Disadvantage Deconstructed: African American Perspectives on Success Prospects

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Abstract

Recent research on race has demonstrated the various racial gaps—in the areas of income, wealth, housing, education, crime, employment, and health, among others—that exist between white and black Americans. The scholarly literature on the topic attributes these gaps to the historic forces of slavery, segregation, and housing discrimination, as well as the persistence of the cycle of disadvantage in American society. Through semi-structured interviews with ten African Americans, conducted at a black non-denominational religious congregation on the South Side of Chicago, the present study seeks to gain insight into the mechanisms through which America’s racist past continues to affect African American prospects for economic success. Participants indicate that African Americans have to work much harder than their white counterparts to achieve comparable levels of success. Yet, interviewees concur that, with perseverance, success is within the reach of African Americans on the South Side of Chicago.
Introduction

It was around 11:00 AM on a chilly Sunday in November. I was sitting in one of the wooden pews of a nondenominational church on the South Side of Chicago, in the Bronzeville neighborhood. Erected no more than 30 years ago, the church, with its spacious interior and a television screen on either side of the altar, has a very modern feel. Dispersed throughout it were about 100 people. Each of them was listening intently to the captivating voice of the senior pastor who had just finished going over that week’s announcements when he commented on the perceived lack of community in the congregation. He stipulated that if he were to point out specific people in the pews, most of the congregation would not know the names of the people he pointed to. To illustrate this assertion, the pastor singled out several churchgoers; meekly and with hesitation the members of the congregation produced their names. Then, he pointed at me, the only white audience member in an otherwise black church. Almost in a chorus the congregation responded: “Szymon.” “Yeah, you know his name,” the pastor remarked. “He’s the good shake.”

I was attending church service that Sunday to meet potential interviewees for the present project. While said in jest, the pastor’s remark that day was significant because it spoke to his recognition of an often unacknowledged fact of life in contemporary American society: In today’s United States, due in part to America’s history of slavery and racial segregation, disproportionate numbers of African Americans are living in poverty. As a result, many African Americans find their opportunities for economic success severely limited by the cycle of disadvantage. This has led to the existence of many widely documented racial gaps in American society. In this paper, I investigate African American perspectives on the racial barriers to black achievement by exploring how African Americans evaluate the success prospects open to blacks
living in disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods. My focus on the black experience stems from the connection between race and poverty. Despite the fact that many whites also find themselves living in poverty (Caliendo 2014), the disproportionate number of African Americans in that situation renders a study of the intersection of race and poverty, and not poverty more generally, particularly interesting.

By providing an insight into the perspectives and ways of thinking of African Americans who have had experience living and working in some of Chicago’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods, this research is important because it demonstrates how African Americans make sense of the limited success prospects open to blacks. An understanding of African American perspectives on these issues is crucial to the inclusion of the black voice in potential remedies to America’s racial gaps. Furthermore, by demonstrating that, in the face of many obstacles to black success, African Americans with experience living and working in disadvantaged neighborhoods continue to believe that success is within the reach of all Americans, my findings emphasize the optimism of study participants.

I conducted ten semi-structured in-depth interviews with African American members of one nondenominational religious institution on the South Side of Chicago. Before their perspectives are presented in this paper, I begin with a review of the literature in which I discuss, in more detail, the cycle of disadvantage to which many urban blacks are subjected, its relation to the racial gaps apparent in American society, and previous findings related to my topic of investigation. Based on such research, I speculate how I think participants will evaluate the success prospects open to disadvantaged inner-city African Americans. Next, I present my research design and methods in more detail. Then, I discuss the central findings of my research.
Finally, I conclude my paper with a summary of my findings, as well as a discussion of the potential direction of future research on this topic.

**Previous Literature**

As previous literature on race in America demonstrates, a number of historic forces has worked together to cause a disproportionate number of African Americans to live in some of America’s poorest neighborhoods where many blacks are subject to the cycle of disadvantage. This has led to a number of black-white racial gaps in American society. Despite this, recent work shows that Americans as a whole—and African Americans in particular—are optimistic in regard to their future success prospects.

*A History of Disadvantage*

The American system was designed for whites and by whites (Feagin 2006). Despite the legal end of slavery and segregation, it continues to disadvantage African Americans by rendering a disproportionate number of blacks susceptible to life in some of the lowest socioeconomic tiers of American society. A discussion of wealth and racial housing discrimination does well to demonstrate how America’s racist past continues to disadvantage African Americans.

Wealth represents the total worth of a household or person. It is calculated by subtracting debt from assets (Caliendo 2014). As such, while income deals with what a person earns over a specific period of time, wealth represents everything that an individual owns. Consequently, wealth encompasses the accumulation of income over time, as well as the passing down of resources in a family through the generations. In this way, an individual's wealth is a more accurate indicator of his or her economic status than income (Oliver and Shapiro 1995).
Historically, it was illegal for black slaves to accumulate wealth (Caliendo 2014; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). Later, during the period of segregation, African Americans were routinely denied access to education and well-paying jobs (Oliver and Shapiro 1995), thus further limiting their ability to accumulate wealth. Because of these historic forces, African American parents have generally been unable to pass wealth to their children. Whites, as a group, do not face this problem. In fact, white households are at least twice as likely as black households to receive an inheritance (Menchik and Jianakoplos 1997). Thus, while the historic forces of slavery and segregation have prevented African American families from accumulating wealth over the generations, white families have faced no such roadblocks. This has contributed to a disproportionate number of African Americans living in poverty.

Those black Americans who were able to amass the wealth necessary to move away from impoverished neighborhoods were historically prevented from doing so by racial housing discrimination. Racial segregation in America today is in large part the result of such historic racial discrimination (Feagin 2006; McIlwain and Caliendo 2011). Between 1890 and 1940 many “white only” towns and suburbs came into existence in the United States (particularly in the North). These white towns and suburbs are collectively referred to as sundown towns because many of them had signs outside their city limits warning African Americans not to let the sun come down on them while they were within the town (Loewen 2005). In such towns, African Americans were kept out through blatant racism, intimidation, and sometimes violence. Many sundown towns continue to exist today, with only token amounts of African Americans living in them (Loewen 2005).

In large urban areas, multiple factors caused a disproportionate number of African Americans to live in the poorest areas of the city. First, in the 1940s the Federal Housing
Administration (FHA) began to guarantee very enticing loans to potential homeowners. These loans were used by whites to buy houses in the suburbs. However, such loans were not extended to African Americans (Orfield 2008). Consequently, many African Americans were resigned to live in economically depressed and segregated communities. This policy prevented blacks from participating in what became the largest wealth-producing program in American history, thereby further preventing blacks from accumulating wealth (Cashin 2008). Secondly, the interstate highway system made it easy for whites to commute into the city while living in the suburbs, thereby accelerating white flight from the cities and contributing to racial segregation (Cashin 2008). Finally, through a policy of “urban renewal,” the federal government largely contributed to the creation of the black ghetto in many of America’s largest cities; in order to eliminate “blight” the federal government spent close to $3 billion to remove about 400,000 primarily black-occupied housing units that were often located near urban business centers. The displaced African Americans were thus forced to move to public housing or different impoverished neighborhoods (Cashin 2008).

Through such mechanisms, the historic forces of slavery, segregation, and racial housing discrimination have worked together to cause a disproportionate number of African Americans to live in impoverished neighborhoods. Living in such neighborhoods, many African Americans find themselves caught up in the cycle of disadvantage: Because American schools are funded with property taxes, children living in poor neighborhoods must attend poor schools (McIlwain and Caliendo 2011). Poor schools provide students with a low quality of education, which does not adequately prepare them for college. Without a college education, many young African Americans are unable to find well-paying jobs and are thus, like their parents, forced to live in impoverished areas (McIlwain and Caliendo 2011). The cycle of disadvantage is self-reinforcing.
and difficult to escape. Because it so disproportionately targets African Americans, it is to blame for many of the racial gaps persisting in American society to this day.

*Black-White Racial Disparities*

As recent research on race in the United States has repeatedly demonstrated, such racial gaps between white and black Americans are extensive; in the areas of income and wealth, education, healthcare, and crime, among others, African Americans are disadvantaged in relation to whites in American society.

Economically speaking, in 2012, 9.7% of white Americans were living in poverty, as compared to 27.2% of African Americans (National Center for Law and Economic Justice 2013). In 2011, the median household income (defined as yearly earnings) of African Americans was $32,229, as compared to the median household income of $52,214 for white families (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2012). The racial disparity in wealth is even more striking; according to recent data, the average wealth of white American families is $632,000, versus just $98,000 for African American families (Lowrey 2013). This finding confirms the long lasting impact that the historic denial of wealth accumulation to blacks has had on African American families.

The economic hardship faced by the African American community is closely tied to the prevalence of single mothers in black neighborhoods. In the African American community, 29% of all families are headed by single women. For whites, 9.6% of all families are headed by women (Vespa, Lewis, and Kreider 2013). Since families headed by single women are much more likely to be below the poverty line than families headed by married couples (National Center for Law and Economic Justice 2013), combined with the persistence of the cycle of disadvantage, the high rate of poverty in African American communities is, perhaps, not so
surprising. In addition to its compounding effect on poverty, the prevalence of single-mother households in the black community is problematic in other ways. Research has demonstrated that children who grow up in single-parent households receive less effective parenting, are more emotionally distant from their parents, and encounter more stress than children raised in two-parent households (Amato 2005). This has been speculated to lead to a wide range of behavioral, emotional, and social problems in children from single-parent households, not just in childhood but also in adulthood (Amato 2005). For these reasons, the high proportion of single-mother households in the African American community has the potential to compound the problems faced by blacks as a result of the cycle of disadvantage. Because of the cycle’s close ties to poverty, many of these issues could be combated by finding ways for impoverished African Americans to escape the cycle of disadvantage.

Better access to high-quality education represents one way for African Americans to do exactly that; if schools in black neighborhoods adequately prepare their students for success in college and such students go on to graduate from institutions of higher learning, they will increase their chances of landing well-paying jobs and moving away from their impoverished neighborhoods, thus contributing to ending the cycle of disadvantage. This argument is supported by a report from *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* demonstrating that a college degree significantly closes the racial income gap (“Higher Education Is the Major Force in Closing the Black-White Income Gap” 2007). Despite such encouraging conclusions, the racial gap in education continues to be very significant. In general, African American students perform worse on standardized tests than white students (Thompson 2010). This gap begins in infancy where, due to environmental and social factors, white infants score better on cognitive measures than their African American counterparts (Rippeyoung 2009). The racial education gap
only increases as children grow. For example, whites hold a 26-point achievement gap (on a 500 point achievement test) in math over African Americans in fourth grade (Vanneman, Hamilton, and Anderson 2009). This gap increases to 31 points in eighth grade. In reading, the gap between white and black students remains more stable. In the fourth grade it is 27 points. In eighth grade, it stands at 26 points (Vanneman, Hamilton, and Anderson 2009). The racial gap is also evidenced by the disproportionate representation of black students in special education (Blanchett 2006). This situation can be partly attributed to insufficient funding in predominantly African American schools (Blanchett 2006). As a result, the dropout rate for 16-to-24-year-olds is 5% for whites, as compared to 7.3% for blacks (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). Of those who do attend college, 60% of whites earn a bachelor’s degree in six years. Only 40% of African Americans do the same (NewsOne 2010).

The racial gaps between white and black Americans are also readily apparent in the area of health care. For example, black infants are born with low birth weights twice as often as white infants (Murray and Bernfield 1988). Additionally, while the infant mortality rate now stands at 6.14 per 1,000 births, it is 11.61 for African Americans (Minino and Murphy 2012). Black infants are also almost twice more likely than white infants to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (Mathews and MacDorman 2012). Moreover, Hicken et al. (2012) have drawn attention to the black-white disparity in hypertension. As they point out, a 2010 American Heart Association report estimates that roughly 33% of white Americans suffer from hypertension, as compared to 43% of African Americans. Blacks are also more likely to be overweight and obese than their white counterparts (Ogden et al. 2014). Such health disparities between white and black Americans are in large part the result of poverty (which inhibits some African Americans from purchasing healthful food and health care services) and the limited access to education
about the importance of health and nutrition in impoverished African Americans neighborhoods (Caliendo 2014).

The racial disparities between white and black Americans also extend to the area of crime. In America today, blacks are disproportionately represented in the prison system; despite constituting roughly 14% of the population, African Americans account for about 39% of those held in American prisons (Ostertag and Armaline 2011). In Chicago, nine out of ten convicts released every year are black (Peck and Theodore 2008). The heavily racialized composition of the American prison system is partly explained by Ostertag and Armaline (2011), who assert that the American justice system, primarily through its failed War on Drugs, disproportionately targets minorities. The racialized population in American prisons is particularly problematic because it limits employment opportunities later in life. As demonstrated in one analysis of Chicago, it is almost impossible for African Americans with criminal backgrounds to find jobs in the city (Peck and Theodor 2008). Needing to make a living, many of them turn to criminal behavior. This helps explain the high recidivism rate in Chicago (Peck and Theodore 2008).

The specific racial gaps between African Americans and whites described above constitute only some examples of the ways in which blacks are disadvantaged in relation to whites. In his book, *Inequality in America: Race, Poverty, and Fulfilling Democracy’s Promise*, Caliendo (2014) demonstrates, through an analysis much more extensive than one that can be provided in this paper, that in the areas of income, wealth, housing, education, crime, employment, and health, blacks are disadvantaged in relation to whites in American society.
American Optimism

Consistent with the theory behind the cycle of disadvantage, a consideration of recent data examining upward mobility—the ability of Americans to rise to a higher economic class than their parents—suggests that such racial gaps are unlikely to close in the near future. Past studies have demonstrated that the lower a group’s average earnings, the more likely members of that group are to stay in the bottom quintile of income distribution (Wyatt-Nichol 2011). In fact, only 6% of the children born to parents in the bottom of the income distribution will rise to the top of the distribution (Isaacs 2007). Furthermore, according to a report from the Economic Mobility Project of the Pew Charitable Trust, 65% of Americans raised in the bottom quintile of income distribution stay in the bottom two quintiles (DeParle 2012). Given the disproportionate representation of African Americans in poverty, these data speak to the difficulties faced by African Americans, as a group, in getting ahead in life. Such difficulties are further highlighted by the fact that 54% of black children born in families in the bottom quintile of the income distribution stay there. This is compared to 31% of white children (Isaacs 2007).

Despite such weak prospects for upward mobility, the majority of Americans continue to believe that success is well within their grasp. As a recent report from the Economic Mobility Project (2009) demonstrates, 79% of respondents believe that people can get ahead in the current economy. Furthermore, 72% of respondents indicate that they expect their economic conditions to improve in the next ten years. Interestingly enough considering these statistics, African Americans are more likely than whites to be optimistic about their future. On the same measure, 85% of African Americans indicate a belief in the improvement of their economic condition over the next ten years, as compared to 71% of whites. Furthermore, 65% of black parents indicate that it will be easier for their children to move up the income ladder than it was for themselves,
but only 34% of white parents express a corresponding viewpoint (Economic Mobility Project 2009).

This optimistic attitude within the African American community is further highlighted by “African Americans’ Lives Today,” a poll of over 1,000 African Americans from the South and urban centers conducted by National Public Radio (NPR) in June of 2013. While 21% of the respondents in that poll indicate that they have “achieved the American dream of having a nice home and financial security,” an additional 60% indicate that they have not but that they will eventually (NPR 2013). Similar findings are presented by Hochschild in her 1995 book entitled *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. She utilizes survey data and anecdotal examples to demonstrate that the majority of impoverished African Americans believe that they and their families can succeed despite the many obstacles to black success. Such findings can be partly explained by psychological research demonstrating that optimism is often utilized by individuals in stressful situations as an active coping mechanism (Taylor and Armor 1996). Furthermore, since optimism drives people, both poor and wealthy, to achieve their life ambitions, a sense of optimism is almost required for disadvantaged individuals to improve their life situation; without it, individuals will lose one of the central motivators driving them to achieve success (Barnes and Jaret 2003).

**Data and Methods**

The present paper builds on past research by examining African American perspectives on the success prospects open to blacks from a qualitative standpoint; the small number of participants in the present research, combined with its in-depth interview structure, allows for a more nuanced understanding of how African Americans who have had experience living or
working in impoverished neighborhoods view the success prospects open to blacks from disadvantaged urban areas.

*Research Expectations*

Given the literature presented above, several key research expectations for the current study emerge. First, because of the prevalence of the cycle of disadvantage and its effect on the success prospects open to disadvantaged African Americans, as well as the many well-documented racial gaps apparent in American society, I expect the participants—who know a lot about the conditions of life in some of Chicago’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods—to be very aware of the many obstacles to success facing individuals from such neighborhoods. However, given the recent research indicating black optimism and belief in eventual life success, I also expect that the participants will indicate that, despite many obstacles, success is within the reach of African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods. This expectation is further warranted in light of research emphasizing the importance of optimism as a motivator for all individuals, poor and wealthy alike. Finally, since I expect that the participants will indicate that success is within the grasp of impoverished African Americans, I also expect the participants to indicate that personal responsibility on the part of impoverished African Americans plays a significant part in their success prospects. After all, if success is achievable by everyone, then a lack of success among some individuals must be at least partly attributable to their personal characteristics.

*Research Design*

An analysis of ten in-depth interviews conducted within the confines of a single black South Side non-denominational religious institution in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago
was employed to test the above expectations. Given the prevalence of racial segregation and African American poverty within the city, Chicago is an optimal place to conduct the present study. The amount of participants was capped at ten in order to ensure the proper depth of analysis. All ten of the participants in the study were recruited from the congregation of the participating religious institution. Seven of the respondents were introduced to me by the assistant pastor of the congregation. I met the remaining three through earlier respondents. Thus, the present study utilizes both convenience and snowball sampling. This fact, combined with the strong religious views of all ten participants, as well as their membership in a single religious institution, limits the generalizability of the study.

The interviews on which this study is based were conducted between October of 2013 and February of 2014. Among the participants were four women and six men. The ages of the participants ranged from the late 30s to the early 70s. Nine of the ten participants had at least some education beyond high school, with one participant having earned a Ph.D. An additional three participants earned a Master’s degree. This high average educational attainment of participants does have a further potential to limit the generalizability of the study. The study participants represented a wide range of occupations: Two retired nurses, two business owners, a personal trainer, a writer employed by the Chicago Public School (CPS) system, an unemployed individual who has been in the prison system, an engineer, an inner city school teacher, and a worker for a security company with years of experience in the Postal Service. Most of the participants had significant experience either living of working in a predominantly African American disadvantaged neighborhood on the South or West Side of Chicago, and all of them were at least somewhat familiar with the circumstances existing in such neighborhoods. A short biography of each of the study participants can be found in Appendix A.
All of the interviews in the sample were semi-structured and in-depth; during each interview an interview guide (see Appendix B) was utilized but not strictly adhered to. This gave each participant ample opportunity to touch upon whatever issues she or he felt were pertinent to the topic of investigation, thereby allowing for a deeper account to emerge. Prior to the interviews, each participate signed an informed consent form. Because of the differences specific to the participants, the interviews varied in length from 45 to 90 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded for later analysis. Once the research was complete, each interview was reviewed and the topic of conversation at each stage of the interview was noted. When this process was completed for all ten interviews, similar topics from different interviews were grouped together to reveal common themes and patterns. At that point, the interview recordings were revisited and transcriptions of their pertinent parts were made. Through this process, the ten interviews yielded 38 pages of transcript material. This method of analysis allowed for a thorough but time-efficient examination of common interview themes and patterns. The most common themes, accompanied by supporting quotations, are discussed in the next section of this paper. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of study participants.

Findings

Results of the interview analysis give support to all three research expectations. All ten of the study participants demonstrated an awareness of the many obstacles to success faced by African Americans living in Chicago’s disadvantaged neighborhoods. Among the most commonly mentioned of such obstacles were poverty, peer pressure, family problems, and limited access to quality education in the African American community. Given such obstacles, respondents expressed their belief that success was harder to achieve for disadvantaged African Americans than for individuals from wealthier communities. Even so, nine of the respondents
did cautiously indicate, as expected, that some level of success was within the grasp of disadvantaged African Americans. However, this finding was complicated by the fact that three of the participants who held this view also expressed the belief that many African Americans in disadvantaged communities have actually abandoned hope for future success. Finally, results lend support to the expectation that participants would place a lot of emphasis on the personal responsibility of African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods in achieving success.

Recognition of Obstacles to Black Success

The participants’ recognition of the obstacles to black success in disadvantaged African American communities was near universal, thereby demonstrating that blacks familiar with disadvantaged African American neighborhoods are very aware of the systemic problems prevalent in such neighborhoods. Due in part to the fact that the obstacles to black success are so interrelated, the participants’ discussion of them often overlapped. Poverty, which based on the previous discussion of the cycle of disadvantage can be considered to be one of the root causes of many of the problems prevalent in disadvantaged African American communities, was recognized as an obstacle to black success by six participants. When answering a question about the prevalence of various problems in the African American community, Janice, a retired nurse, simply stated that “poverty, ignorance, all of that contributes, I think, to it.” Ray, a personal trainer, specifically drew attention to the intersection of poverty and crime when he stated, in talking about various neighborhood problems:

Well, one of the reasons that I think it’s more prevalent in those neighborhoods is because of the poverty level. I mean Naperville is probably a pretty good, I want to say affluent suburb, maybe middle class, upper middle class, opposed to the West Side or the South Side where the poverty level is so high and the jobs are not there and people don’t have a means to make money so they turn to robbing people and selling drugs and stuff like that.
A very similar connection was made by John, an engineer, who stated that people in disadvantaged African American neighborhoods seem to get sucked into this vortex of poverty and, drugs and poverty. It just sucks them in. And the next thing you know, you’re in the criminal justice system and they have you in there and it may be 10, 20 years before you get out.

For the above men, the prevalence of poverty in certain African American neighborhoods acts as an obstacle to black success partly by making crime, and the possibility of quick reward that comes along with it, appealing. When impoverished individuals who turn to crime are caught, their prospects for success are significantly limited as they enter the prison system.

Through its effect on the rising level of crime in disadvantaged neighborhoods, poverty also has the potential to increase the amount of negative influences prevalent in impoverished African American communities. Thus, perhaps unsurprisingly, peer pressure and other negative influences were specifically pointed out as an obstacle to black success by five participants. When discussing the difficulty of overcoming obstacles to black success Ryan, an owner of a construction company, observed:

For instance, if you hang around a bunch of friends who are up to no good and you end up becoming a follower then certainly you can get caught up in that. You can end up being, if they’re stealing, or stick up, or robbing, or whatever it is they are. If you get caught up in those influences, peer pressure, yeah, you could, very easily that could happen.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Francis, a worker for a security company, who noted just how difficult escaping the negative influences in the community can be:

And you get some friends and people in your community that don’t think like that. Why, I don’t know, but they would rather stay in the gutter and try and keep you there, as a friend, then to see you rise to the top. I think that’s when they coined the phrase that
misery loves company. And there are a lot of envious people out there that won’t let you know that they’re envious of you and they’ll try to keep you down.

As such, for both Ryan and Francis the negative influences in disadvantaged African American neighborhoods do have a potential to keep people from achieving their goals, thereby acting as obstacles to black success in such neighborhoods.

As Paul, a business owner, indicated, this might particularly be the case for disadvantaged youths who come from broken families:

So the parents have little or no interaction with the kids, positive. I think it’s more of a negative relationship and interaction between the kids and the parents these days, and that has a definitive impact because these same kids are the ones who are, if they go home after school, they’re leaving out after school and who do they see? They see the guys hanging out on the corners. The guys with the new gym shoes, the new fanciest jeans, the sharp coats, and that’s not even, you know, that’s not even addressing those guys who have the nice cars and all this. So what’s appealing to them is the only thing that they can see, you know.

The above quote highlights the connection that two different obstacles to black success—the negative influences in the community and family problems—have with each other. The same connection was also pointed out by Francis when assessing the prevalence of problems in the African American community:

[When] the family structure breaks down there is no strong backbone in the family or a lot of these families are single parent. They may not have a father, their mother may be on drugs, there may be an uncle in the house, he might be dealing drugs and that fast easy money will turn a lot of [inaudible] heads away from why should I, you know, go to school when I can get out here and make more money than a guy, you know, working 20 years or 10 years and trying to save his little money to buy a house when they can make that money in months…
Therefore, according to Paul and Francis, young African Americans from disadvantaged communities are more susceptible to the negative influences in such communities because of what the respondents perceive to be the breakdown of the African American family.

Family problems were also recognized as an obstacle to African American success by participants in other contexts. In fact, nine of the ten participants made, like Paul and Francis, the explicit connection between the breakdown of the African American family and the problems apparent in disadvantaged black neighborhoods. For example, Ray remarked:

In today’s society, especially the African American community, we have a lot of single moms. In a lot of circumstances, the dad is gone before the child is even born. And that’s a huge problem.

When discussing the conversations she used to have with her mother, Alice, a retired nurse, also pointed out how a bad family life can be the cause of problems in the African American neighborhood:

Some of the things I talked to her about she didn’t like but we did discuss them… and I think when parents are secretive or don’t communicate well with their children, that’s when they run into problems.

A similar theme was touched upon by Janice when discussing why she felt that certain people in the community really struggle to get by:

It’s sometimes a response to, you know everyone can put up with a kid that’s pretty cooperative and we’re ill prepared to take care of the nourished ones that give you a little opposition… so I think inability and unpreparedness to deal with personalities. Here you got eight personalities, so some people, some of those kids, I think, don’t get what they need. And that starts at home and spreads abroad…

In this way, Alice and Janice, like most of the other study participants, recognized the detrimental effect that a bad family life can have on disadvantaged African Americans.
The connection between a good family life and success prospects was so widely evident among study participants that even the one respondent, Kirsten, a writer for the CPS, who did not explicitly link the problems in disadvantaged African American communities to the breakdown of the family, clearly exemplified the importance of a good family life to the ability of individuals to achieve success. When asked whether education was important in her household growing up she stated:

Yes. Yeah. Both my parents went to college, my grandmother, my grandaunt, and my great-grandmother, my great-grandfather. It was just a no brainer. You know, it wasn’t even an issue. It was just: “where are you going?” Not that you’re going. You know, it was just a given.

Growing up in a family that valued education had a clear impact on Kirsten’s decision to go to college; having grown up in an educated family, not going to college was never an option for her. For this reason, Kirsten’s own experience demonstrates the connection between family and success mentioned by all other study participants.

Limited access to quality education was the final of the most commonly mentioned obstacles to the success prospects of African Americans from disadvantaged communities. This obstacle was specifically discussed by six participants. The person with perhaps the best perspective on it was Jackie, an inner-city school teacher. As she stated:

When we were here [in Chicago] my twelve-year old was a student at Walt Disney Magnet School, which is on the North Side of Chicago in a more prominent area. The school is immaculate. They have the best resources, they do everything through technology, and I work at a school on the West Side of Chicago, which is still under the umbrella of Chicago Public Schools so you would think the resources would be similar but they’re not. In my class alone we don’t even have a—we only have a classroom set of books so our students are not allowed to take the textbooks home. Each student doesn’t have a book, the resources teachers have to purchase for themselves and they’re very scarce. And I know a part of it by location is, you know, schools get funding based on where they’re located and things like that, but I could never understand those huge disparity rates because, again, you look at ethnicity and who lives in these areas and
where the disparity rates are and you just gotta think that there has to be some type of connection with, you know, the lack of resources and where schools are located.

In the above quotation, Jackie demonstrates her familiarity with the cycle of disadvantage, even if she doesn’t specifically give it that name. Since she teaches in an impoverished neighborhood, the resources in her school are very scarce. This fact limits the educational opportunities open to her students. In this way, access to quality education acts as an obstacle to the success prospects of Jackie’s pupils.

The recognition of the connection between success prospects and education among study respondents was also exemplified by another respondent, Alice, during a discussion about why some individuals chose not to pursue a higher education:

I don’t think they have any idea and I think its ill preparation early and I think some of them have a fear of going into different educational institutions because they didn’t have the good preparation…

The issue of inadequate preparation in disadvantaged schools was also brought up by John:

[I]f you’re sitting there with people that have read the book and have the material and have the knowledge, they hit the ground running from day one. These others are stuck and that’s what this whole cultural and ethnicity thing and race thing comes down to, some having a head start then the others. It’s not that they’re no smarter. It’s just that they were better prepared for this particular class or this particular event or whatever.

In this way, by expressing their opinion that the lack of quality education in disadvantaged schools cannot adequately prepare students for what comes next, both Alice and John demonstrated familiarity with the cycle of disadvantage and how its educational component can act as an obstacle to success for African Americans from impoverished neighborhoods.
As John related, he was first made aware of the educational disparities between schools in disadvantaged African American neighborhoods and schools in wealthier white areas when his daughter attended a school in a wealthy neighborhood. He explained:

When I was in high school, me, I went to a regular high school, Fenger High School, it’s just school for everybody. We did not have biology dissecting frogs and all that other—all this other stuff until I was a sophomore in high school. I put my daughter in this [wealthier] school in fifth grade. She comes home with this stuff for me to help her. I was so proud… but that just showed me the difference. That they are learning in fifth grade what we did not learn until we were in high school.

The general attitude of study participants toward education and its relation to success prospects open to African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods was nicely summarized by Paul:

I think education equals opportunity because no matter how bleak your outlook is there is something that you can read and something that you can pursue via education that will get you out of that situation. So if we made education equally available and the quality of it available to every single student I think a lot of the issues that you have now would be non-existent.

Thus, like the other participants quoted above, Paul also demonstrated recognition of the fact that a quality education can lead to increased life opportunities and therefore that, by extension, a lack of such education represents an obstacle to success for African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Perceived Success Prospects

Despite such widespread recognition of the many obstacles to black success, nine of the ten study participants did indicate, as expected, that some measure of success was within the grasp of African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods. Thus, the present study confirms recent survey results demonstrating the optimism of African American individuals (Economic Mobility Project 2009; Hochschild 1995; NPR 2013). In discussing the prospects for
success of disadvantaged African Americans, Ryan stated that “you don’t have to become a product of that environment that you’re in.” Likewise, Janice remarked that success was possible for all people in America:

As long as ability, you know, if there is not any impairment. But I believe even you can work with impairments. Yeah. You just need support. But like I said, you don’t need crutches. You just need a little support and encouragement.

Even so, participants overwhelmingly demonstrated their belief in the idea that, because of the many obstacles to black success, African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods would have to work harder than whites from wealthier communities to achieve comparable levels of success.

As Paul noted, “in most cases those who have more opportunities the greater percentage will excel as opposed to those who don’t have opportunities available to them…” For this reason, according to Greg, an unemployed respondent who has been in the prison system, in order to overcome obstacles to success, African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods got to want this. You know what I’m saying. They got to work hard in order to achieve this. They just can’t, you know what I’m saying, just step into it. You’re not born with a silver fork in your mouth. You know what I’m saying. It’s not born like that. You’ve got to overcome the fears and problems that you’ve got to go through in life…

The same sentiment was expressed by Francis, who, when answering whether he thought that individuals from disadvantaged communities can eventually achieve success, remarked:

Absolutely, absolutely. But it takes a great effort and their mindset has to be, I mean, they have to really, really want to get out in order to get out because they have so much going against them.
Jackie was a little bit more hesitant in her own answer to the same question. At first, she stated that “if I was pushed to have to say a yes or no, I would have to say no [not everyone can succeed in America]. ‘Cause it’s a big gray area there. To an extent, yes to an extent. But I can’t unequivocally say yes, in America.” However, after expending on her answer, she did concede that “eventually I believe, yes [everyone can succeed], if those people are just really persevering and things like that, you know, then yes but there are some roadblocks.”

A similar hesitancy regarding this question was expressed by Kirsten, the only respondent who stopped short of indicating that anyone in America could eventually reach success. Having recognized the obstacles to success prospects of disadvantaged individuals, she stated the following:

But I would like to think that if you work hard and you try and you find, you know, the resources, that anybody could achieve their own level of success. I really don’t know if that’s true or not. I don’t know if that’s true. ‘Cause some people have more advantages then others. That is just the, that is the truth.

Thus, while Kirsten was the only respondent who said that success may not be within the reach of all Americans, all of the respondents recognized that the poor conditions in disadvantaged African American communities have a strong negative relationship to the success prospects of individuals residing therein.

The fact that most of the respondents still indicated that, despite this, some level of success is within the reach of African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods was somewhat complicated by the view of three participants who also expressed the belief that many African Americans in disadvantaged communities have actually abandoned hope for future success. This belief was indicated by Jackie, the school teacher, who stated:
[T]he people who are living in these places, these destitute situations, they’ve in some ways encompassed this fatalistic approach of themselves. That’s how they see themselves. They see themselves in a generational curse of sorts. You know, and I know this because, you know, just talking with students and talking with colleagues and things like that you have students who say: “well, when I grow up I’m gonna,” you know, “get me a Link card,” you know, they are saying the things that their mom is doing because they accept that as their fate. They don’t see a way out so they don’t even try to go in any other direction because that’s where they see themselves…

A very similar sentiment was expressed by Greg, who held that African Americans in disadvantaged communities are

not conditioned to succeed. If you ask a young black person right today what would they do at the age of 21 they would say they’re not gonna live to be 21. They’re not conditioned to go any further than that.

Greg also invoked a metaphor to illustrate this conditioning:

You put a cricket in a bowl or something, right, a cricket would jump out the bowl. But if you put a top on the bowl, the cricket, you can hear the cricket jumping and they will hit the top. All right. After they hit the top so often they condition themselves to not jump that high no more. All right, so you can take the top off and they would not jump out the bowl ‘cause they’re only conditioned to jump so high.

Hence, at least for Greg, the historic circumstances of African Americans have conditioned blacks from disadvantaged neighborhoods not to aspire to the same levels that individuals from more advantaged communities do.

For this reason, all three respondents who noted this “fatalistic” outlook of certain individuals in the community, as well as three other respondents who did not speak to it directly, indicated the importance of mentors to the success prospects of disadvantaged individuals. For example, Francis remarked:
If the right mentor could pull these teens into these centers and show them that there is a better way, that the way of the streets is not the way of life, I think that that would really turn a lot of teens around. But they have to believe in the person who is mentoring them.

The same theme was expounded by Greg:

I think to where some of these kids they can branch off into another area but they need like more mentors, they need someone to give them a better sense of guidance or whatever, to whereas for instance, my son he’s selling drugs and I’m buying them from him. To whereas that ain’t gonna work. You know what I’m saying. You need a person to whereas is gonna say: “Okay man, this ain’t the right thing to do, let me show you how to do the right thing…”

Thus, those respondents who indicated that people in the most disadvantaged communities had a “fatalistic” outlook of their success prospects also believe that mentors could remedy this problem; in their eyes, mentors could show African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods that success is, as most of the participants indicated, within their grasp.

*Personal Responsibility in Success Prospects*

As expected, all ten participants also gave indication that personal choice and responsibility plays a crucial part in reaching this success. In other words, all participants recognized the fact that the choices individuals from disadvantaged communities make matter in whether or not they achieve success. This was exemplified by the response of Ryan:

So, if you live in an impoverished area or community does that, does that cause you to not grow? Ehhe. That’s personal choices. We all make personal choices on how we want to do and what we want to do…choices, so we make our choices.

Thus, for Ryan, individuals from all circumstances have the responsibility to make choices that will lead them to grow and advance in life. If the correct choices are made, success is a real possibility, as Alice remarked: “You know, if you want something bad enough, it’s there. You
just have to do the preparation…” However, due in part to the many obstacles faced by African Americans from disadvantaged communities, the choices made by individuals in these situations often work to the detriment of their success prospects.

For example, when discussing why some problems are more prevalent in the African American community, Kirsten remarked:

I would have to assume that it’s because people are desperate. And, just like, I guess that the job situation, I mean, I know, I think that things are improving but people are more desperate. I think that they’re less willing to do what’s necessary or what they could do or look into you know, maybe going to, to get into some kind of a job placement program or something that’s going to take some time for them to get there. They want to get it right now or they see other people having stuff and then they want it.

Thus, it is because some people don’t do the things that are necessary that their success prospects look so grim. As Ray remarked, in support of this point, “some people do not, you know, they just get complacent and comfortable with where they are in life, and they don’t want to change…” Greg nicely summarized the general attitude of respondents on this issue:

It all comes down to whereas you know you make it what you want it to be. You make it what you want it to be. It just don’t materialize for your face, you know, you just got to strive to be a better person and some people, they just don’t care. You know, they don’t care which way they go, you know.

In this way, the respondents in the study indicated that African Americans from disadvantaged communities do have a certain responsibility to take advantage of the limited opportunities open to them to achieve success. If they stand idly by and do nothing to improve their situation then, in the view of study participants, they are at least partly to blame for their lack of success.

Thus, as is evidenced above, all three of the major research expectations were confirmed by study participants. Participants were deeply aware of the many obstacles—including poverty,
peer pressure, family problems, and limited access to quality education—faced by African Americans living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Even so, in confirmation of recent survey results demonstrating African American optimism, they overwhelmingly indicated that disadvantaged individuals could overcome such obstacles and achieve success. At the same time, they placed a lot of responsibility on individual members of disadvantaged communities in doing so. As such, the findings of this study give a general indication of how African Americans who have familiarity with disadvantaged neighborhoods perceive the success prospects open to blacks in such neighborhoods; while they realize that success prospects in disadvantaged African American neighborhoods are limited, they refuse to believe that all hope is lost. In their view, if African Americans from disadvantaged communities make the right choices, they will eventually be able to overcome the obstacles to black success prevalent in their neighborhoods and get ahead in life. Yet, achieving success will be much harder for them than it is for individuals from wealthier communities.

Conclusion

Recent literature on race has demonstrated that the historic forces of slavery, segregation, and racial housing discrimination have worked together to cause a disproportionate number of African Americans to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Living in impoverished neighborhoods, many African Americans find themselves affected by the cycle of disadvantage. By keeping generations of individuals in poverty, the cycle of disadvantage significantly limits the opportunities open to African Americans affected by it. Given the many obstacles to success that blacks living in disadvantaged communities must face as a result of this cycle, the present research explores how African Americans evaluate the prospects for success open to blacks living in disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods. It does so through an analysis of ten interviews
conducted with African American members of one nondenominational religious institution on the South Side of Chicago.

Results lend support to all three research expectations: African Americans with experience living and working in some of Chicago’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods were well aware of the many obstacles to success faced by blacks from impoverished neighborhoods, thereby demonstrating that African Americans familiar with disadvantaged neighborhoods recognize the structural problems present therein. Among the most commonly mentioned of the obstacles faced by blacks from impoverished neighborhoods were poverty, peer pressure, family problems, and limited access to quality education in the African American community. Despite such obstacles to black success, in confirmation of recent survey results demonstrating African American optimism, respondents also indicated that success was within the grasp of African Americans from disadvantaged neighborhoods. In achieving this success, respondents emphasized the importance of personal responsibility and wise decision making. In sum, the results of this study are both realistic and optimistic: While respondents are completely aware of the many difficulties faced by African Americans living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, they also believe that, with hard work and responsible decision making, African Americans can overcome these difficulties and achieve success. However, doing so will be much harder for impoverished blacks than it is for individuals from wealthier areas.

While several other studies and polls have demonstrated, similarly to the present research, that African Americans largely believe that success is within the reach of the most disadvantaged members of our society (Economic Mobility Project 2009; Hochschild 1995; NPR 2013), the present research is particularly important because, with its small sample size and in-depth interview method, it allows for a more nuanced and detailed analysis of how African
Americans who are familiar with the conditions of life in disadvantaged African American neighborhoods view the success prospects open to individuals from such neighborhoods. In other words, the in-depth interview method of the present research is best suited to demonstrate how some African Americans make sense of the situation of impoverished inner-city blacks. Additionally, the present study is significant because it shows that study participants are not blind to the difficulties faced by blacks from disadvantaged neighborhoods; respondents know that there remain many obstacles to black success. Yet, they simply believe that such obstacles can be overcome. In light of research highlighting the benefits of an optimistic life outlook (Barnes and Jaret 2003; Taylor and Armor 1996), such findings are encouraging. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the present study is important because the inclusion of an African American voices is, and has always been, crucial in designing and implementing potential remedies to America’s racial problems.

Despite the importance of the present research, this study faces a number of challenges. First, one must acknowledge that my status as a young white interviewer who was new to the congregation where the interviews took place may have influenced the responses I received. People are likely to behave differently, on both the subconscious and conscious levels, around different individuals. This might be particularly true when the topic of conversation is, as was the case in the present project, explicitly racial. For this reason, the responses I received may differ significantly from the responses that an identical interview guide would have generated given an interviewer of more stature in the community or one with more familiarity with the congregation. This is not to say that the quality of responses in the present study was compromised compared to those that would have been generated with a different interviewer. After all, respondents might
have felt more comfortable sharing personal information with a stranger then somebody familiar with them, or vice-versa.

Of more concern is the fact that all ten respondents in the study were members of the same nondenominational institution. This is somewhat problematic because the faith of respondents has a clear potential to influence study results. For example, while many studies of black perspectives on success prospects attribute the belief of African Americans in eventual success to respondents’ exposure to the ideology of the American Dream (Hochschild 1995; NPR 2013; Wyatt-Nichol 2011), which teaches that America is the land of equal opportunity, it is possible that a similar response from present study participants was influenced not by the ideology of the American Dream but by the participants’ religious convictions, or both factors working together. After all, religious individuals are likely to think that God will reward their faith and hard work with success. This notion was reinforced during my visits to the participating religious institution where the senior pastor would often remind the congregation that God would eventually grant them success. As such, despite the richness of responses, I am unable to determine the causes behind respondents’ views of success prospects open to disadvantaged African Americans.

Of course, my study is also faced with other challenges. First, success is defined by the participants themselves in this study. This is problematic because definitions of success vary between individuals; while one respondent might have understood moving out of a particularly bad neighborhood to be a sign of success, another might have defined success based on monetary income or a happy family life. Additionally, the small sample size in the present study, as well as the fact that the present study utilizes a combination of convenience based and snowball sampling, limits the study’s generalizability; since all of the respondents in the present sample
were introduced to me by either the assistant pastor of the participating religious institution or one of its members, it is possible that the responses I received are explainable through some characteristic particular to the individuals with whom I spoke, such as, for example, the high average educational attainment of study participants. Hence, while I can make conclusions about the ten participants in the study, I cannot extrapolate my results to the African American population—or even the Chicagoan African American population—as a whole. As such, the present study is most interesting for the depth of analysis it provides in support of much more generalizable studies that, despite their large sample size, lack the qualitative component of the present research.

Future studies on this topic should look to explore African American perspectives on success prospects while avoiding some of the challenges mentioned above. In particular, future research should examine the present results in light of a more diverse sample. Since the religious conviction of study participants has the potential to influence responses, it would be interesting to see how different, if at all, the study results would look given a sample with less religious individuals. Other differences between study participants—including greater variations in their age, sex, educational attainment, income level, etc.—could provide interesting insight into the factors that influence African American perspectives on success prospects open to blacks from disadvantaged communities. Given the connection, highlighted by past research, between the ideology of the American Dream and belief in eventual success, future research should especially look to test the extent to which a belief in the American Dream ideology influences respondents’ views on success prospects open to disadvantaged African Americans. Such research could potentially do much to explain the mechanism through which African American opinions on the present topic are shaped. In general, a continuation of in-depth interview-based qualitative work
such as this is important in order to give a nuanced explanation of the findings presented in more extensive quantitative work that, due to its breadth, does not allow for the same level of analysis as the present research.
Appendix A

Participant Information

Alice

Alice was born, raised, and has always lived in Chicago. She is 72 years old. For the past 40 years, she has resided in the Bronzeville neighborhood of the city. Alice received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing from DePaul University. Throughout her professional career, she has worked in a variety of nursing positions. Alice left her last job in 2010, but she doesn’t like the idea of retirement; she volunteers to keep herself busy and plans to return to full-time employment in the future. Alice is the cousin of John, another study participant.

Janice

Janice is in her 60s. She currently lives in Glenwood, IL, but she grew up and spent much of her adult life in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago. She moved after her two biological sons were adults to provide a safer environment for her two adopted sons. Janice has worked in a variety of occupations throughout her career. Her education culminated later in her life with a Master’s Degree in Psychiatric Nursing from the University of Illinois. For 20 years, she was a nurse in the Army Reserves. Janice quit working in 2011, but she plans to go back to full-time employment. Currently, she volunteers her time as the Ministry Leader of her church’s Prison Ministry. Janice is also the sister of Greg, another study participant.

Ray

Ray, now 42, grew up in a crime-ridden area on the West Side of Chicago, but for the last seven years he has resided in the Bronzeville neighborhood of the city. In the past, Ray has worked for the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA). Currently, he is a personal trainer in Downtown Chicago.
He also acts as the armor-bearer of his church, where he is both the body guard and assistant of the pastor. Two years into college, Ray was forced to leave school after the passing of his father to help his mother support his six siblings. Someday, Ray plans to finish his education. Eventually, he would also like to open up a small gym in Miami, FL.

**Kirsten**

Kirsten grew up in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago, but for more than the last 20 years she has resided in Chatham, on the South Side of the city. Kirsten has always wanted to be a writer. To that end, she graduated from Spelman College in Atlanta, GA with a degree in English. She went on to receive a Master’s Degree in Journalism from Northwestern University. For a short time, she was a newspaper reporter in Pontiac, MI. Currently, Kirsten works as the Communications Manager for one of the offices of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). She is in charge of all the writing that comes out of her office. Throughout her professional life, Kirsten has authored two books on the Film Noir movement in movies.

**Greg**

Greg grew up in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago, and he continues to live on the South Side of the city. Greg is in his early 60s. Throughout much of his life, he has been in trouble with the law. He first went to jail when he was around 17 years old. When he was 26, he went to prison for the first time. For the entire period from 1979 to about 2003 Greg was either in jail or out on parole. In 2003, he decided to turn his life around. At that point, he quit doing drugs and became determined to stay out of trouble. Greg does not currently have a paid position, but he volunteers his time in a drug recovery program where he assists individuals struggling with addiction. Together with his sister Janice, another one of the participants in this study, he serves on his church’s Prison Ministry Board.
John

John was born and grew up in Chicago. He is 57 years old. For the past year, he has resided in the Bronzeville neighborhood, but he has lived all over the city. He left high school before graduation. However, shortly thereafter, he took and passed his GED. Facing unemployment in the 1980s, John decided to go back to school. He graduated with an Associate’s Degree in Electronic Engineering from Olive-Harvey College. Almost 20 years later, he went on to receive a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Engineering from East-West University. He continued his education at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management, where he received two separate Master’s degrees. Throughout his life, John has worked in a variety of occupations both related and unrelated to his field of study. He currently works as a production specialist in a packaging plant. John is also the cousin of Alice, another study participant.

Ryan

Ryan grew up and lived most of his adult life in Chicago, but about 10 years ago he and his wife moved to Tinley Park, IL to be closer to their daughter and granddaughter. A Vietnam veteran, Ryan completed two years of community college before he went to a trade school to fix computers. However, he spent most of his professional life in sales. In 2000, he decided on a career change and became a general contractor. Initially, his business was doing very well, but things slowed down after the housing bubble crash. Nearing the age of 65, Ryan is now preparing for his retirement.

Janice

Having lived in Chicago in the past, Janice recently moved to Steger, IL to expose her children to a more diverse environment. Janice has a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Northeastern Illinois University. She is a lifelong educator who has taught various grade levels
throughout her life. However, most of her career has been spent teaching in elementary school and high school. Currently, she is a professor of Urban Studies at Northeastern Illinois University where she teaches a Saturday course every spring. Throughout the year, she is also a fifth grade Math teacher in a school on the West Side of Chicago.

**Francis**

Francis grew up and lived most of his life in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago. About 10 years ago Francis and his wife decided to move to Olympia Fields, IL to provide a better living environment for their seventh grade son. Francis attended Roosevelt University for two years, but given his family commitments and professional life, he did not finish his college education. For most of his professional life, Francis worked in a supervisory position at the Post Office. He retired from the Post Office a few years ago, but he has since rejoined the workforce as a security employee. After a brief stint as a doorman in Chicagoan high-rises, he now works as a security guard who opens banks. In the future, Francis looks to move into a managerial position at his current company.

**Paul**

Paul has lived in Hazel Crest, IL for the past 22 years. He was born in Chicago, but when he was about 11 years old he and his family moved to a middle class African American neighborhood in the suburbs of Gary, IN. That is where Paul grew up. He attended Purdue University for three years until he decided to leave school and seek full-time employment. Paul has always worked in Chicago. For much of his adult life, he was the Assistant Vice President of a corporation. However, he wanted to work for himself, so he started a commercial cleaning business. Eventually, he took over his family’s towing company. His company is located in the Roseland area of Chicago.
Appendix B

Interview Guide

Background on you:

- Where do you live?
  - Why is this where you make your home?
  - What is the best thing about your neighborhood?
  - What would you change, if anything, about your neighborhood?
- What do you do for a living?
  - Why?
  - What is your job history?
  - Which of your past jobs have you most enjoyed? Least enjoyed?
- What is your educational level?
  - Are you satisfied with your educational level?
- What social class would you say you belong to?

Life views and aspirations:

- What are two or three of your life goals?
  - What are you doing to achieve them?
  - Are you running into any obstacles as you try to achieve them?
- When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up?
  - Why?
- What kind of future do you want for your [potential] kids?
- Up to this point, are you satisfied with how your life has turned out?
  - Why or why not?

Hypotheticals

- If you could live your life over again up to this point, would you do anything differently?
  - Why and How?
- If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you live?
  - Why?
- If you won 20 million dollars in the lottery, what would you do with the money?
Linked Fate/Direct

- Do you feel that your race has impacted your life situation? What about your gender? Social class? Educational level?
  - If so, how?
- Do you feel that what happens to other African Americans affects you?
  - Why or why not?
  - What about other members of your gender, social class, or people with the same educational level as you?
- To what do you attribute the existence of the white/black racial gaps in American society?
- Do you believe that anybody can succeed in America? Why or why not?
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