush, 2013), positive communities (Strayhorn, 2015), positive relationships (Fries-Britt, 2017), support (Harper, 2012), self-efficacy (Whiting, 2009), and spiritual attribution (Asplund, 2009). There is a positive narrative about Black males and their success within schools (Goings, 2015). Rolland (2011) described that academic success, in the form of retention and successful graduation rates, which increases opportunities for life success for Black.

5. Future Research

Future research opportunities for the modification of the BMLST are plentiful. This study could be replicated in different localities to see if the affirming community aspect of the BMLST remains accurate. The Central Virginia region is made up of rural areas, towns, and a small city. Duplicating this study outside of the mid-Atlantic region in a more densely populated area would provide additional data to build upon the theory.

Second, the expansion of the sample size for the study would benefit the BMLST. The age range for future research could be expanded upon, greatly, to ensure that older stages of a Black male's life is captured within the narrative. Receiving data from participants who are in their 50s, 60s, and 70s could yield different results. The selection of a much more heterogeneous sample of Black men that includes a wide range of religions, places of birth, education levels, and socio-economic statuses would enhance the BMLST.

Several underrepresented populations, such as Latinx individuals, Black females, and other marginalized racial groups could also be studied, individually, in future research, utilizing the BMLST. Overall, the future research could focus on the sharpening of the model to become more generalized in nature.

Lastly, a quantitative survey to measure the BMLST could be administered in various locations and a much wider demographic range to generate a stronger framework and theory.

6. Conclusion

Life success for Black males is achievable, despite what the more negative narrative indicates. This study sought to create a theory that demonstrated how Black males currently located in the Central Virginia region were able to achieve that life success. While their stories were unique, many commonalities were found among them which led to the development of the Black Male Life Success Theory. Black males within this study consistently overcame hardships in order to achieve their life success. Their affirming community, the positive relationships they developed, and the support received from others helped to propel them to a successful state. But, it wasn't without the success mindset of self-efficacy, future orientation, and spiritual attribution that the men in this study achieved success.

Community members deemed the men in this study to be successful based on observable traits or attributes such as jobs held, perceived salary, education, perceived esteem within the community, and overall visibility. However, the Black men of this study deemed success as reaching their goals, helping others reach their goals, finding contentment, not falling victim to stereotypes or negative statistics and finding their purpose in life. While these traits and attributes, in some cases, were not quite as observable as the traits that the community members used, that does not mean that these Black men were not successful. These successes should be acknowledged, specifically for Black boys, to change the deficit narrative for Black men.

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