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# Superstar or Scholar? African American Male Youths' Perceptions of Opportunity in a Time of Change

## Gilberto Q. Conchas[1], Alex R. Lin[1], Leticia Oseguera[2], and Sean J. Drake[1]

## Abstract

Through a Multiple Marginality Framework, this exploratory case study highlights how African American male youth in an urban high school setting perceive the opportunity structure during the historic election of the first African American President. Youth optimism generated by Obama's election gives students a sense of hope despite the persistent inequality they face in inner-city communities and schools. Findings suggest that the pervasive influence of both structural and cultural factors—such as poverty, racial ideology, racial tracking in schools, and street socialization—help explain students' aspirations and constrained expectations to pursue professional athletics. The implications of this study call for a reemphasis on the relevancy of school and community factors and influences in improving the perceptions of opportunity for African American males.

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> Well the stereotypical thing about Blacks . . . is that they grow up in the ghetto and especially Blacks. They say that Blacks are always in the worst part, they're always in the ghetto, so there is never going to be any successful Black guys, and we can see that's not the truth because we have a Black President.
>
> Steve, high school senior

> [What are your aspirations?] Hopefully go to the NFL, that's the dream but if that doesn't work I was thinking of something in real estate.
>
> Drake, high school senior

African American[1] males are typically over-represented at the bottom rungs of the achievement ladder on most student performance measures, as supported by a greater likelihood to be suspended and expelled from school than any other racial group (Tienda & Wilson, 2002); classified as mentally retarded or suffering from a learning disability (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002); and tracked into remedial courses and thus excluded from advanced placement and honors courses (Author, 2006; Oakes, 2005). The low performance among African American males is attributed to school factors such as racial segregation (Howard, 2008; Orfield & Eaton, 1996), inequities in funding (Kozol, 1991), and the politics of school governance (Datnow & Murphy, 2002). Furthermore, African American males often face unfavorable external conditions in the urban environment (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Noguera, 2003a; Rendón, 2013) and must wrestle with negative stereotypes and depictions harbored by the media and society writ large (Brooks, 2009).

These structural inequalities are deeply rooted in the history of the United States and have contributed to low rates of social mobility for African Americans (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Wilson, 2009). However, despite limited opportunities, many African American youth manage to succeed and thrive (Conchas, 2006; Conchas & Noguera, 2003; Howard, 2008). Recent research has invested in understanding how and why non-dominant youth overcome structural barriers and climb social ladders (Conchas, 2006; Howard, 2008). The current article builds upon this line of inquiry by examining African American males' perceptions of the opportunity structure at a pivotal time in American history—the historic election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States.

In this exploratory qualitative case study, we examine how a diverse group of African American high school youth—enrolled in an urban college preparatory academy located in southern California—perceive social mobility in a

time marked by the election of President Obama. Although these students were part of a thriving and engaging academy designed to increase college readiness, the participants have schooling experiences that shed light on the complexity and challenges associated with an urban educational context. Public schools located in urban areas typically face the greatest challenges and most acute problems. Poverty, lack of access to adequate housing and health care, crime and social disorder, all have an impact upon the ability of children to learn and the quality of education provided in schools (Milner, 2006; Noguera, 2003b; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).

This article advances research on the Multiple Marginality Framework that documents the influence of economic, environmental, historical, racial, socio-psychological, and cultural forces that, in turn, contribute to academic and social marginalization among non-dominant groups. This article suggests that examining the historical and cultural root causes of the marginalization of youth of color in urban communities and schools remains critical to informing policymakers, educators, and social service providers. Responding effectively to these challenges is a complicated task made more difficult by the fact that educational issues are inextricably linked and related to issues and problems that are present within the urban environment. In so far as educational professionals understand and embrace the lived realities of youth in the inner-city context, alternative approaches to the academic and social success among boys of color are sure to develop.

## Historical Significance of the Election of Barack Obama

African American male perceptions of Barack Obama's election is significant on two main fronts: (1) Barack Obama's election to the highest office of the United States signaled a paradigm shift that shattered the racial glass ceiling constraining the opportunity structure for all minorities (Joseph, 2010; Nagourney, 2008) and (2) his campaign themes of hope, change, and opportunity inspired African Americans to elevate their societal and economic positions (Banks, 2009). Obama's achievement suggests his potential as a role model who can buffer stereotype threats—a persons' consciousness about confirming a negative stereotype about their social group in contexts in which that stereotype is salient (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Interventions using repeated exposure of well-known positive Black (e.g., Martin Luther King) and female exemplars (e.g., Hilary Clinton) were found to be successful in reducing participants' racial and gender bias toward their own social groups (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Taylor, Lord, McIntyre, & Paulson, 2011).
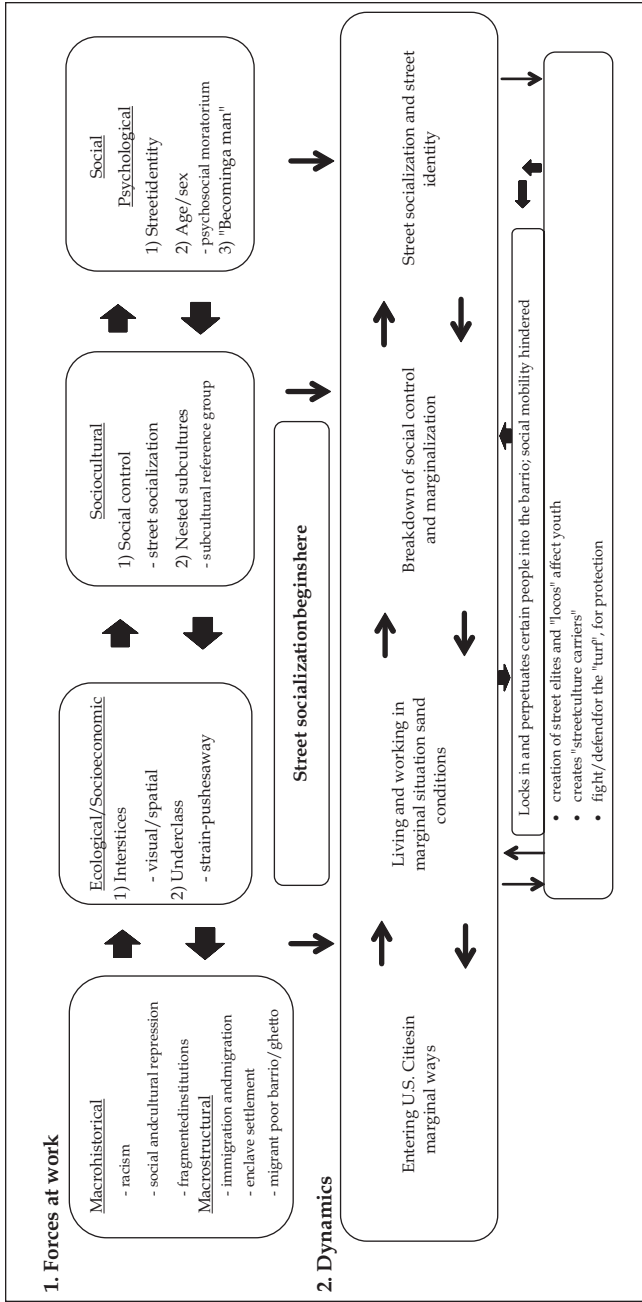
Role models can be effective in countering negative stereotypes (Marx, Stapel, & Muller, 2005) for groups sharing the same gender or racial membership (Lockwood, 2006; Marx & Goff, 2005; Marx & Roman, 2002; McIntyre, Paulson, & Lord, 2003).

Naturally, scholarly attention has surged across a wide range of disciplines seeking to understand the *Obama Effect* and found mostly positive results on a number of social and academic outcomes (Aronson, Jannoe, McGlone, & Johnson-Campbell, 2009; Columb & Plant, 2011; Lybarger & Monteith, 2011; Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Plant et al., 2009). Based on a quasi-experimental study, Marx and colleagues (2009) found that video exposure of Obama's convention speech was related to improvements in Graduate Record Examination (GRE) test scores across a largely non-diverse sample of adult participants. However, Schmidt and Nosek (2010) observed little evidence of systematic change in racial attitudes during the years before and after the 2008 election season. Although there have been a number of studies on the *Obama Effect* to assess racial bias and test scores, not much is known from the perspectives of African Americans. These studies are also limited to quantitative data, which fail to address the personal and meaningful connections that individuals experience with Obama's presidency—particularly their perceptions about social mobility in contemporary society.

Although this study shares a strong-rooted interest in understanding the significance of Obama's presidency, we share similar concerns with other researchers by avoiding causal attribution theories to explain how Obama's presidency may be associated with reducing stereotype threats (Taylor et al., 2011; Weiner, 1995). We intend to gain a critical and exploratory examination on young Black males' sense of social mobility in an important time of change. Through the Multiple Marginality Framework, we extend past, decontextualized research and illuminate multiple facets of African American males' perceptions of social mobility within the context of Obama's election, as well as other contexts of their lives, both in and out of school.

## A Snapshot of Multiple Marginality

We offer a Multiple Marginality Framework that captures the complexity of experiences of non-dominant youth who grew up in segregated neighborhoods with limited resources (Conchas & Vigil, 2012). According to Figure 1, the framework reflects the complexities and persistence of ecological, economic, sociocultural, and psychological factors that underlie street gangs and youths' participation in them (Vigil, 1988). Macro-historical and macro-structural forces and processes—those that occur at the broader levels of society—lead to economic insecurity and lack of opportunity. These forces

**1. Forces at work**

Macrohistorical
- racism
- social and cultural repression
- fragmented institutions

Macrostructural
- immigration and immigration
- enclave settlement
- migrant poor barrio/ghetto

Ecological/Socioeconomic
1) Interstices
 - visual/spatial
2) Underclass
 - strain-push-es-away

Sociocultural
1) Social control
 - street socialization
2) Nested subcultures
 - subcultural reference group

Social Psychological
1) Street identity
2) Age/sex
 - psychosocial moratorium
3) "Becoming a man"

**Street socialization begins here**

**2. Dynamics**

Entering U.S. Cities in marginal ways

Living and working in marginal situations and conditions

Breakdown of social control and marginalization

Street socialization and street identity

Locks in and perpetuates certain people into the barrio; social mobility hindered
- creation of street elites and "locos" affect youth
- creates "street culture carriers"
- fight/defend for the "turf", for protection

**Figure 1.** The Multiple Marginality Framework "Act and React" addresses ecological, economic, sociocultural, and psychological factors that underlie street gangs and youths' participation in them.
*Source.* Adapted from Vigil (1988). Copyright 1988 by the University of Texas Press. Reprinted with permission.

5

also compound the adaptation of non-dominant groups, such as recent immigrant populations who face fragmented institutions of social control, maintenance of homes and families, and psychological and emotional barriers.

The Multiple Marginality Framework is nuanced and embraces the facets of time, place, and people as important prisms to aid future researchers. These variables will help them understand the dynamics of street socialization and to develop meaningful alternatives to street peer cultures. Time reflects the economic, social, and political habits that shape people and events, whereas place—such as the neighborhood or school—represents local, immediate, and often changing realities. People shift in time and place, and new and/or different forces come into play, such as immigration or economic restructuring. These forces can significantly alter an individual's feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Academic and social disengagement is an outcome of marginalization; it is the relegation of certain persons or groups to the fringes of society, where social and economic conditions result in powerlessness. This process occurs on multiple levels as a product of forces in play over a long period of time. Some of the most street-socialized youth come from unstable circumstances. Despite these setbacks, many youth from the same communities and families manage to not only survive but to thrive and succeed (Conchas, 2006). Multiple Marginality works as a conceptual framework because it encompasses the disengagement and reengagement that occurs on multiple micro and macro levels.

In this article, we conceptualize how marginalization among boys of color in inadequately resourced neighborhoods leads to street socialization, and even those youth that are doing well are not immune (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rendón, 2013). The phenomenon of street socialization helps explain the emergence of disengagement and disconnection. We define socialization as the dynamic process by which a person learns the behaviors and norms of a given social group and is molded into an effective participant. Street socialization emerges and continues as social controls break down and human-development processes are undermined by stressful situations and conditions. Street socialization, in turn, undermines and transforms the otherwise usual course of human development for marginalized youth in ways that institutionalize a street peer subculture.

The majority of youth of color—of distinct social class and academic standing—must confront and come to terms with the street socialization forces and processes that affect youth in distinct ways. Even school smart youth are not immune to the hazards of marginalization and street socialization. We argue that educational initiatives and reform efforts ought to address the marginalization and street socialization that inflict all youth of color interacting at the community and school levels.

## Methodology and Setting

Case study design methodology was employed because it allows the researcher to focus on a phenomenon within its real-world context (Yin, 2009). This case study is embedded within a larger comparative project of Latino, Asian, and Black boys[2] in the Palmview Male Cooperative (PMC) during two time periods, 2008-2009 and 2012-2013. The research project was typical in its goal—to determine the effectiveness of the PMC implementation and its ability to improve the educational outcomes of its members. The data presented for this article are derived from the first time period, 2008-2009. The data consist of information from ethnically and socioeconomically diverse high school males involved in an extra-curricular social and academic, male-identified academy. A follow-up study of PMC students was conducted in 2012-2013.

The current article relies on data derived from semi-structured interviews[3] with 24 African American males collected as part of the larger study of the PMC. The interviews were designed to elicit more nuanced perspectives about students' involvement with PMC, interactions with school personnel and peers, college aspirations and expectations, ideas about success, and their race, culture, class, and gender perceptions. Through these interviews, we sought to illuminate boys' perspectives on race, schooling, and academic achievement in their lives. In so doing, we hope to unpack how students' experiences and perceptions both in and out of high school influenced their aspirations and expectations. This is a compelling narrative given that our current time period represents, to many, a new era for non-dominant youth under the leadership of an African American president.

### The PMC as Research Context

PMC is a district-wide initiative designed to achieve two main goals: (1) increase high school graduation rates and (2) support professional career planning for "underrepresented promising male students" (Mission Statement). While the program was developed to address the low high school graduation rates of Black and Latino students in the Sunny Unified School District (SUSD), it is not reserved only for students who are struggling academically. PMC members include the high school senior class President and Vice President, college bound students, students who are making up credits, C-average students, star athletes, and students returning from continuation school for a second chance at graduating from their home school. This heterogeneity is an important feature. By including students of different achievement levels, the school encourages relationships among students who are members of very different social and academic circles. The tacit goal is that

**Table 1.** Racial/Ethnic Composition of Smith High School, 2008-2009.

| Race/ethnicity | Smith High School | District |
|---|---|---|
| American Indian | 0.50% | 0.30% |
| Asian | 10.60% | 8.30% |
| Pacific Islander | 0.60% | 1.90% |
| Filipino | 2.30% | 3.70% |
| Hispanic | 38.80% | 51.20% |
| African American | 13.70% | 17.50% |
| White | 33.00% | 16.40% |
| Multiple/no response | 0.50% | 0.80% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

*Source.* Adapted from the California Department of Education (2011). Copyright by California Department of Education.

the high-achieving students with pro-academic social networks will have a positive influence on those who are struggling. The program is also aimed to bolster students' interests in pursing distinct professional career options, especially those playing on the school sports teams. A core group of teachers work in small and personalized learning-communities to prepare students for careers in the health, science, and technology fields. The emphasis on non-athletic and non-entertainment careers has implications for the findings of this study.

## The Urban High School Research Context

PMC is part of Smith High School (SHS), a large public school located in a largely urban city in Southern California.[4] During the 2008-2009—and similarly during the 2012-2013—academic year, 4,364 students were enrolled and the average class size ranged from 27 to 30 students. Table 1 shows the ethnic/racial composition of the school during the 2008-2009 school year. Together, White and Hispanic students constitute 71.8% of the school population, 38.8% and 33% respectively. African Americans represent 13.7% of the student population, and Asians are 10.6%. The number of SHS students who qualify for free or reduced lunch is lower than the district average—48.4% and 67% for SHS and the district, respectively. Only 9.8% of SHS students are English Language Learners compared to a 24.7% district average.

The district comparison data illustrate two notable features of SHS. First, SHS, although located in a middle class community, also draws from affluent and working-class neighborhoods. This results in a student body that is highly diverse economically, ethnically, and in terms of academic preparation.

Second, SHS is one of four high schools in the district chosen as a Top U.S. High School by *Newsweek* based on the number of students who are enrolled in Advanced Placement courses, among other markers. These features are important to consider before and during the study because they influence the culture of the school, students' experiences in the community, and their interactions with peers from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds.

## The Sample

A smaller and more focused case study on 24 high school students was carved out of the larger research project to examine more closely the social relations between and among PMC African American youth. The sampled students consisted of 10th to 12th graders who offered a diverse array of experiences, including varying achievement levels, career expectations, athletes and non-athletes, and students from working- to middle-class economic backgrounds. In addition to coding data to identify emergent themes, we wrote case reports that facilitated cross-student comparisons.

## Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis began with the careful coding of hundreds of pages of interview data, "broken" down analytically as an interpretive process. Interview data were reviewed line-by-line with the goal of identifying recurrent words, phrases, expressions, and significant events or aspects of informants' perceptions of urban school inequality and social mobility. Through this approach, a very long "laundry list" of codes was created. Then, data were re-coded and grouped into thematic clusters, which enabled the construction of meaningful micro and macro categories that either supported or hindered student's sense of optimism and success. These thematic codes or categories, in turn, were applied to new chunks of data. Throughout this process, we kept an open mind to new codes and new data-derived formulations. At this stage, relationships among categories were examined and explained using theoretical memos. This co-constructed process for understanding student's perspectives helped clarify and organize relationships among categories and the eventual expansion of the original Multiple Marginality Framework.

## Results

In this section, we show how students' senses of social mobility are shaped through both structural and cultural developments, a combination of

marginalization and socialization processes within school and outside of school. We present five main findings that emerged from the exploratory interviews. The interviews were not specifically designed to probe into these five categories; rather, themes emerged organically based on student responses. The five main themes include student perspectives on (a) the election of Barack Obama, (b) societal views of Blackness in America, (c) school racialization, (d) poverty and out of school constraints, and (e) conflicting aspirations and expectations. Sections (a) and (b) describe how students view the opportunity structure and their own mobility within it (psychological) as well as how society views their social mobility (macro-historical). Sections (c) and (d) describe the conditions that students face in and out of school that directly influence their perceptions of social mobility (ecological, economic, and micro- and macro-structural). Section (e) describes students' aspirations and expectations for social mobility within the entire community and school context (sociocultural). Below we present these five findings and attempt to place them within a broader socio-historical context in an effort to elucidate how schools and social conditions create compounding forms of marginality in aspirations and expectations among young boys of color.

## Student Perspectives on the Obama Election: Macro-Historical and Macro-Structural

Respondents were not explicitly asked about Barack Obama's election. Nonetheless, when probed about self-perceptions and expectations of social mobility, most of the sampled students expressed a feeling of positive transformation in society's expectations concerning African Americans and a sense that the doors of opportunity would dramatically open for them given the election of a Black president. Jonathan offered a vivid and thorough explanation about the significance of Obama's victory:

> Most Americans expect us to not even make it out of high school. When an African American gets a doctorate or master's you know it's a very rare thing and most African Americans celebrate that when something like that does happen because they say, "dang you know he made it" or, "it's like when Obama became president," you know a lot of African Americans were like "you know we finally have one of our people in there" . . . we can actually do something where it's no more of that excuse of oh I'm African American. (Jonathan)

Jonathan prefaced his explanation with the observation that, historically, society has placed low expectations on the academic achievement of African

Americans. However, in assessing the meaning of Obama's presidency, he described how the mind-set of African Americans has been dramatically changed by the mere fact that a Black person reached the highest office in the nation.

The PMC students' assessments suggest that Obama's presidency extends beyond a purely political influence; it is also applicable to a student thriving in any academic setting. Jonathan equated the achievement of a person earning their doctorate or master's degree with someone clinching the presidency in the sense that they both have "made it." This is an indication that he values academic achievement highly. In addition, Jonathan's comments reveal a positive view that the opportunities for African Americans within the United States are potentially limitless. This opinion may be advantageous considering research into the importance that a sense of agency and hope plays in motivation and persistence (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

As evidenced in our conversations with students in the sample, they were cognizant of the racial injustices African Americans have endured for centuries, and were also able to place Obama historically among other African Americans who were crucial to the civil rights movement. For instance, Kevin's ability to understand how Obama's success developed from a long line of achievements starting with Harriet Tubman's effort in "freeing the slaves back in slavery days" to acknowledging Martin Luther King's triumph in giving "us our rights, so that he [Obama] could get in the White House." The Multiple Marginality perspective is instrumental to illuminating the PMC students' experiences in how Obama's election led to an increased awareness of contributions made by other notable Black leaders. The commentary drawn from these students indicates that Obama's presidency was more than just an individual achievement; it was also about honoring the triumphs of all the important figures in African American history.

Students viewed Obama as a role model and they viewed his successful presidential campaign as an inspirational victory among the tireless civic and judicial efforts exerted by all Black leaders and common citizens in the past. Kevin elaborated on the significance of electing a Black President in his assertion that

> People were really proud of that. They say the Black face in the White House
> . . . that should motivate you to do better. So maybe . . . you can do whatever
> you wanna do. Him [Obama] becomin' president kinda raises the bar on what
> you're doin' . . . he motivated us. (Kevin)

The influence of Obama's victory resonated powerfully with students. Kevin's feelings highlight the symbolic image of a Black president as a

motivating force to help African Americans enhance their career interests and persevere in a world of limited opportunities. Indeed, this student captured the spirit of many African Americans and others around the world for whom Barack Obama is a powerful symbol of hope, freedom, and progress.

Finally, students were keen to observe how Obama's presidency would change the way that society looks at Black males. Todd exclaimed that "he [Obama] has opened the door for every race and has proven that you can actually do something with yourself. You don't have to have that person looking down on you saying that you're not going to make it." Thus, from the students' observations, we can see the perception that the opportunity structure has theoretically opened for all members of the African American community. With this finding, we do not mean to suggest that race is not a mediating factor within society or that social justice should not continue to be a focus in reform initiatives. Rather, we simply aim to illuminate the perspectives of the African American males within the sample as way to begin a conversation about what it means for African Americans themselves to perceive the lack of constraints associated with being Black when considering that a Black man was elected as U.S. president. These voices highlight the perspective of Black males in the sample that place great value on academic success and believe that the election of Obama proves that the possibilities for their academic achievement are limitless. The following sections will further unpack students' perceptions of social mobility and career aspirations within a context where they believe they have "no excuses" based on their race.

### Students' Perceptions of Being Black in the United States: Psychological

In contrast to the conception within the African American community that the academic possibilities for African Americans are limitless, students in this sample reported an awareness of the negative views of African Americans held by those outside of the African American community. When students were probed on their perceptions of societal views on being Black, they reported feeling a strong effect from racial stereotypes on their career aspirations and expectations. Kevin, a hardworking 17-year-old student aspiring to become an architect, was asked about how African Americans were portrayed in the media. He candidly replied that "so many things for the negative side, like we're seen as loud, violent . . . talkin' super loud in theaters, we ruin it for everybody. We're the ones gang-banging, shootin' people, goin' to jail." Like Kevin, many students offered an unfavorable media depiction of African

Americans. They communicated that African Americans were viewed as having undesirable characteristics that clash with social norms.

Societies' projection of such harmful stereotypes of African American males could have a detrimental effect on how these students perceive themselves. Jonathan, a student at the academy motivated to become a sociologist, shared his thoughts and even his inability to resist the onset of negative stereotypes. He admitted that

> when so many people telling you statistics show that 85 or whatever percent . . . of African Americans fail . . . you start to believe it you know so it gets harder and you're . . . just gonna wind up like everybody else so why even try.

Here, we can see how facts and statistics that appear to be couched within a scientific or empirical context can be detrimental for these youth since they create a perception of hopelessness.

In fact, a majority of the students acquired their negative conceptions of African Americans through the media. Sam described the reality constructed by the media that reinforces a social ordering. This order relegates minorities, particularly African Americans, to lower class status.

> You rarely see a Black or Latino boss, you always see the Caucasian man and it's in everywhere. It's in TV, it's in movies, magazines, wherever you look, and you always see either the Black or Latino . . . they're at a little desk working and the boss is always coming in to check on them. (Sam)

Thus, the media's expansive influence on movies, TV shows, and magazines occupies a significant portion of the students' lives. These media outlets create difficulties for young developing minds to escape the proliferation of negative stereotypes. The stereotypes described by these students starkly contrast the views students themselves held about the limitless possibilities for African Americans based on the election of an African American president. While the students themselves held conceptions that race was not a mediating factor in determining social mobility, the low expectations from social influences weigh heavily in their minds.

In revisiting our student Jonathan, he proclaimed that his parents would continually remind him about his disadvantage in life by asserting that

> you're always gonna have a strike against you because of the color of your skin . . . it's been engraved into my skull that you know I have to try harder than everybody else just because of the color of my skin and in some cases that is true because you still have racist people.

These students had the shared experience of trying to break various stereotypes both in school and out of school that also helps explain the noticeable constraint on their career aspirations and expectations. This view that anything is possible aligns with the shared perceptions of limitless possibilities based on race. Nonetheless, the limitless possibilities are sharply at odds with perceptions students feel from society writ large. Rather than aspiring to succeed academically because they feel support or encouragement from society, students in the sample report a desire to succeed to prove society is wrong as a sort of resistance against the position of marginality faced by larger society. This, of course, extends into the school setting.

## Students' Perspectives on In-School Racialization: Micro-Structural and Sociocultural

When probed about school experiences, students reported feeling distinct racial discrimination within their schools. Students felt that a racial and ethnic based social ordering was influential in defining the school culture. When asked to order students by racial hierarchy, Cliff responded "African Americans would be on the bottom . . . then Latinos, then Asians, then Caucasians [ordering them from lowest to highest]." In this and other PMC students' eyes, the school had a preconceived notion of which racial groups would succeed or end up at the bottom. However, a student named Drew highlighted that this social ranking was determined by the "order of the highest test scores." This was indicative of his experience in an AP English class since "it was only me and another Black student . . . but the majority . . . are Caucasian students." It is apparent that PMC students' appraisal of the social ordering system is not coincidental to the presence of tracking in the school system, and this racial ordering mirrors how we perceive success on a larger societal scale.

Many students shared their discomfort in acknowledging the presence of racial discrimination apparent in classrooms where some teachers held particularly low expectations of African Americans students. According to Jeffrey, "they're [teachers] not gonna teach as good . . . they're not gonna give them as much information . . . 'Why give it to 'em, they don't know.' It's probably what their mind is saying." This observation suggests that a teacher's academic expectations of his or her students may vary depending on the student's race. As a result, teacher prejudice may influence youths to temper their career aspirations and hopes of achievement. Another student, Drew, also supported the notion that teachers' expectations might be race based. He felt that

some of my teachers didn't expect me to do good. They didn't verbally say it but I could see how their actions were. They didn't expect me to be the one answering the questions in class and actually doing my homework and trying to go to tutoring and get a better grade.

While enrolled in his AP English class, Drew strove to distance himself from unfavorable African American stereotypes in an attempt to disrupt the low academic expectations held by teachers. The low expectations of teachers are on par with the reportedly low expectations of African Americans portrayed throughout the media. These multiple spaces of low expectation create multiple spaces where African American males in the sample are marginalized.

### Students' Perceptions of Poverty, Gangs, and Racism Out-of-School: Ecological, Economic, and Micro- and Macro-Structural

In addition to stereotypes of African American men and in-school racial inequality, students eloquently spoke about the impact of neighborhood factors and influences on their perceptions of social mobility. Throughout our discourse with students about their career aspirations and expectations, there was a general consensus among students that they could not quite escape various problems stemming from poverty and other socially related issues in their communities, and these social dynamics greatly impacted their schooling perspectives and aspirations. In our interview with Todd, he explained that students are often tempted to "let that [gang membership] take over their lives and then they start saying 'oh this is not for me' and start putting themselves down and saying that they can't do it even though they are smart enough inside." From the PMC students' perspectives, the pressure of joining gangs can have a destructive impact on the person's self-awareness and career aspirations. Indeed, gang subcultures can seep into every aspect of a student's life with damaging consequences, even if that student has no desire to become a gang member or even an affiliate.

Furthermore, some of the students who were knowledgeable about the gang situations existing on and off school grounds explained that tensions between Blacks and Latinos were often high. Jay believed that

the tension between Hispanics and Blacks is like, maybe I guess it's over territory . . . some Black people felt, you know Hispanics kinda came . . . into Southern California and they started livin' in their neighborhoods and stuff.

The explanation sheds light on how some of the animosity and gang violence between Blacks and Hispanics may have developed. From a historical perspective, the students were mindful about poverty and its prevalence in building gang tensions around their neighborhoods in the competition for limited resources. This provides a more critical understanding about the importance of poverty in gang formation and how racial inequality continues to be a significant element in the home life of inner-city students.

In fact, students expressed a desire for their school to encourage an open and continuous dialogue on the impact of racism in their lives. Kevin commented on the topic of race and racism and whether he adopted the belief that schools should strive to adopt a post-racial perspective.

> *Interviewer:* Some people don't talk about race a lot, you know. So if you feel uncomfortable with any of these questions . . .
> *Kevin:* Like . . . I feel like it's somethin' that should be talked about . . . people try to deny like . . . there's like racial barriers and stuff.

Kevin believed it was important for schools to not presume a post-racial society since racial barriers are still intact at many levels. Kevin seemed troubled by the notion that people wanted schools to declare colorblindness when racial discrimination is still obviously occurring. PMC students valued the significance of bringing racism to the forefront in dealing with various issues stemming from poverty and gang-related activities to explore how these issues impact their aspirations and expectations.

This discussion indicates that the neighborhood contextual factors that students face greatly influence their academic aspirations and expectations. Moreover, the suggestion that schools acknowledge and address issues faced by students out of school highlights the perceived importance of structural support from the school that is relevant to the multiple forms of marginality that students face. Let us now turn to youths' aspirations and expectations within a context of marginality.

## Conflicting Student Perspectives on Aspirations: Psychological and Sociocultural

An unanswered question remains crucial for our analysis: What are the students' perceptions of the opportunity structure—namely, career aspirations and expectations—given the context of high self-expectations and low societal expectations for the academic success of African Americans? When probed about career mobility, students in our sample indicated a strong desire to enter athletic and entertainment fields rather than academic fields. In a school climate that promotes academics and in the PMC program that stresses

college and career success, 50% of the participants aspired to be entertainers or athletes instead of indicating professionally oriented careers. This finding is at odds with the rest of the school culture that prides itself on placing students in academically competitive four-year colleges. According to Table 2, only 6 out of 24 (25%) students actually aspired to a career that requires at least a bachelor's degree, with an additional 3 Black males (12.5%) aspiring to pursue a career in the military after high school. Among the 12 student-athletes in the sample, 8 (67%) opted for careers as athletes or entertainers, whereas only 4 (33%) of the student-athletes desired professional non-athletic/entertainer careers.

The finding that students within the sample aspire to athletic and entertainment fields aligns with much past research on the aspirations of African American males (Conchas, 2006; Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2008). Our findings add to the extant literature, with such aspirations still evident in a time marked by the historic election of an African American president. Of importance, students within this specific sample may prefer athletic and entertainment careers, but this does not mean that they disregard the low chances of attaining success in these careers or the importance of having a contingency plan which includes succeeding in school. Drake, a student on the football team, often boasted about the academy's rigorous education. While he predominately aspired to a successful career as an athlete, he also divulged a detailed contingency plan to implement should his first choice for a career fall short. Drake notes that he had a Plan A, B, and C, "so A is the NFL (National Football League), B is some form of engineering or real estate, but if that doesn't work I was looking into law enforcement." Like many of his African American peers, expectations in the athletic and entertainment industry still held precedence for Drake, but a career in an academic field remained as a backup plan. Drake's football goals seemed contradictory to his earlier admission that "fitting the stereotype" bothered him while observing that people can fall into the stereotype like "dominoes." As indicated in the first finding, students in the sample valued academic success very highly. Nonetheless, they continued to desire careers in line with stereotypes propagated by the media and institutionalized in society.

Perhaps most important in these findings is how Drake assessed the chances for a person to become a professional football player:

*Interviewer:* So you have 10 athletes and out of those 10, how many do you think will become a superstar?

*Drake:* 2.

*Interviewer:* So you have 10 smart kids and they stay in school, how many of those kids will become doctors or lawyers?

*Drake:* Probably 8 or 9 of them.

**Table 2.** Student Profiles and Career Aspirations for the 24 Participants in the Study.

| Name | Grade | Whether recruited in school sports team | Ideal career |
|---|---|---|---|
| David | 10th | Yes | Actor |
| Jake | 10th | No | Chef (as on TV) |
| Ty | 11th | No | Designer (as on TV) |
| Larry | 11th | No | Entertainer |
| Jeffrey | 10th | Yes | Sport broadcaster |
| Sam | 10th | Yes | Basketball coach |
| James | 10th | Yes | Basketball player |
| Drew | 12th | Yes | Basketball player |
| Fred | 10th | Yes | Basketball player |
| Arthur | 10th | Yes | Football player |
| Drake | 12th | Yes | Football player |
| Curtis | 12th | Yes | Sports related |
| Marvin | 12th | Yes | Community college (undetermined field of study) |
| Terrence | 12th | Yes | Navy or college (undetermined field of study) |
| Cliff | 12th | Yes | Biologist |
| Jarred | 12th | No | Community college (undetermined field of study) |
| Kevin | 12th | No | Architect |
| Burt | 11th | No | Mechanic |
| Jonathan | 12th | No | Sociologist |
| Steve | 12th | No | Real estate agent |
| Todd | 11th | No | High school counselor |
| Marcus | 11th | No | Engineer |
| Raymond | 11th | No | Air force |
| Bill | 11th | No | Military |

*Note.* All identifiers are pseudonyms.

Interestingly, Drake believed that the chance for an individual to become an athletic superstar is considerably smaller in comparison with that of an individual who pursues academic stardom. In fact, research shows that only 0.08% of high school seniors playing football will ever be drafted by an NFL team (Newlin, 2010). Furthermore, only a fraction of those drafted become NFL regulars.

Nonetheless, findings indicate that some of the students' aspirations to go to college were guided by their inclination toward sports—even if the chances of reaching success in athletic careers are admittedly remote. Drew, a student mentioned earlier, had strong aspirations to pursue higher education. He ranked his college prospects starting with the "University of Texas . . . then UCLA probably number two and USC number three, but [he] think[s] Georgetown or Georgia Tech was number three or four." He admitted that his list was determined by "playing college basketball video games and watching college basketball." In a separate and more extreme example, a student justified his desire to enroll in a Minnesota college because the Los Angeles Lakers are his favorite sports team, and their colors (purple and yellow) are the same as those of the Minnesota Vikings. Despite the fact that students exhibited a more optimistic view regarding education and the opportunities therein for social mobility, some college aspirations may be determined primarily by a preference toward super stardom. This crucial finding does not suggest that the PMC was ineffective; rather, student perspectives illuminate a primary expectation toward sports and entertainment careers that can be further unpacked by investigating their marginal status in school and in society.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings suggest the important link between social structures, economic complexities, and the historical contexts of the urban environment that allows us to examine youth perspectives of social mobility through a Multiple Marginality Framework. While students in the sample describe promising factors in their lives, such as the election of an African American president and the high quality education offered at PMC, they also note many forms of marginalization due to racism, low academic expectations within and outside of school, poverty, and gang issues that impact their perceptions of social mobility (Fanon, 1967; Rendón, 2013). This discussion will attempt to unpack and contextualize both the protective and marginalizing factors faced by the African American male youth in this sample.

The first finding, that the election of an African American president led students to feel a sense of hope, is particularly important to understand. Specifically, it is important to note that the election of an African American president does not necessarily eradicate the lasting historical and structural barriers that Blacks face within society. The view that African Americans no longer have an excuse to fail aligns with a view that blames individuals rather than the larger social structure—individuals who have been disadvantaged through no fault of their own. Traditionally, this view has been documented

coming from right wing conservatives or very affluent African American individuals (Kaiser, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan, & O'Brien, 2009). The contention that Obama's election indicates the eradication of institutional racism is problematic considering that this can lead to the perception that social justice initiatives are no longer necessary (Kaiser et al., 2009).

However, researchers have not investigated how a "lack of excuses" relates to African American males themselves. Within the African American community, the perception that anything is possible regardless of race may have other implications. Traditionally, ethnic minority students suffer from low self-esteem and a lack of agency within academic settings (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). The findings that adolescents within this sample feel that their opportunities are limitless may help alleviate low self-esteem. Students in the sample report that the status of African Americans has been elevated due to Obama's election within the African American community and how his election opened many more academic career opportunities for them. Nonetheless, it is important to contextualize this finding within a larger social context of persistent inequality; that is, the election of an African American president did not mean the overnight eradication of all the social and historical barriers that African Americans confront. Instead, the finding that African American students perceive a more egalitarian opportunity structure brings up questions as to how this sense of "no excuses" interacts with the reality of the multiple forms of marginality that students actually face in their daily lives.

Despite the perceptions held by students in the sample that the election of Obama marked an end to racial barriers, the students reported various marginalizing obstacles created through ideological and structural processes in society. It seems possible that multiple marginalizing factors faced by the students in this sample are related to their responses to questions about their career aspirations considering that several students regarded the athletic and entertainment fields as their optimal choices. In this regard, we observe the significant influence of racial stereotypes that often portray African Americans in the entertainment/athletic domain that may deter these students from aspiring toward other careers. Students' perceptions of how Black men are negatively portrayed in society, coupled with in-school and out-of-school neighborhood disparities, indicate that these concrete attitudes tempered their optimism regarding career opportunities.

According to Mickelson (1990), concrete attitudes are a reflection of the "material world" that the student lives in. Often, the material (or structural) reality for these students encompasses what they see in their parents' work experiences, with class, race, and gender having an influence on their education returns. In turn, the process of determining a career occupation requires

"taking thought of material (economic) advantages and disadvantages, and choosing that which will yield the fuller material measure of life" (Veblen, 1907, p. 305). Even though students responded positively about the impact of Obama's election, students still felt that poverty was prevalent in their lives and a major source of racial inequality and neighborhood tensions. This brings us to reconsider how within-school and out-of-school factors complicate and perhaps explain school inequalities.

The Multiple Marginality Framework is useful in allowing us to examine how students perceive racial stereotypes perpetuated in the media and institutionalized throughout society. In schools, students were often confronted with the pressure of validating the long history of racial oppression experienced by the African Americans community. The ideology of Blackness would be rearticulated through the dual process of exposing the deep-seated racism and inequality, while constructing an alternative and oppositional framework. Thus, when students are confronted with various racial stereotypes, they are stuck with either validating the dominant racial ideology or forging a movement to redefine Black identity. Certainly, mass media coverage of the Obama campaign was a promising sign for enhancing the career aspirations of these youth. However, we must also consider that negative stereotypes of African Americans, stereotypes that are institutionalized in society and work against the positive impacts of Obama's success.

Furthermore, it remains apparent to students that racial categorizations continue to feature prominently in society. When students occupy the uncomfortable position of determining which racial categories they belong to, this has "profound implications for the norms and behaviors they embrace in connection with their social and academic performance" (Noguera, 2003a, p. 51). Thus, the impact of marginalization becomes more pronounced when racial categories are institutionalized in school structural and cultural processes. The pervasiveness of racial marginalization certainly raises doubts on whether or not schools adopt policies that ensure equal treatment for all students.

Educators have often struggled to develop new strategies in the school environment to address the educational needs of all youth who grew up in or are exposed to street-socialized circumstances. The various school-based strategies that have been formulated and are constantly being reformulated often do not target the street-socialized segment—even the PMC lacked this understanding. Regrettably, the PMC could not shield the boys from the dire circumstances surrounding their lives. In addition to school inequality, poverty—as a source of gang-related activities and violence—had a detrimental impact on their school and home life. The African American students in the PMC are constantly experiencing these street socialization forces, and

are thus greatly influenced by them on a daily basis as these forces are brought into the schoolyard and reinforced outside of school. In effect, not even the middle-income youth were immune from the pressures of the streets and distinct peer influences

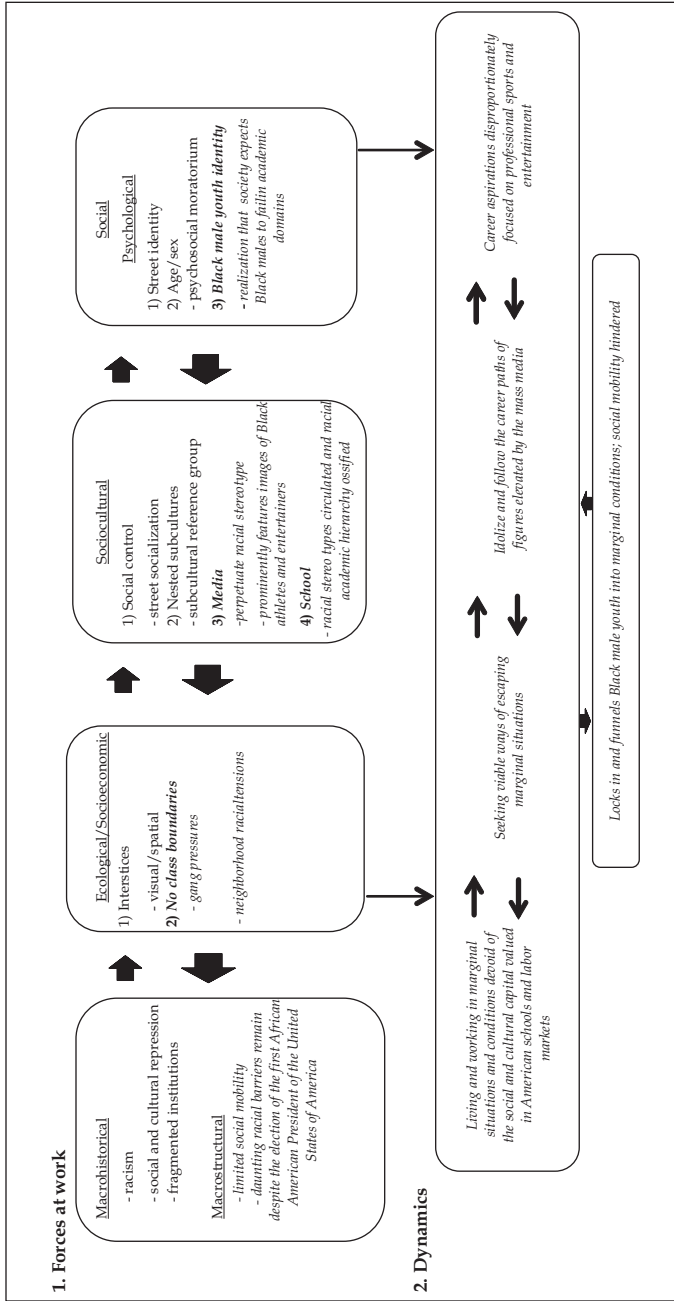## Revisiting the Multiple Marginality Framework

The Multiple Marginality Framework was originally applied to gangs and street youth in impoverished neighborhoods (Vigil, 1988). Most recently, the framework was extended to include non-dominant youth who were not in gangs but who were, nonetheless, exposed to the harsh realities of street socialization in poor neighborhoods (Conchas & Vigil, 2012). This article further elevates the framework to include both low- and middle-income African American youth and expands the framework in three fundamental ways: We contend that (a) peer street-socialized cultures are fluid and have no class boundaries; we suggest that (b) the school itself perpetuates marginal statuses for all boys of color, regardless of class status; and we unearth how (c) broader societal elements further push African American boys to the margins of society.

Figure 2 reflects the three interrelated micro and macro processes evident in the expanded Multiple Marginality Framework, which explains why many African American adolescents aspire toward the athletic and entertainment domains. We suggest that the primary aspiration to athletics and the entertainment fields, in and of itself, creates marginality. Even boys who do not aspire to these fields are still cognizant of the fact that society does not expect them to succeed. Therein lies the power of the Multiple Marginality Framework—it is well suited to explain African American high school boys' perceptions of opportunity in contemporary America and the forces that elevate aspirations and constrain expectations.

## Conclusion

Despite the election of a Black president, students could not quite escape from structural inequality present in larger American society and culture. Certainly, the political tide that has shifted the nation's attention to the first Black president may still be overshadowed by the lack of opportunities in many urban communities with little to no resources. The impact of the cultural shift achieved by Obama's presidency needs to be coupled with considerations of the street socialization contexts engendered by the students' school and neighborhood environments. These, in turn, shed light on contemporary youth experiences and perspectives on social mobility.

**Figure 2.** The modified version of the Multiple Marginality Framework which addresses ecological, economic, sociocultural, and psychological factors that underlie the limited career/social mobility for African American adolescent males. *Note.* Italicized text indicates revised changes to the original Multiple Marginality Framework.

**1. Forces at work**

Macrohistorical
- racism
- social and cultural repression
- fragmented institutions

Macrostructural
- *limited social mobility*
- *daunting racial barriers remain despite the election of the first African American President of the United States of America*

Ecological/Socioeconomic
1) Interstices
  - visual/spatial
2) *No class boundaries*
  - *gang pressures*
  - *neighborhood racial tensions*

Sociocultural
1) Social control
  - street socialization
2) Nested subcultures
  - subcultural reference group
3) *Media*
  - *perpetuate racial stereotype*
  - *prominently features images of Black athletes and entertainers*
4) *School*
  - *racial stereo types circulated and racial academic hierarchy ossified*

Social Psychological
1) Street identity
2) Age/sex
  - psychosocial moratorium
3) *Black male youth identity*
  - *realization that society expects Black males to fail in academic domains*

**2. Dynamics**

*Living and working in marginal situations and conditions devoid of the social and cultural capital valued in American schools and labor markets*

*Seeking viable ways of escaping marginal situations*

*Idolize and follow the career paths of figures elevated by the mass media*

*Career aspirations disproportionately focused on professional sports and entertainment*

*Locks in and funnels Black male youth into marginal conditions; social mobility hindered*

23

The strength of this study lies in the advantage of collecting responses from low- to high-achieving African American males who spoke openly about their school and neighborhood experiences and candidly reflected on their career expectations. In-depth interviews were particularly effective not only in providing the details needed for a rich and vivid account, but also in delivering honest perspectives of the realities in school and society that are often overshadowed by mainstream media narratives. Through these interviews, respondents were able to provide perspectives on the influence of Obama's election to their lives in the context of African American history and the long and ongoing struggle for social equity.[5]

Many students articulated that Obama's election represented the breaking of a racial glass ceiling and that they could now aspire toward any career. However, in the discourse concerning how African Americans were stereotyped in the media and society, students were reflective about the heightened stress and discomfort they faced in dealing with these distorted depictions. Students provided schemas on how racial identities were socially ranked and how these categories were institutionalized by the school's tracking system. In addition to racial inequality within school, students underscored the importance of marginalization and poverty in their neighborhood life, as manifested through gang- and peer-related street socialization. Regrettably, we found that the influence of Obama's election did not exert a discernible effect on the students' career aspirations. Students still communicated a desire to pursue a career in sports or entertainment, career paths not indicative of a culture of opportunity. Racial inequality, marginalization, and poverty in and out-of-schools are crucial elements that may serve to impede students' academic performance and ultimately constrain their career expectations.

Marginalization and, in particular, street socialization, ought to be taken into consideration in an endeavor to structure success for all. We suggest the need for institutional support systems and new pedagogical methods that embrace difference and create a positive disposition toward school success. Although certain school effects begin to foster positive educational experiences, they do not equally transform students' perceptions of the opportunity structure. Before tangible progress occurs, we must wrestle with the weight of larger social and economic inequality and the creation of street socialization forces in economically deprived neighborhoods. These processes have a devastating impact on the experiences and perceptions of non-dominant youth in terms of social mobility.

The election of an African American president marked the ushering of renewed hope and optimism for the country. However, the influence of Obama's election alone may not be enough to substantially erode the long historical oppression of African Americans that seeps deep into many

institutions in society. This study has presented evidence that poverty and racism—resulting in marginalization and street socialization—play prominent roles in Black male students' constrained career expectations. The multiple forms of marginalization faced by African American males in the sample are integral to their perceptions of social mobility. It remains crucial that conversations regarding inequality should be sustained to promote a healthy and racially tolerant school and community environment. This study has shown that it will take more than an individual to break the insidious racial glass ceiling, even if that individual happens to be an African American President of the United States of America.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1. In this article, we use African American and Black interchangeably.
2. All identifiers are pseudonyms.
3. It is important to note that the interviews were exploratory and asked broad enough questions to allow the freedom for student's unique perspectives on how their experiences in and out-of-school relate to their sense of social mobility—the finding therefore emerged organically.
4. In light of our study being primarily focused on the experiences of African American males living in a large and diverse inner-city located in southern California, we do not seek to generalize but, instead, to expand upon existing theoretical propositions. We also conceptualize urban education as the in-school and out-of-school challenges—such as poverty, the lack of access to adequate housing, health care, crime, and social disorder—that constrain the ability of children to learn and the quality of education provided in distinct schooling contexts. That is, educational issues are inextricably linked and related to issues and problems that are present within the urban environment marked by limited opportunity.
5. While we have established important grounds for the effects of Obama's presidency on Black students, future research should assess the perceptions of Asian, Latino, White, and those youth who identify as mixed race to understand their view on the status of African Americans in the Obama era. This can be extended to include female students and broadened to different geographic regions across the United States, with particular attention to the Washington, D.C., area and the localized effects of Obama's presidency in the White House. Longitudinal studies could also examine student perceptions and attitudes at different points during Obama's

tenure. These extensions of the current study would add comparative elements that are lacking in the current analysis, and longitudinal elements that might give us a more nuanced insight into the phenomenon of an African American president. Subsequent studies might also attempt to uncover the features of paths that have led poor minority students to pursue academic careers.

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