Discrimination and Achieving the American Dream in African American Families

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ABSTRACT

The American Dream is a pervasive ideology prevalent in African American families, despite historically being excluded from its promises. African American's adherence to the economic success and career achievement propaganda of the Dream is understudied in the literature. The present study examined the association between chronic discrimination and levels of life satisfaction on achieving the ideals of the American Dream.

Results indicated that discrimination, life satisfaction, education, career success, income, and feeling financially worse off than parents were significantly associated with achieving the American Dream.

INTRODUCTION

The American Dream (TAD) defined as an ideology promoting the attainment of material and economic success. Other researchers defined TAD as a steadfast optimism against adversity to achieve any opportunity through hard work (Hanson & White, 2010; Kwate, & Meyer, 2000). Historically, African Americans were excluded from the promises of TAD in the form of racial discrimination and poverty (Cernkovich, Giordano, & Rudolph, 2000).

Surprisingly, researchers stress that African Americans remain committed to the promises of TAD. Few empirical studies focus on the experiences of discrimination on TAD and its rewards of prosperity through hard work (Cernkovich et al., 2000).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

1) To examine how experiences with discrimination impacted African American's ideas of achieving the American Dream.
2) To investigate the impact of the American Dream on life satisfaction in African American families.

METHODS

Sample. Data were collected from the Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) 2013 Survey of African Americans, sponsored by NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation/Harvard School of Public Heath.

Study consisted of $N = 1,081$ African American men and women; Ages 18- 65 years old, M age $= 54$, SD = 1.094; 58%% female; 32% middle SES and 53% lower SES.

Data was collected through telephone interview (landline; $n = 662$) and cellphone; $n = 419$).

Measurement.

	Life Satisfaction	
1	How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life overall these days? Are you…very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?	Likert scale: 1= "Very dissatisfied" to 4= "Very satisfied"
2	How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the area in which you live? Are you…very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?	Likert scale: 1= "Very dissatisfied" to 4= "Very satisfied"
	The American Dream	
1	People sometimes talk about the American Dream. Which of the following comes closest to your view?	Likert scale: 1= "You feel you will never achieve the American Dream" to 2= "You have not achieved the American Dream but you will do so eventually" to 3= "You feel as if you have achieved the American Dream"
	Discrimination	
1	In your day-to-day how often have any of the following things happened to you? How about when you are treated with less courtesy or respect than other people?	Likert scale: 1= "Never" to 6= "Amost every day"
2	In your day-to-day life how often have any of the following things happened to you? How about when you receive poorer service than other people at restaurants or stores?	Likert scale: 1= "Never" to 6= "Amost every day"
3	In your day-to-day life how often have any of the following things happened to you? How about when people act as if they think you are not smart?	Likert scale: 1= "Never" to 6= "Amost every day"
4	In your day-to-day life how often have any of the following things happened to you? How about when people act as if they are afraid of you?	Likert scale: 1= "Never" to 6= "Amost every day"
5	In your day-to-day life how often have any of the following things happened to you? How about when you are threatened or harassed?	Likert scale: 1= "Never" to 6= "Amost every day"

Results

We used ordinal logistic regressions to examine the association between discrimination, life satisfaction, and the American Dream.

- Model ($\chi^2 = 238.32$; $p < .001$, $R^2 = .249$)
- The test of parallel lines was significant ($p < .05$) and explained 25% of the variation in American Dream.

- Life satisfaction ($b = .34$, $p < .001$), "feeling successful in career" ($b = .96$, $p < .001$), and education ($b = .73$, $p < .001$) were significant and *positively* associated with achieving the American Dream.
- Higher levels of education, success in career, and life satisfaction produced feelings of attaining the American Dream.

- Discrimination ($b = -.03$, $p < .05$), income ($b = -.71$, $p < .001$), and "feeling financially worse off than parents" ($b = -.55$, $p < .05$) were significant and *inversely* associated with achieving the American Dream.
- Increased experiences of discrimination, having more income, and more feelings of being less financially successful in comparison to parents produced feelings of *not* attaining the American Dream.

CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Researchers need to examine the impact of structural barriers and racism on African American's life satisfaction. Despite its deep-rooted pervasiveness in African American families, the attainment of the American Dream continues to be overlooked by researchers.

Mental health professionals must support healthy coping strategies in African American families to counteract the disadvantageous effects of the American Dream.

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