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The African American Dream Deferred: Exploring the Relationship Between the "American Dream" And the Black American Millennial Reality

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The African American Dream Deferred: Exploring the Relationship Between the "American Dream" And the Black American Millennial Reality

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I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah. For example, I don't disagree with Mr. Burford that the inequalities suffered by the American Negro population of the United States has hindered the American dream. Indeed it has. I quarrel with some other things he has to say. The other, deeper element of a certain awfulness I feel has to do with one's point of view. I have to put it that way. One's sense, one's system of reality. It would seem to me the proposition before the house, when I put it that way, is the American dream at the expense of the American Negro, or the American dream is at the expense of the American Negro—is a question, hideously loaded— and that one's response to that question, one's reaction to that question, has to depend in effect—in effect on where you find yourself in the world. What your sense of reality is, what your system of reality is. That is, it depends on assumptions which we hold, so deeply, as to be scarcely aware of them. (Baldwin, 1965, as cited in the Buccola, 2019, p. 379. Reposted with permission from Princeton University Press)

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to highlight and bring understanding to the lived experiences of Black American millennials. This study was conducted from the constructivist and critical research paradigms and utilized Reflexive Thematic Analysis methods to analyze qualitative data. The study places specific focus on Black or African American millennials' associated thoughts and feelings regarding their current reality and positionality within the American context, and its relation to the idealized reality of the American Dream. The influence of the American Dream on the African American millennial reality was explored to gain a better understanding of how, or if awareness of disparities in the realization of American ideals affects their beliefs related to being American. Fifteen Black American millennials were asked questions related to their perceptions of their reality in relation to American ideals like the American Dream. Participants discussed the impact that their American reality had on their sense of being American, sense of alignment with American culture, attitudes to the U.S. and being American, and belief in their ability to achieve the American Dream (Armstrong, 2019; Carter & Perez, 2016; Flanagan et al., 2009). The patterns of shared meaning that emerged from the findings were: (1) Black millennials identify themselves as a pivotal generation, (2) the American Dream is a White myth, (3) "unalienable rights" are not applied equally amongst Americans, (4) the American Dream highlights disparities in American reality, (5) Black millennials are reckoning with internal conflict towards their American reality. Clinical implications and future areas of research are discussed.

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<div align="center">**CHAPTER I**</div>

<div align="center">**INTRODUCTION**</div>

This chapter will provide an understanding of the current study, while also presenting information on the history of the "American Dream," the positionality of Black and African American millennials, and the issues they are facing as American citizens. Other important concepts and terminology will be defined in detail and explored. Additionally, the specific research questions and significance of the study will be highlighted.

Background of the Problem

On July 4th, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was adopted by the continental congress of the nascent United States of America (Kaplan, 1976). The introduction of this document to this new republic set in motion a divide that has become as American as the Declaration of Independence itself (Perry, 2007; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021).

In the initial draft of the Declaration of Independence, the founders sought to charge King George III of England with waging "piratical" and "cruel" warfare "against human nature" and "violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty" (Kaplan, 1976, p. 244) by engaging in the slave trade, and introducing the practice to America. The founders argued that King George III facilitated the American dependency on slave labor, and subsequently hindered the cessation of slavery in the then United States. This charge would have been the sole explicit acknowledgment of the enslaved Africans of the United States, in a document known as the Declaration of Independence. However, though the founders sought to charge King George III for instilling the institution of slavery into the core of American culture, they had no plans to bring an end to slavery or bestow equal rights to the misplaced African slaves in service to the White people of America.

<div align="center">1</div>

The acknowledgment of the slave trade was subsequently removed at the behest of representatives from the colonies of Georgia and South Carolina (Kaplan, 1976). The founders made no direct mention of slavery or the enslaved Africans within their final declaration, perhaps seeing the irony in denouncing a corrupt institution and crime against humanity (in which they still participated), in a document whose sole purpose is to extol human freedom and liberty. The founders' failure to address the inhumanity of slavery, a denial of the innate unalienable rights of Black people in the United States, weaved racism into the fabric of American culture in as much the same way as it threaded "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (The United States Declaration of Independence, par. 2, 1776; Jefferson, 2009) into the fiber of the American society. Despite exercising great foresight in their establishment of the United States as an independent sovereign nation, they overlooked the "least" among them (Bogin, 1983); a grave misstep that was emblematic of what was to come for Black people in America.

The concept of the American Dream depicts the United States as a utopia, in which citizens are entitled to "unalienable" rights. These rights include opportunities to lead peaceful and fulfilling lives, in which they are able to advance solely according to their individual capabilities. In this society, all citizens are respected by their peers as equals, regardless of their creed, social class, or the circumstances of their birth (Adams & Schneiderman, 2017). The American Dream is an idealistic social construct that is derivative of the American Declaration of Independence (Taylor, 2019). As a term, it is used in everyday parlance (Barber, 2016; Stiuliuc, 2011), and as a concept, it is synonymous with the American experience, particularly in reference to capitalism and financial success (Dyer, 2012; Schweyer et al., 2020; Taylor, 2019). However, it has taken on different meanings to different people across generations, as well as race and ethnicity (Sontag, 1981; Stiuliuc, 2011).

For many American millennials, the concept of the American Dream is still a believable one, but the idea of achieving it is currently an endangered aspiration (New Strategist Publications, 2018). While there is no definitive cutoff age range for American millennials (Dimock, 2019), the generational cohort generally has been reported to encompass American people born between the late seventies to early eighties (1977-1981) and the mid-nineteen nineties (1994-1996) (Dimock; 2019; New Strategist Publications, 2015).

American millennials are presently the largest generational cohort in the United States (Fry, 2016; Rouse & Ross, 2018), and are currently at the stage in their development where they are at their highest financial earning potential (Deal et al., 2010; Fromm & Garton, 2013). Unfortunately, they face unfavorable trends and struggles unique to their generational group. Primary among them is their disparity in wages when compared to their older generational counterparts (Levenson, 2010), as well as a lack of upward mobility (AbouAssi et al., 2021). These problems are related to improved mortality rates and older average retirement age leading to older professionals occupying positions longer (Clark et al., 2019; Rappaport & Stone, 2019; Rutledge et al., 2015) and making the job market increasingly competitive (Gaidhani et al., 2019; Zemke et al., 2013). Additionally, due to financial burdens caused by economic trends, American millennials on average are wading through generationally unprecedented levels of debt, a significant portion of which can be attributed to higher education loans (Haneman, 2017).

The steep climb to find economic success as a millennial in the United States becomes even more perilous for Black millennials as their generational struggles are further compounded due to their racial identities. Black millennials traverse additional obstacles, such as a lack of mentorship or representation in leadership positions (Powers et al., 2016) while also experiencing career and racial anxiety (Rogowski & Cohen, 2015). This reality is due in large

portion to factors like systemic racism and generational trauma in the United States (Johnson, 2016). Black and African American millennials regularly contend with racist and oppressive societal structures that negatively impact their overall well-being (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021), and impinge on their "unalienable" rights as Americans to achieve the American Dream (Johnson, 2016). Having to confront social and economic disadvantages unique to their generational cohort bolsters not only racial, but generational divides (Cain, 2015; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015).

Areas of Persistent Inequality

The Black experience in America has long been marred by oppression, brutality, trauma, and discrimination (Lauer, 2017; Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005; Williams, 2008; Williams, 2012); beginning with the first African slave brought to America more than 400 years ago (Miles, 2020; Stevenson, 2019). Slavery in America was abolished in theory in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation, which banned slavery in rebel states during the Civil War. Despite its name, its true intent was not to free all the American enslaved people, but rather weaken rebel southern states who depended heavily on slave labor for their success (Guelzo, 2005). It was not until after the end of the Civil War that this legislation would be recognized in all the formerly confederate states, with the last one being Texas in June 1865. Slavery in the United States had already been officially abolished nationwide months prior with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment to the American Constitution in January of that same year (Hume & Arceneaux, 2008; Taylor, 2002).

The decades post-slavery are notable for several reasons related to race relations and include the establishment and eventual dissolution of social institutions like reconstruction and Jim Crow laws (Lawrence, 2018). Social advancements in America, particularly those initiated

in the 1950s and 1960s that were spurred on by the Civil Rights Movement, sought to rectify some of the social ills unique to the American context (Warren, 2013).

It can be counted as a success that with all African Americans have faced in the United States, and the efforts made to disenfranchise them, they continue to persist as a people and as Americans (Dawson, 2003; Martin & Martin 2002). Black and African American people in America are still wrestling with racism, and still seeking equity in justice, "life, liberty, and the pursuit happiness" (Bush & Bush, 2015; The United States Declaration of Independence, par. 2, 1776) promised to them unconditionally as American citizens living under American law. This basic right was not established with the creation of the Declaration of Independence or the original iteration of the American Constitution, but after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, and the eventual passing of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1868. The Fourteenth Amendment was intended to grant citizenship and equal protection of the laws to all Americans including the formerly enslaved and displaced Black people living in the United States. Despite this, the liberty and rights of Black Americans were still not federally protected and remained contested throughout the Reconstruction era and well into the mid-twentieth century (Cates, 2012). The passing of the Civil Rights Bills of 1964 and 1968, more than a century after the end of the Civil War and the *declared* end to slavery, was not just a watershed moment for race relations in the United States, but a landmark moment in world history.

Although racial relations in the United States have improved significantly in the decades since the abolishment of slavery and the eventual passing of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 (Miles, 2020; Stevenson, 2019) and many of the social ills that plagued African Americans throughout history were rectified, there is far more work to be done (Warren, 2013). Black and African American people in the United States have constantly had to grapple with the numerous

incarnations of American racism that have inhibited them from experiencing full and lawful equity in justice, "life, liberty, and the pursuit happiness," (Bush & Bush, 2015; The United States Declaration of Independence, par. 2, 1776). Black Americans are still contending with oppressive forces, brutality, trauma, and discrimination (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). The limited number of protective or reformatory policies and legislation (Macedo, 2021) are strong indicators that American ideals and principles are still not justly applied to all American citizens as Black people in America still face disproportionate insecurity regarding their most basic rights, such as adequate health care, education, legal representation, and protection under the law (Feagin, 2013). Additionally, the adverse effects of historical trauma faced by Black descendants of slaves are still evident in African American communities (O'Connell, 2012).

Black Americans perpetually experience systemic and institutional racism (Brown, 2000; Chama, 2019). This is present in the American legal system (Macedo, 2021) where occurrences such as repeated incidents of police brutality against unarmed Black people (Johnson, 2016), disproportionate imprisonment and sentencing, and racial profiling (Perez, 2021) are rampant forces regularly impeding social justice (Williams et al., 2021). There are also economic injustices such as unfair housing policies (Lynch et al., 2021), gentrification (Chronopoulos, 2016; Yonto & Thill, 2020), and discriminatory financial practices (Charron-Chénier, 2020; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). At the institutional level, there is inadequate representation in public office and other high-ranking administrative positions (Costa, 2021; Heaney, 2020; Hicks et al., 2018), because of factors like voter suppression (Bump, 2016; Ross, 2019; Venetis, 2019; Wang, 2012). Additionally, educational resources are inadequately distributed to historically underserved predominantly Black communities (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021; English et al., 2016). The same can be said of healthcare resources leading to grave healthcare disparities for

Black Americans (Ibrahimi et al., 2020; Peek et al., 2021; Simons et al., 2021). This is evidenced by the disproportionate vulnerability experienced by the African American community in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapman, 2020; DiMaggio, 2020; Fairlie et al., 2020; Millett et al, 2020). These can all be cited as evidence of the injustice and inequality that persists in the United States, and also serve as evidence against the idea that all Americans are given equal regard (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Warren, 2013). These factors all influence the vast divide in the education, economic achievement, and overall well-being between African Americans and their White American counterparts (Hunt, 2004; Nam, 2020; Polk, 2018; Schiele, 2005) and are indicators of the systemic marginalization of Black people in the United States (Janssen, 2012). One could even cite the lack of a formal apology on behalf of the American government or any form of tangible reconciliation in the wake of slavery as additional evidence (Berlin 2004; Schedler, 2007). Though abolished in 1865, a federal holiday established to commemorate the end slavery was not instituted until 2021 (Juneteenth; Gordon-Reed, 2021).

The experience of Black and African American millennials in America is an indicator that though Americans are all entitled to the rights highlighted in the Declaration of Independence and the American Dream alike (Dyer, 2012), American citizens are not monolithic and are not all treated equally or have the same American experience (Opie & Roberts, 2017; Williams, 2018). This is why it is important that research be done regarding the specific experiences of Americans, particularly those with systemically marginalized and endangered identities. This study focuses on the lived experiences of Black and African American millennials born and raised in the United States, with particular attention paid to the possible contrast between their realities and that of the American Dream (Armstrong et al., 2019) as seen through their eyes and lived experiences in the United States. Its purpose was to explore what

impact Black and African Americans' perceived positionality in the United States has on their

well-being, sense of national pride, and belief in their ability to "achieve" the American Dream

(Carter & Perez, 2016; Flanagan et al., 2009). This study highlights Black and African

Americans' thoughts and feelings associated with their lived experiences of being American,

calling the United States home, and American ideals and principles. These thoughts and feelings

will be explored in relation to their influence on how young Black Americans perceive the

American Dream.

Statement of the Problem

The African American experience is integral to that of the history of America. Black life

has been a fundamental element to the progression of American society. The Black American

experience is mammoth in scope, the stories encapsulated within it are diverse and leave no area

of American life untouched (Dufresne, 2017). Despite this, it seems that the narratives of Black

people in America are constantly being overlooked (Brezinski et al., 2018; Ellis & Geller, 2016).

This pattern plays itself out through multiple aspects of the Black existence.

There is perpetual outcry among minorities in the United States for proportionate

representation in American institutions like local and federal government (Lee et al., 2018).

Undeterred by the sharp incline in the demands for social change, improvement seems to move at

a glacial pace in the United States (Coates, 2017; Towler et al., 2020). Improved racial and

cultural representation in American social institutions and corporations is vital for fostering the

still much-needed social progress in American society (Clark, 2019a). An appreciation for the

African American experience and Black life in general in American society has been long

awaited. Realizing the moment that Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed about a time in the United

States when a Black life mattered just as much as a White one has been an enduring American

struggle (Cottrell et al., 2019). In examining the idea of the American Dream and what it

represents to Americans, White and Black people alike, it is clear that there is a contrast between both groups, with African Americans being on the disadvantaged end of the spectrum. Americans are aware of the disparity (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Lafree & Drass, 1996), but just like everything else, social change can be cumbersome. It is for this reason that some African Americans are disgruntled with their lot in America (Gibbons et al., 2019).

Additionally, attempts made to inspire healing and growth have been insufficient. With the lasting effects of slavery still readily apparent (Andrews, 2017), there are African Americans who feel like strangers in their own homelands (Halter & Johnson, 2014). The term African American presents itself to many like an oxymoron, mocking the very existence of Black life in the United States because sadly many African Americans cannot identify with being American (Andrews, 2017; Halter & Johnson, 2014), and even more are incapable of identifying with their African roots (Chaplin, 2018) and have no claim to Africa. African Americans are a historically displaced people (Norberg & Meshesha, 2019).

There is also a misconception among some Americans that in the United States, they are living in a post-racial society (Kaplan, 2011; Warren, 2013). This notion is based on the advancements in race relations in America, which these individuals support by citing the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the elections of a Black president in 2008 and 2012 (Kaplan, 2011; Warren, 2013), and a female Black vice president in 2020 (Reddi et al., 2021). What individuals making these claims often neglect are the numerous ways in which Black people in America have been treated in America not just historically, but currently (Bush & Bush, 2015; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021).

Due to economic hurdles, Black millennials' aspirations of realizing their American Dream are particularly endangered when compared to not only their White counterparts, but

Black Americans from older generational cohorts. When Americans face adverse circumstances such as the housing crisis of 2008 or the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, though detrimental to all who experience it, the distribution of the effects are disparate (Samuel et al., 2021; Simons et al., 2021); Americans from marginalized and underserved communities struggle the most (Cain, 2015; Grishby, 2019; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015).

Black millennials on average, are currently in unprecedented levels of debt (Blalock, 2017; Nam, 2021), particularly Black American college graduates who find themselves borrowing more in educational loans compared to their White counterparts (Blalock, 2017). The Black American college students who are able to graduate with a bachelor's degree, on average go on to earn less and have a lower financial net worth compared to their White counterparts (Jones et al., 2020), thus weakening their already handicapped ability as an economic bloc to generate and maintain generational wealth (Adams et al., 2020; Ryabov, 2020). Some Black graduates also bear the burden of the Black Tax, which can be defined as an obligation some Black individuals feel to support their extended families (Magubane, 2017). Though noble and supportive of the collective, this can hinder individual economic advancement (Fongwa, 2019). The vast racial inequalities in debt accumulation can also be attributed to historical wealth disparities and the inability of Black Americans to transfer wealth generationally due to racist practices like redlining, which was a discriminatory mortgage lending practice that prevented loans for homes of predominantly Black neighborhoods. This not only hindered Black home ownership, but subsequently the communities in which Black folks were relegated. For example, schools in the historically "redlined" districts on average receive less government funding than schools in "White" districts, despite serving the same number or greater number of students with higher levels of need (Baker & Cotto Jr., 2020; Blalock, 2017). This leads to poorer educational

and vocational outcomes, less money invested in disadvantaged Black communities, and less wealth for Black millennials to inherit due to limited appreciation in property values over time which is a stark contrast to their white counterparts (Brady et al., 2020), and more debt.

The American Dream is as much of an economic ideal as it is an American one. Without economic power, African American millennials are further disadvantaged in their ability to realize the innate rights granted to them as American citizens as economic barriers make one more susceptible to being hindered by societal impediments like institutional racism and poor health (Grable & Joo, 2006; Ruetschlin & Asante-Muhammad, 2013). It is a misfortune that because of systemic racism, and related social deficits in their communities, inadequately equipped African Americans are still attempting to navigate past inherent pitfalls, on their way to economic success in an unfair and racist societal structure. As the American job market becomes increasingly competitive for the United States' most educated cohort in American history (Mottola, 2014; Patten & Fry, 2015), with 34% of millennials possessing at least a bachelor's degree (Taylor et al., 2014), some White millennials, with racial and economic privileges, have the means to ascend in skill and qualifications to meet the challenge. White Americans being more likely to have higher levels of financial well-being and financial literacy than Black Americans (Yakoboski et al., 2020) is evidence of this. Additionally, for White millennials, just being White is a protective factor in the American workforce (Jemal et al., 2017). A much larger and disproportionate percentage of the marginalized are incapable of meeting such challenges and therefore find themselves and their communities gradually left behind (Gopalan, 2019; Welburn, 2016).

The absence of literature and critical research regarding this population is evidence of the need for continued research related to the African American experience. This study would bring

needed awareness to the displaced and disadvantaged voices. African American millennials are aware of the unkept promises made to them but fulfilled to others (Mwangi et al., 2018; Seider et al., 2019). They are fighting for their right by law to have the same "American Dream" that their White counterparts are able to realize for themselves (Brown, 2000; Opie & Roberts, 2017). Displayed displeasure in American life for African Americans means more than what is seen at face value; these are narratives that need to be heard as doing so could facilitate healing.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of a historically oppressed group of Americans. This study explored the possible influence that their perceived positionality and associated feelings as millennials and African Americans has on their well-being, sense of national pride, and belief in their ability to achieve the American Dream (Armstrong, 2019; Carter & Perez, 2016; Flanagan et al., 2009). Learning more about their feelings toward the United States, its practices and ideals, while highlighting their experiences in coping with the possible mismatch of these ideals as well as their own individual realities as Americans, can give voice to this population's unique lived experiences. This process can also provide further insight into the larger African American experience, particularly how it is still impacted by racial inequality in the modern United States of America.

African Americans are persistently hyperaware of not only their experiences, but also what they observe to be the experiences of their White majority counterparts (Mwangi et al., 2018; Seider et al., 2019). Some African Americans feel justified in their perception that they have second-class standing in America (Gibbons, et al., 2019). They are cognizant of how the promises and ideals set forth by the American Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the "American Dream," and other similar American creeds such as, "All men are created equal," apply to them in theory only, leaving them uncertain regarding their identities as Americans, and

conflicted in their feelings towards their home country (Halter & Johnson, 2014). For Black American millennials, this conflict and uncertainty is further compounded by the struggles of their generational cohort; struggles which they experience disproportionately (Hanson & Gulish, 2016). The intersectionality of their Black identities and their generational cohort places them at a heightened disadvantage and makes them more susceptible to oppressive factors and race-related stress (Boone, 2020; Jones et al, 2021). As a qualitative study, this research can supplement the knowledge base and bolster previous empirical findings related to Black life and the American millennial cohort by illustrating this peculiar reality.

Additionally, it is important to develop increased awareness of African Americans' conceptualization of the "American Dream," and the impact it has on Black millennials' perception of their status within American society (Cernkovich et al., 2000). Learning more about their unique realities and the idealized "American Dream" promised to them can highlight the roadblocks that impede their progression in society and impinge on their belief in their ability to achieve their aspirations (Cernkovich et al., 2000). Learning more about perceived roadblocks can help lead to the dismantling of these hindrances within American society.

Research Questions

For this qualitative research study, the research questions attempt to reflect and highlight the complexities of the reality (Mills & Birks, 2014) that is the African American millennial experience. The research questions are purposefully broad to accommodate the flexible nature of qualitative research, but not so broad as to lead to excessive conclusions (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Mills & Birks, 2014). This research attempted to answer the following questions:

R 1. How do Black American millennials perceive their reality in relation to American ideals, such as the American Dream?

R 2.   How does the lived experience and perceived social positionality of Black and African American millennials influence their perception of the American Dream and other American ideals?

R 3.   What impact does awareness of the American Dream, and other similar American ideals have on Black and African American millennials' sense of American identity?

There has been a limited amount of research performed on the confluence of the American Dream and the African American millennial reality. Qualitative research can highlight insights and elicit theory development centered on the multi-layered and intricate reality of such a distinct population.

Definition of Terms

American Dream – The American Dream is an idealistic construct originally depicting an American utopia of equal rights and opportunities for social and economic advancement based on one's ability regardless of their race, creed, or birth circumstances. This construct is synonymous with American ideals of "life, liberty, and, pursuit of happiness." It is currently regarded as a financial aspiration.

Millennial – Although the age range for this cohort in the existing literature varies slightly, for the purpose of this study, millennials will be defined as people born between the years 1981 and 1996, currently ages 25 to 40 years old (Allen et al., 2020). As a group, this population is currently facing myriad adverse cohort disadvantages in comparison to older cohort counterparts, due to American economic trends. Disadvantages include increased average levels of debt, lack of vocational mobility, and financial capital.

Black or African American – The terms Black and African American are used to identify individuals of African descent (people whose ancestors descend from Black racial groups

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indigenous to the continent of Africa), who possess American citizenship. For the purpose of this study, these individuals will be those who self-identify as either Black, African, Afro-Caribbean, or African American and also currently live in the United States. The terms Black and African American will be used interchangeably throughout study.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study can provide more insight and create awareness related to the lived experiences of a historically oppressed people, facing contemporary forms of adversity. This study can highlight how the context in which the participants live has contributed to their plight and influenced their perceived reality as American citizens. Through hearing the stories of African American millennials, this study can shed light on the perceived impacts of the disparity in reality between privileged and oppressed groups. This is important because it is vital that the experiences of the oppressed not be overlooked, minimized, or taken at face value. There is an immense amount of nuance within the Black experience being taken for granted (Johnson, 2016) leaving Black Americans often feeling "unseen," and subsequently aggrieved as American citizens (Halter & Johnson, 2014). Hopefully, by gaining insight into African American reality, readers can learn more about the unique circumstances under which African Americans exist.

Awareness of the disparity between one's lived experience and their idealized reality elicits some form of anxiety in all people (Isaranon, 2019). As members of an oppressed group in America, which African Americans undoubtedly are, they are cognizant of their standing within American society, and that of their White majority counterparts (Anderson et al., 2021; Threlfall, 2018). Black Americans are able to highlight their unequal footing with the people with whom they are regarded as "created equal" (Carter & Perez, 2016; Cernkovich et al., 2000) under their country's Declaration of Independence. It can be imagined that such a reality could lead to a

sense of dissonance for ethnic minorities regarding their thoughts on their home country, and the rights promised to them. This research aims to provide readers with an understanding of how their reality influences the Black and African American people's views on the idealized American Dream and their subsequent feelings on being American. More effort needs to be made in bringing the lived experiences of those engaged in an unequal struggle to the American consciousness, as the insight gained can facilitate crucial dialogue and elicit necessary healing; hopefully, this study will contribute to that effort.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The persistent pursuit for the equality of Black people in the United States and the struggle against racism has been a core element of the American experience since its inception in 1776 (Miles, 2020; Stevenson, 2019) when the founding fathers made an unspecific declaration of American freedom that made promises in perpetuity for seemingly only White Americans (Bush & Bush, 2015). This has been the backdrop against which the American Dream has been projected, depicting a fallacy that is American in name only. Just as the document that extoled liberty and equality upon the American people did not acknowledge the humanity of Black people, many authors have observed that the construct of the American Dream is inherently antiquated and an inadequate symbol of contemporary American life (Bush & Bush, 2015; McClelland & Tobin 2010; New Strategist Publications, 2018). This is particularly the case for Black and African American millennials (Allen et al., 2020; Boone, 2020; Hanson & Gulish, 2016; McCoy, 2019).

The idyllic American Dream, along with the United States' vaunted ideals and values have historically been imposed on Black life in the United States (Belgrave & Allison, 2009; Kraus et al., 2019; Trotter, 1995). Researchers have found that for the Black people living in the United States, this has caused psychological distress (Graham et al., 2016; Huguley et al., 2019; Odafe et al., 2017) presenting itself in the form of dissonance and discord (Cross, 1991; Durkee et al., 2019; Forsyth et al., 2015; Young, 2003), internalized racism (Bailey et al., 2011; Cokley, 2002, 2005; Neville & Cross Jr., 2017), and a perpetuation of racial oppression and further disenfranchisement (David et al., 2019; Schmidt, 2005; Speight, 2007). The combination of the

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longstanding and ever-evolving specter of systemic racism (Combs, 2016; Ibrahimi et al., 2020; Perez, 2021; Threlfall, 2018) along with the presence of generational trauma in the wake of slavery (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021; Craemer et al., 2020; Johnson, 2016; Schiele, 2005) has made the Black experience in the United States one of constant turmoil and struggle (Anderson et al., 2021; Seider et al., 2019; Samayeen et al., 2020; Threlfall, 2018).

African American millennials living in the United States are at a further disadvantage; in addition to being marginalized because of their identity as Black Americans, Black millennials have a host of additional generation-specific barriers to overcome. The intersectionality of a historically oppressed identity and a distinctly disadvantaged one within an unfavorable American context produces peculiar and divergent realities stark in contrast to their White peers (Allen et al., 2020). This is of particular importance as Black and African American millennials are members of the largest generational cohort in the United States. They are positioned to be the backbone of American society as they will become the dominant collective force that impacts economic trends as well as American culture as a whole (Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Weinbaum et al., 2016).

As is often the case with Black sub-populations, there has been limited research focusing on the unique lived experiences of Black and African American millennials currently living in the United States (Boone, 2020; Ingram, 2021; McCoy, 2019). This study aims to add to the literature by highlighting the impact of historic marginalization on a subgroup of oppressed people living within the American context and contending with constant disenfranchisement and forced assimilation in the form of the imposition of American ideals such as the American Dream.

The American Dream

The American Dream is a social ideal that originally depicted an idyllic egalitarian American society where every citizen is entitled to a full and fulfilling life, filled with meaningful opportunities to achieve an ideal living aligned with their individual capabilities. Additionally, all citizens are entitled to be held in the same equal and esteemed regard, regardless of creed, social class, or the circumstances of their birth (Adams & Schneiderman, 2017). The idea of the American Dream was formally introduced into the American consciousness in 1931 (Taylor, 2019), by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic America* (Adams & Schneiderman, 2017). Adams' idea of the American Dream was inspired by the founding fathers' ambitions for the United States as outlined in the American Declaration of Independence (Dyer, 2012; Taylor, 2019). The declaration holds certain truths to be self-evident: "that all men are created equal" and entitled to civil liberties and "unalienable" human rights (The United States Declaration of Independence, par. 2, 1776; Jefferson, 2009). The American Dream is analogous with the "self-evident truths" of the United States Declaration of Independence (Dyer, 2012) and is thus an integral social construct to the American experience.

In current vernacular, the sentiment of liberty and assured human rights are still intrinsic to the American Dream and American society alike, but the American Dream has evolved beyond its conceptualization of an American utopia into an ideal that is tantamount to a financial aspiration (Hecht, 2018), existing in concert with American consumerism (Yoon & Kim, 2016). Research shows that Americans have been losing faith in the idea of the American Dream (McClelland & Tobin, 2010; New Strategist Publications, 2018), particularly as their ability to achieve it seems to be becoming increasingly endangered (Chetty et al., 2017). This is

particularly the case for White Americans (Cox et al., 2017), some of whom now believe that the sanctity and symbolism of the American Dream is threatened (Nelson, 2019).

Millennials are one of only a few American cohorts and subgroups still maintaining a strong belief and aspirations to realize the construct despite their lack of faith in their ability to actually achieve it (Abowitz, 2005; New Strategist Publications, 2015, 2018). A nationwide study found that 66% of millennials endorsed a belief in the American Dream, the highest percentage among other generational cohorts (New Strategist Publications, 2018). Millennials' endorsement of the American Dream is rooted in the belief that, as Americans they are able to improve themselves and their family's living standards (New Strategist Publications, 2018). Being more closely associated with economic achievement further highlights the current and historical racial (Kraus et al., 2019) and generational divide (Gooding, 2018; Ryabov, 2020) between Black and African American millennials and their White and older generational cohort counterparts. Economic disparities serve as an additional indicator that the notion of American liberty, and the unalienable human rights and opportunities to a good life are equally entitled to all Americans in theory only, not in reality (Berry, 2006; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021).

The African American Dream

In his work as a civil rights activist and scholar, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. examined the idea of the American Dream through the lens of an African American (King Jr., 1963). Dr. King was cognizant of the fact that all men and women were indeed created equal, but in the United States, they were not treated as such (Kearl, 2018; King Jr., 1963, 2018). This is the reality faced by many African Americans today; a reality that, according to Kate Carroll de Gutes (2020) and Coleman et al. (2019), is widely unremarked upon and often unacknowledged by those who are privileged in America and not forced to endure such an existence. Dr. King made his "dream"

explicit, and through contrast made it clear that the "American Dream" (King Jr., 2000, pp. 83) was anything but American in its exclusion of marginalized populations living on its soil (Damak, 2018; Kearl, 2018; Purcell Jr., 2014). In his "Letter From Birmingham Jail," King (1963) posited that Black people's "echoing demands" (King Jr., 2000, pp. 82) –their protest for equal rights and the opportunity to experience the American Dream and "the most sacred values" (King Jr., 2000, pp. 83) of American heritage was necessary especially if the United States were to become the great democracy the founding fathers purported it to be in the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution (King Jr., 2000).

Dr. King tried to highlight for a privileged White majority what was already evident to a frustrated and oppressed racial minority, that all Americans are not treated equally (Leopold & Bell, 2017; Mazumder, 2018; Philogène, 2000). Americans are not a monolithic group;they do not live in a society where all individuals benefit equally. Additionally, there is an immense amount of nuance within the Black experience in the United States that is often taken for granted (Johnson, 2016). Research indicates that this experience has left Black people to often feel diminished and aggrieved (Cross, 1991; Halter & Johnson, 2014).

The 1963 "March on Washington," and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech are watershed moments in not only Black history, but American history in its entirety. In his speech, Dr. King stressed the importance of social reform now rather than later, a sentiment still expressed by contemporary scholars who contend that there needs to be immediate reconciliation between African Americans and the United States (Colbert, 2017; Fields, 2016; Torpey, 2019). Dr. King presented an undeniably poignant view of the Black experience in America at that time, one that could no longer be neglected by those benefiting from the privilege gifted to them by their forefathers (Purcell, 2014). Dr. King also pronounced his own

American "dream" of equality and inclusion in the United States regardless of race, color, or creed (Damak, 2018). Dr. King's declaration of his "dream" was similar to the one expressed by the United States founding fathers, and James Truslow Adams, but Dr. King differed from them in that he took care to overtly and intentionally mention race, underscoring its importance (Lei & Miller, 1999). Dr. King saw clearly how, due to historical contexts, race and poverty were intertwined and dutifully pointed out the sacrifice it would take on behalf of a privileged White majority to rectify this issue (King Jr., 1963, 2018; Leff & Utley, 2004).

After the election of a Black president in the United States, there is a belief among many Americans that Dr. King's "dream" has been realized (Deifell, 2018; Ward, 2011). There is also a misconception among many Americans that they are living in a post-racial society (Cohen, 2011; Deifell, 2018; Kaplan, 2011; Wamble & Laird, 2020; Warren, 2013). This notion is based on the advancements in race relations in the United States (Kaplan, 2011; Tamali, 2021; Warren, 2013), but the nation's embrace of historic emblems might indicate otherwise. The articles believed to be representative of American values, and extolling freedom and justice for all, are symbols of oppression for Black Americans (Demetriou & Wingo, 2018; Johnson, 2018; Mitchell, 2020; Schedler, 1998). An example of this can be seen in the numerous statues, monuments, and other forms of tribute to former White American slaveholders (Demetriou & Wingo, 2018; Schedler, 2001; Timmerman, 2020; Wijegoonawardana, 2021).

Even the Star-Spangled Banner, an emblem of American freedom and exceptionalism, contains racist undertones (Andrea & Sheffield-Hayes, 2019). Officially recognized as the American national anthem in 1931, it is an excerpt from a poem called "Defence of Fort M'Henry," written by Francis Scott Key (Kennedy, 2004; Richie, 2020). The poem contains words celebrating the deaths of slaves in the Revolutionary War, which, as the descendants of

slaves, is offensive to Black Americans (Bernstein et al., 2020; Dupuy, 2017; Pena, 2017;

Schwarz, 2016; Morley & Schwarz, 2016). One could also cite the celebration of an American

Independence Day and how its celebration overlooked the reality of the still enslaved Africans

who sacrificed much to help the young nation achieve liberty from the British. The American

government has never formally acknowledged that this independence was not applied equally

(Darity Jr. & Mullen, 2020; Du Bois, 2020; Nieman, 2020). It is additionally difficult for some

Black Americans to celebrate Independence Day, as some Black people living in the United

States still do not feel entirely free (Hannah-Jones, 2019; Madriaga, 2005). This reality is

compounded in the absence of reparations or a formal apology on behalf of the American

government to the descendants of the enslaved African people (Brooks, 2020; Hatch, 2006;

Prager, 2017; Schedler, 1998; Weyeneth, 2001). The lack of a federal holiday commemorating

the end of slavery in the United States until 2021, more than 150 years after the Emancipation

Proclamation and the 13th Amendment, could also be cited (Walker, 2021).

In present day, the American government still fails to enact substantial police reform

policies. The dereliction of this duty persists, despite the evident need for such intervention

(Redbird & Albrecht, 2020; Epp et al., 2017; Fenton et al., 2020) and one of the largest outbreaks

of racial protest in United States' history in response to the unjust killings of Black Americans

including Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Botham Jean, and numerous others

(Aitken, 2021; Andrews et al., 2020; Reny & Newman, 2021; Spencer, 2021). The murder of

George Floyd prompted American lawmakers to propose a police reform bill, which would

become known as the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (Hewitt, 2021). The bill was created

as a means of undoing years of racist policing rooted in this country's inception (Duchess Harris

& Gagne, 2020; Monkkonen, 1992; Potter, 2013; Uchida, 1993). The George Floyd policing act

was passed in the House of Representatives but was stalled and eventually failed in the American

Senate (Hewitt, 2021; Sonmez & DeBonis, 2021). The lack of reform addressing the historical

racial bias in American policing is evidence of persistent injustice and inequity for Black

Americans. It also represents The United States' embrace of an institution, created to uphold

American law and order, that is seen as symbol of oppression for many Black people in America

(Bolton & Feagin, 2004; Bor et al., 2018; Howell et al., 2004; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019).

Black Identity in the White-Dominant American Context

The concept of the American Dream encompasses American ideals and principles that all

Americans are entitled to in theory, but not often in practice (Berry, 2006; Bush & Bush, 2015;

Stiuliuc, 2011). Historic prejudice and discriminatory practices such as racially-biased banking

and mortgage lending policies (Lynch et al., 2021), racial segregation (Stern, 2021), unjust

policing (Perez, 2021), and political disenfranchisement (Epperly et al., 2020) have been critical

to the proliferation of modern-day systemic racism (Craemer et al., 2020; Ibrahimi et al., 2020;

Johnson, 2016) and the subsequent marginalization of the Black and African American

population of the United States.

Due to their experience contending against systemic racism (Brady et al., 2020; Combs,

2016; Macedo, 2021; Threlfall, 2018) and the lingering ill effects of slavery within the American

context (Berlin, 2004; Craemer et al., 2020; Nunn, 2008; Philogène, 2000), African Americans

regularly wrestle with racially-rooted marginalization, anxiety, and stress. This experience

inevitably manifests itself in their identity development as African Americans (Cross, 1971; Hall,

2012; Helms 1996). Researchers have found that confrontation with racial oppression can have

diverse effects on Black people's racial development and sense of self, which influences how

they respond to the oppression (Cross, 1991; Forsyth et al., 2015). For those who are unprepared,

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such an encounter could be crippling (Cort, 2007; Stevenson Jr., 1995). For others it can lead to increased awareness and activism (Neville & Cross Jr., 2017).

The construct of Black racial identity development has been explored extensively in past research (Awad, 2007; Milliones, 1980; Thomas, 1971; Sellers et al., 1998; Vandiver et al., 2002) with some researchers paying particular attention to the influence that racial oppression has on the process from a contextual standpoint (Cross, 1971, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Helms, 1996). Notable among past research is Cross' 1971 development of the Nigrescence theory which was created to outline the stages by which Black individuals realize their Black consciousness in response to the systemic racial oppression they experience.

In his Nigrescence theory, Cross (1971, 1991) posits that there is a relationship between racial identity and self-regard. Additionally, he contends that an individual's self-concept consists of two elements, their personal identity, and their reference group orientation. An individual's reference group is defined as any social group that a person considers themselves to be a member of. The Nigrescence theory was developed into a model which illustrates how Black people's experience with being marginalized and disenfranchised affects them psychologically (Vandiver et al., 2002). The revised version of the Nigrescence model consists of four stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization (Cross, 1991). Cross (1991) uses the model to hypothesize how an individuals' response to external racial stressors influence their identity development. For example, someone in the pre-encounter stage (characterized by idealization of White dominant culture, and internalized racial oppression) (Worrell et al, 2004), who assimilates to the dominant White American culture with limited acceptance of their Black identity is likely to have less racial salience and identify stronger with the larger American reference group (Vandiver et al., 2002).

The encounter stage is characterized by a Black individual's awareness of the invasive and oppressive dynamics between dominant White American culture and Black culture. According to Cross (1991) this realization is triggered by a psychologically impactful event, such as witnessing police brutality which elicits an emotionally intense and uncomfortable reevaluation of the relationship between Black people and the dominant White American culture. The encounter stage leads to increased racial salience in the immersion-emersion stage, which is characterized by dichotomous feelings related to their Blackness and White culture (Cross, 1991). For example, an individual in this stage may experience increased pride in their Black identity and antipathy regarding elements of White culture. The final stage of Cross' Nigrescence model is the internalization stage in which an individual adopts a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of Blackness and its relationship within the American context. Black individuals in the internalization stage are able to take on a multiculturalist identity–an indicator of Black acceptance and strong positive racial salience–while also being accepting towards members of other racial groups and having salience with at least one other reference group such as their generation cohort, or the larger American society (Vandiver et al., 2002).

Theoretical models such as the Nigrescence model (Cross, 1971, 1991) provides researchers with the necessary scaffolding to conduct research and gain a better understanding of the Black and African American community as they exist as a historically displaced and oppressed group (Andrews, 2009; Cokley, 2002; Dartson, 1999; Manning, 1998; Seaton et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2009). For example, Janet Helms (1995) proposed that rather than being moved through stages of Black identity, Black people adopt more fluid or amorphous statuses that hybridize in response to racial stressors. With regards to their ability to live and thrive in the United States, researchers have found that amongst Black people in the United States,

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achievement and success have been racialized; this is due to their awareness of racial oppression

and other racialized experiences (Andrews, 2009; Durkee et al., 2019; Pierre, 2004; Stinson,

2011). African Americans cite racial oppression as the cause for their inability to achieve their

life goals (Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Sellers et al., 2011). The pervasiveness of racially

oppressive messages within the African American community has led to internalized racism and

racial anxiety, which is correlated with decreased mental health and self-regard (Odafe et al.,

2017; Sanchez et al., 2016). The experience of internalized racism is particularly harmful, as it is

a self-perpetuating mechanism that maintains systems of racial oppression. Internalized racism is

defined by Hall (1986) as a victim of racism subjecting themselves to "racist ideology" which

attempts to "imprison and define them" (pp. 26). In the context of African Americans,

internalized racism entails an acceptance of systems of American racism, the endorsement of

racist stereotypes, and a likely self-hatred (Pyke, 2010). Through their apathy and antagonistic

attitudes towards Black identity and culture, Black people who struggle with internalized racism

perpetuate systemic racism by complying with racial oppression and mirroring it in their

communities (Molina & James 2016). This behavior is complicit in further facilitating the

disenfranchisement and marginalization of Black people by causing emotional strain (Johnson &

Arbona, 2006; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015), psychological distress (Calvin et al., 2003; Cavalhieri

& Wilcox, 2021; Molina & James 2016; Mouzon & McLean, 2017), reinforcing racial

hierarchies (Huber et al., 2006; Kohli, 2014), and reproducing oppression in their communities

(Brown & Segrist, 2016; Pyke, 2010; David et al., 2019).

     Awareness of the disparity between one's lived experience and their idealized reality

elicits some form of anxiety in all people (Isaranon, 2019; Odafe et al., 2017; Sellers et al., 2011;

Speight, 2007). As members of an oppressed group in America, African Americans who have

moved beyond the pre-encounter stage of identity development are hyperaware of their standing

within American society, and that of their White majority counterparts (Cavalhieri & Wilcox,

2021). This highlights the unequal footing with people who are regarded as "created equal"

(Carter & Perez, 2016; Cernkovich et al., 2000) under their country's Declaration of

Independence. It can be imagined that such a reality could lead to a sense of dissonance for racial

minorities regarding their own identities and thoughts on their home country (Campbell &

Flemming, 2000). This results in the limiting of their level of civic engagement in their

communities (Farmer, 2006; Moses et al., 2020; Towler, 2020), which leads to further

marginalization, and the loss of sense of self-efficacy in their ability to achieve their own

"dreams" living in American society (Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Durkee et al., 2019; Sanchez

et al., 2016; Sellers et al., 2011).

The African American Reality

What is often neglected by individuals making claims of living in a post-racial United

States is the numerous ways in which Black people in the United States have been mistreated

there, and not just historically (Williams, 2012), but currently. Occurrences such as

disproportionate police brutality and prejudice against Black people (Chama, 2019) is evidence

of this. Voigt et al., (2017) found that Black people interacting with the police are 61% more

likely than White people to be verbally accosted by a police officer. In a stark contrast, White

Americans are 57% more likely to have civil and respectful interactions with officers compared

to Black people (Voigt et al., 2017). DeGue et al (2016) found that between 2009 and 2012,

Black people in America were 2.8 times more likely to have a fatal interaction with police

officers, when compared to White Americans despite being more likely to be unarmed (14.8%)

compared to their White (9.4%) counterparts. Other studies have found that, compared to White

Americans, Black Americans are three times more likely to be shot and killed by police officers and five times more likely to be unarmed in such an encounter (Bor et al., 2018). Additionally, Black teens in America are 21 times more likely to be killed by police officers compared to white teens (McLeod et al., 2020). Studies indicate that such occurrences are erosive to the mental health and well-being of not only the victims' loved ones, but the Black American community as a whole, reinforcing disenfranchisement and civic insecurity (Bor et al., 2018; Laurencin & Walker, 2020; McLeod et al., 2020). Bratton and Anderson (2018) found that only 19% Black Americans express confidence in American policing, compared to 56% of White Americans. This finding is an indicator of a divide in how Black Americans view law and order in the United States, and how they themselves are viewed by the legal system compared to White Americans (Trinkner et al., 2019). This suggests that due to disparities in treatment, Black people are less inclined to engage with law enforcement (Ang et al., 2021; Jindal, et al., 2021; Smith Lee & Robinson, 2019; Trinkner et al., 2019), a right entitled to all Americans.

The racial disparities in the criminal justice system do not stop with police interactions but extend to the courts. Black Americans receive disproportionate sentencing for minor crimes (Jouet, 2019; Stone-Mediatore, 2019) and are also incarcerated at a disproportionate rate in the United States (Aelion, 2017; Leonhardt, 2020), as the 2.3 million incarcerated Black people make up 34% of the incarcerated population in the United States (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; NAACP, 2021). The NAACP (2021) reports that Black males are being incarcerated at a rate six times higher than White males, and they posit that should this trend continue, it could increase to as high as one in every three Black American males experiencing imprisonment in their lifetime, a stark contrast to the projected one in every 17 White men (NAACP, 2021). This statistic is troubling not only because of the impact

imprisonment can have on an individual and their family (Edgemon & Clay-Warner, 2018; Harris & Harding, 2019; Nowotny & Kuptsevych-Timmer, 2018), but on the Black community as a whole, because it can prohibit a significant portion of the African American population from engaging in civic duties like voting (Jackson, 2017; Troyer, 2021) and severely inhibits their ability to have a positive economic impact within their community (Brown et al, 2019; Leonhardt, 2020; Petit, 2012).

Voter suppression, which can be defined as strategies enacted to create exclusion of members of a particular group from the democratic process (Hing, 2018), is another racist practice that can lead to the marginalization of Black communities. In the United States all American citizens are entitled to the right to vote in democratic elections, save for a few. The lifetime cessation of voting rights for American people in some states who have been convicted of a felony is seen as a form of voter suppression as this policy prohibits about 2.3% of Americans of voting age from participating in elections (Manza & Uggen, 2004). What makes this policy especially concerning is, because Black Americans are disproportionately arrested, felon disenfranchisement hampers the African American vote (Manza et al., 2004; Manza & Uggen, 2004); more incarcerated Black people means less Black voters, and a weaker Black voting bloc. Other forms of voter suppression tactics have historically been used against Black voters, including literacy tests, poll taxes, and lynching during the Jim Crow era (Combs, 2016; Epperly et al., 2019; Mahato, 2019). In the present day, voter suppression takes many forms (Anderson, 2018; Cobb, 2018; Cobb et al., 2010; Keyssar, 2012), such as partisan gerrymandering of election districts to isolate Black voters and reduce their impact (Hing, 2018; Mahato, 2019). Voter identification laws are also seen as a biased deterrent against Black voters as government issued identification is required to vote in 35 American states (Alvarez et al.,

2008a; Biggers & Hanmer, 2017). Mahato (2019) reports that approximately 25% Black

Americans eligible to vote do not own the necessary identification necessary to do so. Driver's

licenses are the most common form of government identification, but Black Americans are 50%

less likely than White Americans to have one (Hajnal et al., 2017). This is especially burdensome

for elderly Black Americans, who are a part of a cohort that votes most consistently and are less

likely to have government-issued photo identification and may have had their driver's licenses

taken away due to their age (Hopkins et al, 2017). Even more troublesome is the inequity

experienced by Black people regarding having the necessary identification. For example, in

Texas, voters are able to use gun permits, but college identification is not suitable for voting.

This is seen as a deterrent to young Black voters as more than half of the students in the

University of Texas system are Black while more than 80% of gun permit license holders in

Texas are White (Barreto et. al 2018; Walker et al., 2018). In Alabama, not long after the passing

of a voter identification law, 31 of 67 Department of Motor Vehicles offices were closed, a

significant number of which were in majority Black counties (Anderson, 2018; Watson, 2015),

deterring Black Americans from obtaining the identification necessary to vote. Additionally,

factors such as not being able to locate their birth certificate, not being able to show proof of

address, and not being able to afford a day off from work in order to obtain identification from a

government office are all potential stumbling blocks for people from low-income backgrounds a

demographic in which Black Americans are overrepresented (Biggers & Hanmer, 2017; Hing,

2018; Mahato, 2019). Should Black people have adequate identification to vote, those voting in

majority Black constituencies are hindered by disproportionate wait times for voting due to

underserved voting precincts where election officials fail to distribute adequate resources such as

adequate staff and working voting machines (Hajnal et al., 2017; Hasen, 2017; Mukherjee, 2009;

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Pettigrew, 2017). Pettigrew (2017) found that compared to people voting in majority White districts, voters in majority Black districts were three times more likely to wait more than 30 minutes, and six times more likely to wait longer than an hour. Mukherjee (2009) refers to the wait time to vote as the "time tax" (pp. 177). Additionally, Mukherjee (2009) highlights how costly the wait can be for some voters in terms of wages lost, another element of discouragement for Black voters.

Hing (2018) provides a reminder that successful voter suppression efforts not only silence the political voices of individuals, but hobble the concerted efforts of an entire group to exercise their voting power thus inhibiting their ability to impact change and lessen marginalization by advocating for policies aligned with their interests and concerns, or electing a representative who can advocate on their behalf (Avery & Peffley, 2005; Ingalls et al., 2013; Phillips & Deckard, 2016). A lack of voter turnout means less influence at state, federal, and local levels, and less social capital and group cohesion, which leads to weaker influence on social conditions and resource investment in critical areas such as infrastructure, education, and health (Hing, 2018). Additionally, past researchers have found that African Americans are less confident than are White American voters that their votes will be counted (Bullock et al., 2005). Alvarez et al. (2008b) found that 32.4% of African Americans expressed a lack of confidence that their votes are counted, compared to 8.5% of White Americans. Parson and McLaughlin (2007) had similar findings, with 29% of African Americans believing that their votes would not be counted, compared to 8% of White Americans. The disparity in responses indicate a lack of belief among Black Americans that their votes matter, which would make them less likely to vote (Ellis, 2008). Researchers have found that this sort of disenfranchisement, known as political disempowerment, can have negative effects on citizens' well-being (Gilbert & Dean, 2013;

Marmot, 2007; Wallerstein, 2002), such as eliciting a feeling of having a lack of control in their environment (Hing, 2018). Unfortunately, this reality has become characteristic of the American experience in the wake of the Donald Trump presidency as it has been synonymous with an increase in rhetoric regarding voter fraud and rigged elections (Barkun, 2017; Goidel et al., 2019). This has eroded Americans' confidence in the integrity of the democratic process (Berlinski et al., 2021; Ellis, 2020; Levy, 2020; Sinclair et al., 2018) most notably for Black Americans whom Norris et al. (2019) state are more likely to endorse a belief in unfair vote recording. Voter suppression and disempowerment also reinforce discrimination and systemic racism. Both factors can lead to emotional and bodily distress for Black people (Ahmed et al., 2007; Cobb et al., 2010; Hing, 2018; Marmot, 2003; Paradies et al., 2008; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Hing (2018) highlights that voter suppression has made voting in the United States a privilege rather than a right. This privilege is determined not by American citizenship, but instead dictated by systems of structural racism.

When pursuing professional opportunities to advance and live fulfilling lives according to their abilities and achievements as Americans (Adams & Schneiderman, 2017), Black people sometimes find themselves in inhospitable environments where they face mistreatment in the workplace. The American Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reported that in 2014 racial discrimination was the most recurrent charge filed comprising 35% of all workplace discrimination claims filed under the agency's enforced statutes (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission). In 2014, a total of 31,073 race-based charges were filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Of this total, 25,482 were related to racial discrimination against Black people in American workplaces (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission).

Simple interactions in the workplace can be corrosive to a Black individuals' wellbeing, as even "brief, everyday exchanges" can lead to "denigrating messages" to people of color regarding their racial minority status (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Occurrences like these are known as racial microaggressions and they are rampant in American workplaces, particularly in predominantly White organizations (Blume et al., 2012; Pitcan et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2014) More than just being a belittling and disheartening everyday annoyance, racial microaggressions can lead to the degradation of a Black person's mental health (Pierce, 1974), and facilitate the widening wage gap between Black and White people in the American workforce (Hernandez et al., 2019).

Pitcan et al. (2018) found that Black men on average earn 77.1% of their White male counterparts' average salary, Black women on average earn even less (Derenoncourt & Montialoux, 2020; Karageorge, 2017). Daly et al. (2017) finds this particularly troubling as the gap is widening and according to them, the cause for this cannot be explained by differences in vocational field, education, age, and location. Additionally of note, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) found that job recruiters were 50% more likely to contact people with more common anglicized "White" names, for an interview compared to those with stereotypically African American names. The researchers found that the disparity was consistent across industries and employers' size; when controlling for qualifications, resumes with "White" names were more favored.

Researchers have identified vocational prejudice and historical disparities in wages, along with unfair housing policies, as some of the many reasons why there is a widening racial wealth gap in the United States (Kochhar & Fry, 2014; Singh, 2021). Historical factors have handicapped Black Americans' ability to build and transfer wealth (Boen, et al., 2020; Lauer,

2017; Williams, 2008). In 1963, the net worth of White American families was reported to be $45,000 greater than Black American families; by 2016 it grew to be $150,000 greater (Urban Institute, 2017). McIntosh et al. (2020) reported that in 2016, the average net worth of a White family was $171,000, which was almost ten times greater than that of the average Black family at that time ($17,150). This disparity cannot be attributed solely to differences in wages, but also how Black people utilize debt for purposes such as student loans, health care, car ownership, and household upkeep among other personal matters (Charron-Chenier, 2020; Boen et al., 2020). Researchers found that this is the case in part because Black people on average have less wealth thus, they are more reliant on credit (Killewald & Bryan, 2018; Seamster, 2019).

Though researchers highlight that White people on average have more debt than Black people in the United States (Charron-Chénier & Seamster, 2018; Mcintosh et al., 2020; Seamster, 2019), Seamster (2019) makes a note that in addition to being more likely to have the financial wealth necessary to pay off their debt, White people's debt is typically the type of debt that can be used to generate additional wealth, such as an investment that will grow in value and offer a good return on the initial investment. These types of investments can in turn be leveraged to acquire additional financial assets for example, leveraging the equity invested in a home to buy another. This process facilitates wealth generation, social mobility, and healthy financial risk-taking through investments. Additionally, researchers have found that wealth begets political and social influence (Wolff, 2002; Zewde, 2020) as well as education attainment as children from wealthier families are more likely to earn four-year degrees and develop social mobility (Braga et al., 2017; Feiveson & Sabelhaus, 2018).

The Black Americans who are able to find some modicum of financial success are also often burdened with what can defined as the Black Tax (Magubane, 2017). This is the sense of

obligation that some Black people must provide for their families and other members of their

communities. This collectivist value is integral to many Black family systems (Magubane, 2017).

The idea of the Black Tax is rooted in the principle of *Ubuntu,* a Bantu term derived from a

Nguni phrase: *Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu,* which can be translated as, "a person is a person

because of or through others" (Mabasa, 2020, p. 1). This concept speaks to the level of

commitment Black people feel towards their communities and how successful Black people's

decision to invest resources into them can be a protective factor (Hood et al, 2017; Mhlongo,

2019; Mlondo, 2022). Despite the virtue and inherent benefit of a commitment to improving the

welfare of their extended families and wider community, the Black Tax can exact a hefty toll.

This presents itself in the form of psychological stress and fatigue associated with bearing the

disproportionate burden of attempting to uplift their communities (Forman 2002) while also

trying to cope with racial adversity and gain financial and social capital (Devore, 1983; Fongwa,

2019; Hood et al, 2018).

Home ownership is an essential element of wealth building and achieving the American

Dream, in the contemporary sense. It has been historically denied to Black people in the United

States because of predatory and racist mortgage lending practices, such as redlining (Jones et al.,

2020; Lynch et al., 2021; Williams, 2008). A practice known as blockbusting entailed building

developers convincing White homeowners to sell their homes at a lower price, in response to the

impending threat that racial minorities would move in and have an adverse effect on their

property values, health, and safety (Mehlhorn, 1998; Orser, 2015, 2019). The developers would

then sell the vacated properties at elevated prices, sometimes up to almost 28% higher (Akbar et

al., 2019), to Black families, who would also have to pay unfair mortgage rates (Craemer et al.,

2020; Rothstein, 2017; Shoenfeld, 2018). This was a method by which Black people were

segregated, as their communities became ghettos (Pearcy, 2020) that were mismanaged by local

government (Powell, 2021). They lived in homes worth a fraction of what they were required to

pay, as not only did they pay a higher price for their homes, but once the neighborhood they

lived in became "Black," their property values fell by about ten percent (Akbar et al., 2019;

Rothstein 2017). These environments became conducive to the proliferation of social ills

(Caputo-Levine & Lynn, 2019; Griggs et al., 2019) as these communities and the people living in

them were subsequently pathologized by the dominant White power structure which lead to

forms dehumanization and further marginalization such as unjust policing (Pearcy, 2020; Powell,

2021).

Researchers highlight how the effects of blockbusting and redlining can still be felt today

by Black communities (Akbar et al., 2019; Bloch & Phillips, 2021; Jones & Jackson, 2018;

Lynch et al., 2021; Pearcy, 2020; Poulson et al., 2021; Powell, 2021). For example, past redlined

communities, that are majority Black, are not only still experiencing economic hardship, but the

schools in these areas receive less educational funding than predominantly white districts leading

to underserved schools producing ill-prepared students with less social mobility (English et al.,

2016; Fisher et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2019). Jones et al. (2020) found that, despite serving

the same number of students or greater, non-White school districts in the United States receive

$23 billion less in educational funding compared to predominantly White school districts.

Additionally, the blockbusting of the past has now given way to gentrification and the

subsequent displacement of Black families who can no longer afford to live in the communities

they called home (Hightower & Fraser, 2020; Jones & Jackson, 2018).

The disproportionate levels in wealth between Black and White people in the United

States also directly impacts African American's health outcomes (Lynch et al., 2021; Simons et

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al., 2021) and the discrimination they experience when seeking health care (Assari & Moghani Lankarani, 2018; Daniels et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2019). This is particularly evident in the disparity in mortality and morbidity in the Black American community compared to White Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapman, 2020; Ibrahimi et al., 2020; Peek et al., 2021). Garg et al. (2020) found that in Chicago, Black people made up 50% of COVID-19 cases and 70% of deaths despite Black people making up only about 30% of Chicago's population. According to the Center for Disease Control, despite only making up 13% of the United States' population, Black people composed 33% of hospitalized COVID-19 patients (Ibrahimi et al., 2020). Samuel et al. (2021) found that American counties with higher percentages of Black people had higher rates of COVID-19 diagnoses and deaths. The researchers (Samuel et al., 2021) concluded that this was due in part to distrust of the American health care systems as well as the conditions in which some Black people lived. Black people's overrepresentation in occupations deemed to be essential during the pandemic also increased their exposure (Biu et al., 2021; Wingfield, 2021). Samuel et al. (2021) posited these factors were a direct result of historical discriminatory practices.

Beyond the impacts of racism on physical health, researchers have also found that racism and disenfranchisement negatively impact both the mental health of African Americans, and their willingness to pursue mental health care (Alang, 2019; Castro-Ramirez et al., 2021; Henderson et al., 2019; Jemal et al., 2017; Polk et al., 2020). A Kaiser Health News report found that African American adults are 20% more likely to experience mental health struggles (Ibrahimi et al., 2020). Eichstaedt et al. (2021), found that in 2020 the presence of mental health struggles among African Americans reached unprecedented levels in the wake of George Floyd's murder. Eichstaedt et al. (2021) analyzed data collected from the United States Census,

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Household Pulse and Gallup, assessing a representative sample of Black people's mental and

emotional wellbeing a week after the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man killed by

a police officer. The Gallup poll reported that 50% of respondents indicated they had

experienced an increased level of sadness and anger in response to the murder. The United States

Census report indicated a spike in reports of elevated anxiety and depression among Black

people. The researchers estimated that the increased levels of anxiety and depression reported

corresponds to an additional 900,000 African Americans, a rate of increase significantly higher

than that of White Americans (Eichstaedt et al., 2021).

Evidence of injustice and inequality in America disprove the idea that Americans live in a

"post-racial" society (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Tamali, 2021; Warren, 2013). This is particularly

disheartening when one considers the toll the African American community has had to pay

historically in making America the country it is today (Coates, 2015; Janssen, 2012; Means,

2016; Williams, 2012), generating wealth and influence on behalf of their oppressors

(O'Connell, 2012) without receiving adequate restitution (Coates, 2015; King Jr., 2018). The

wealth generated by the slave trade has seldom been used to benefit the lives of those people

who have had adverse lived experiences in the wake of slavery (Craemer, 2015; Obuah, 2016).

Instead, it has been used to further marginalize those whose ancestors were inhumanely broken

and bruised in the name of making America "great" (Gibbons et al., 2019; Jouet, M., 2019;

Stone-Mediatore, S., 2019; Torpey, 2019). The generational wealth accumulated by a White

majority in America has enabled Whites to retain a position of privilege in America (Torpey,

2019).

The American Millennial Experience

Numbered at about 70 million (Choi et al., 2018), millennials are presently the largest American generational cohort. Also known as the Trophy Generation, Generation Y, and Echo Boomers (Dalton, 2012, McAllum, 2016; Waldrop & Grawich, 2011), millennial is a term used universally (Aboobaker et al., 2020; Clarke, 2021; Clark et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2021) to describe people born between the years 1977-1980 to 1994-1996. The range is considered to be fluid (DeVaney, 2015; Dimock, 2019; New Strategist Publications, 2018; Sweeney, 2006; Weinbaum et al., 2016). Millennials are described as being more liberal and accepting; their views and outlook on important issues such as religion, social welfare, and the role of government are diverse and disparate compared to their older generational predecessors (Corbet & Gurdgiev, 2017; Fisher, 2018; Schildkraut & Marotta, 2018). Researchers have found that American millennials are more likely to vote Democratic (Balf, 2020; Cheng, 2017; Medenica, 2018), but are more likely to identify as independents (Chaput, 2020; Gruber et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2019). Taylor et al. (2014) found that in 2014, 50% of millennials identified as independents compared to 39%, 34%, and 32% for Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation respectively. Taylor et al. (2014) also found that millennials are more optimistic regarding the United States' future, with 49% of them believing that the United States has a brighter future. Major zeitgeist events characteristic of the American millennials' generation are: the advent of the internet (1984 – 2004), the Dot-Com Bubble (1995 – 2001), 9/11 and the start of the Iraq war (2001), the Great Recession (2007 – 2009), the election of the United States' first Black president (2008), and the outbreak of the coronavirus (2020) (Debevec et al., 2013; Petersen, 2020; Vermeulen, 2021). Several authors have noted that these events have had a profound and

lasting economic impact on American millennials and their ability to realize the contemporary American Dream (Hidalgo et al., 2022; Sinha, 2016; Rubin, 2014; Xu et al., 2015).

Despite varying age ranges used to define the millennial cohort, there is a significant consensus that this generational cohort's birth year parameters are between 1981 and 1996 (Adams et al, 2020; Allen et al., 2020; Dimock, 2019; Fry, 2014; Taylor et al., 2014). In 2021 these individuals were approximately between the ages of 25 and 40 years old. The ages between 25 and 40 years old are critical because they are considered to be individuals' prime financial earning years (Barnett & Brennan, 1995; Deal et al., 2010; Fromm & Garton, 2013; Giuliano, 1998). At this stage, individuals will typically earn their highest wages and make pivotal financial decisions (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2007). This is a crucial factor when considering that American millennials, the largest generational cohort in the United States (Fry, 2016), are regarded as being at an economic deficit when comparing their average net worth and wages to that of their older generational counterparts' during their prime economic years (Kurz et al., 2019; Levenson, 2010; Taylor et al., 2014). Millennials are poised to be the dominant force behind American labor and productivity and are now tasked with cultivating the bedrock that will nurture future generations (AbouAssi et al., 2021; Chaudhuri & Ghosh, 2012; Weinbaum et al., 2016). Unfortunately, due to economic trends such as the Great Recession (from 2007 to 2009) ,the COVID-19 pandemic, and the United States' subsequent slow recovery (Goodman & Mance, 2011; Stock & Watson, 2012), millennials' ability to execute this task may be at risk. This is particularly the case for older millennials who entered the workforce in 2007 and may have experienced lasting financial adversity due to the economic downturn experienced after the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus (Zachara-Szymańska, 2021). Working millennials' recovery after the Great Recession lagged behind their older generational cohort counterparts due to their

being in the early stages of their professional development (Gale et al., 2020; Zewde & Crystal, 2021). According to Myers et al. (2020), this experience has hindered American millennials from reaching significant financial milestones such as purchasing a home. Despite being considered digital natives capable of navigating remote work during and after the COVID-19 lockdown (Gharzai et al., 2020; Keszei, 2018), the experience still had a profound financial impact on many millennials, compounding their already complex financial reality (Clark, 2019b; Kurz et al., 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, American unemployment reached record highs across generational cohorts (Fairlie et al., 2020; O'Connor et al., 2020; Pullen, 2020), and about 40% of layoffs became permanent job losses (Barrero et al., 2020; Hidalgo et al. 2022). However, as the generational cohort with the largest presence in the American work force, at about 35% (AbouAssi et al., 2021; Frian & Mulyani, 2018; Ingram, 2021; Sweeney et al., 2019), millennials were once again disproportionately affected by an economic downturn (Heys et al., 2020; Hidalgo et al., 2022).

Considering that home ownership is a significant element of generating and maintaining wealth in the United States (McCabe, 2018), this speaks to why millennials average net worth lags behind older generational cohorts as their rates for home ownership are significantly less compared to the home ownership rates of older generational cohorts at the same age (Choi et al. 2018; Mountain et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2015). Choi et al. (2018) cites millennials' delayed marriage rates as a significant cause for their lower rates of home ownership and subsequent lower ability to accumulate wealth through real estate appreciation. The researchers highlight that marriage increases the probability of owning a home by 18% after accounting for age, race, and income (Choi et al., 2018). Similar to rates of home ownership, millennials' marriage rate is less than that of older generational cohorts at the same age as approximately 60% of millennials

are single (Brodman et al, 2018). Choi et al. (2018) highlights that the marriage rate for American young adults has declined from 52% in 1990, to 39% in 2015. The researchers also posit that, had the marriage rate remained consistent since 1990, American millennials' home ownership rates would be five percent higher (Choi et al., 2018). Of note, even for those who do eventually marry, millennials are getting married at later ages; the American median age at first marriage is now at its oldest in history (Manning et al., 2014; Payne, 2019; Smock & Schwartz, 2020). Hemez (2020) found that in 2018, the median age at first marriage was 29.2 for men and 27.1 for women, significantly older than 22.8 and 20.3 for men and women respectively in 1960. Taylor et al. (2014) assert that millennials' delayed marriage rates may be due to financial hardships as marriage is no longer prevalent among young people across socio-economic groups as it was in the past but is instead more prevalent among individuals who are more educated or earn higher incomes. Taylor et al. (2014) also highlight that millennials have the highest rates of births outside of wedlock in the United States with 47% of children born to millennial women. Shifts in culture and beliefs may also be the cause for lower marriage rates as millennials have been found to be less religious and more diverse and liberal in their beliefs when compared to their generational predecessors (New Strategist Press, 2018; Rouse & Ross, 2019; Taylor et al., 2014).

Millennials' economic adversity can also be attributed to demographic factors such as their being more likely to live in or near city centers where the cost of living is higher particularly for real estate (Choi et al., 2018; Ehlenz et al., 2020; Myers, 2016). Additionally, in the job market American millennials face stiff competition as they are contending with a higher rate of older folks in the American workforce compared to past generations (Beinhocker, 2008; Fishman, 2016). Researchers have found that due to improved health outcomes for Americans

and adverse economic circumstances, Baby Boomers and members of Generation X are waiting longer to retire leading to an older and more competitive American workforce (Breyer & Kifmann, 2002; Caraher, 2016; Munnell & Rutledge, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Tang et al., 2013). As members of the most highly educated American generational group (Bannon et al., 2011; Burkus, 2010; Kurz et al., 2019), millennials also compete heavily with their peers for vocational opportunities. According to Hoffman (2018), American millennials have reached record levels of educational achievement across the national population. Levenson (2010) states that millennials have twice the college qualifications of their older counterparts as college attendance of young people (ages 25 to 29) has gone from 32%, with only 16% of the number earning degrees, to nearly 59% of young people attending some college and 31% having received at least a bachelor's degree in 2008. Since then, the upward trend of increased educational achievement among millennials has continued; in 2016 it was reported that among millennials, 38% of men and 46% of women earned at least a bachelor's degree, a significant contrast to 31% and 34% for Generation X men and women respectively in 2000 (Fry, 2017a).

Unfortunately, American millennials' record rate of academic achievement is accompanied by unprecedented levels of education debt which has been regarded as a crisis (Ghaoui, 2020; Haneman, 2017; Rubenstein, 2017; Welbeck, 2020). Researchers (Craemer, 2015; Ghaoui, 2020; Rubenstein, 2017) highlight the detrimental effect that the Great Recession in the United States had on American millennials particularly as it relates to college attendance. Researchers contend (Craemer, 2015; Cruz-Cerdas, 2017; Debevec et al., 2013; Rinz, 2019) that for older millennials who experienced job losses as mere newcomers to the American work force, pursuing higher education was seen as a means of making themselves more marketable and profitable in a depressed job market. Younger millennials who were not yet adults received

similar messages as they prepared to enter job market in flux (Craemer, 2015; Cruz-Cerdas, 2017; Rinz, 2019). Rubenstein (2017) states that this reality is reflected in the increase in American student loan debt as the amount doubled from 2007 to 2016. In 2020, the total American student loan debt reached a staggering all-time high at $1.56 trillion, after having increased by $100 billion since 2018 (Fay, 2021; Friedman, 2020; Welbeck, 2020). According to Rubenstein (2017), current total student debt levels in the United States is second only to the total mortgage debt and it likely still does not encompass the entirety of educational funding as students and families often utilize consumer debt through credit cards and home equity loans to pay for higher education fees. It is also worth noting the steep increase in the cost of earning a college degree in the United States which has contributed to the increase in student loan debt (Henley, 2014; Jones et al., 2009; Oachs, 2016).

The average debt toll per American student loan creditors in 2020 was about $39,000 (Fay, 2021) spread across 45.4 million Americans (Friedman, 2020; Hanson, 2021; Welbeck, 2020). According to Hanson (2021), millennials account for 14.8 million Americans currently in student loan debt; they currently assume roughly 32% of the debt burden. Hanson (2021) also highlights that Generation X possess slightly more debt than millennials, however, this is mitigated by Generation X's higher income and net worth compared to millennials (Bialik & Fry, 2019; Fry, 2017b; Kurz et al., 2019). Also, Hanson (2021) highlights that some older Americans have assumed their dependents' educational debt as their own, indicating that millennials' impact on the overall American educational debt total may be greater than recorded. In 2018, Brodman et al. conducted a study sampling 468 Americans across generational cohorts, finding that despite being more highly educated, the majority of millennials (91%) primarily worked in entry to mid-level vocational positions. Subsequently, 68% of them earn less than

$50,000 annually (Brodman et al, 2018). These findings are associated with an older workforce in which millennials have fewer opportunities for upward mobility and increased pay as older professionals occupy positions longer compared to past generations (AbouAssi et al., 2021; Gaidhani et al., 2019; Rutledge et al., 2015; Zemke et al., 2013). Brodman et al.'s (2018) findings spotlight the generational financial disparities in the American work force.As Baby Boomers (48%) and Generation X (51%) predominantly work in mid-level positions and have higher average wages at $79,950 and $55,600 respectively, millennial participants had a lower average income at $46,320 (Brodman et al., 2018).

American millennials' lower average income and their shortcomings in generating wealth (Ghaoui, 2020; Levenson, 2010) makes their plight with student debt even more complex. Their financial circumstances worsen as some struggle or are unwilling to pay off their loans (de Bassa Scheresberg, 2014; Lee et al., 2019; Mottola, 2014; Teal, 2020) meanwhile, the cost of living in the United States continues to increase (Bobeica et al., 2021; Borrallo et al., 2021; Taylor, 2020a). As millennials prolong paying off their educational loans, their debt total compounds with interest further hampering their ability to become debt-free and realize the American Dream (Ben-Ishai & Stanley, 2016; Razzano, 2020; Xu et al., 2015). Rising levels of debt also bolsters the likelihood of payment delinquency and defaulted loans (Pizarro Milian et al., 2021). Scally (2018) found that in 2018, 11.4 percent of student loan creditors either failed to make a payment or defaulted on their loan;Blagg (2018) asserts that about one million Americans default on their student loans annually. Failure to repay student loans can have a disastrous impact on American millennials financial health, making it even more difficult for them to gain economic momentum (Cox et al., 2020). Additionally, this reality not only affects millennials and their families, it has an indirect effect on the American economy as a whole most notably because the educational

debt is owed primarily to the American federal government (Munsch & Mariola, 2021; Teal, 2020). The funds owed are critical to the federal government's ability to provide resources to Americans. For example, the federal government uses funds from Social Security and Medicare for American retirees to offset the burden of student loan debt (Matthews, 2021; Mitchell, 2021). Additionally, Rubenstein (2017) posits that millennials' inability or unwillingness to purchase homes negatively impacts older American homeowners who may depend on the windfall from the sale of their homes to supplement their finances in retirement.

The Black Millennial Reality

While extensive research has been done regarding how the larger Black and African American community responds to marginalization and disenfranchisement in the White-dominant American context (Craemer et al., 2020; Cross, 1971; Eichstaedt et al., 2021; Lynch et al., 2021; Perez, 2021) and the current reality of American millennials as a whole has been empirically explored at length (AbouAssi et al., 2021; Dimock, 2019; Fry, 2014; Hidalgo et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2014), limited research has been done regarding the reality of the Black American millennial cohort and their relationship with the American experience (Boone, 2020; Ingram, 2021). Black American Millennials are a part of the largest (Adams et al., 2020; Fry, 2016; McCoy, 2019) and most diverse (Frey, 2018a; Struckell, 2019),liberal-thinking American generational cohort (Dimock, 2019; Schildkraut & Marotta, 2018; Taylor et al., 2014). This phenomenon speaks to the shifting American demographic landscape that is growing to become more globalized, multiracial, and less White (Frey, 2018b). DeVaney (2015) reports that 47% of American millennials identify as racial minorities, significantly higher than 37% for the Generation X cohort, 26% for Baby Boomers, and nine percent for the Silent Generation. Millennials also have lower levels of social trust (Struckell, 2019; Watts, 2018) as only 19% of

millennials express trust in American society compared to 31% of those from Generation X, 37% for those from the Silent generation, and 40% for Baby Boomers (Taylor et al., 2014). Dalton (2012) and Struckell, (2019) posit that this is likely due to millennials being closer to their social circle of friends as well as their families, as many of them still live in their family homes (Dey & Pierret, 2014). Taylor et al. (2014) argue that low social trust among American millennials may also be attributed in part to the increased diversity among millennials. Researchers have found that racial minorities in the United States are more likely to have low social trust (Koch, 2019; Taylor et al., 2007; Smith, 2010; Wilkes & Wu, 2018) due to societal hindrances and feelings of insecurity which makes placing trust in a societal system a significant risk as the consequences of having their trust betrayed could be detrimental (Paxton, 2005; Taylor et al., 2014).

For Black millennials, not only are they required to overcome the hurdles faced by their White counterparts, their intersectional racial identity also brings with it added complications and stressors associated with being Black in the United States. These issues are mainly economic in nature (Dimock, 2019; Sherwood, 2020; Xu et al., 2015). For example, in an already competitive American job market (Blancero et al., 2018; Goodman et al., 2015), some Black millennials are working in oppressive or non-supportive work environments (Boone, 2020; Hall, 2018; Jemal et al., 2017), where they can sometimes struggle with a widened disparity in pay (Biu et al., 2021; McCoy, 2019; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015; Wingfield, 2021), decreased opportunity for promotions, lack of representation (Cain, 2015; Ingram, 2021; McCoy, 2019; Powers et al., 2016; Wilson, 2019), rampant microaggressions (Allen & Harris, 2018; Boone, 2020), and other forms of racial and sometimes sexual insensitivity (Grishby, 2019). In contemporary American workplaces, there has been a strong push for increased racial and gender diversity and representation among employees, supervisors, administrators (Boone, 2020;

Homan, 2019; Windsceid et al., 2017). An interesting phenomenon has emerged in all this as employers seek to encourage diversity but at the same time place a high value on having a like-minded group (Hackett & Hogg, 2014). This is antithetical to the idea of diversity and inclusion and hinders its inherent value to the organization (McCoy, 2019; Stewart et al., 2008). An employer's misguided attempts at promoting workplace diversity foster an environment that promotes microaggressions and racial tokenism (Jones, 2014; Pitcan et al., 2018; Ruby, 2020; Salazar et al., 2019). This type of environment can subsequently lead to Black millennials struggling with decreased self-efficacy and feelings of marginalization, inadequacy, and depression (Cockshaw et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2021; McNutt, 2021; Stewart et al., 2008; Witt & Joseph, 2010). Other factors, such as discrimination in supervisory practices and job evaluations further lead to diminished self-regard such that black employees rate their perceived job performance lower than their white counterparts (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Yang & Morimoto, 2011) fostering a cycle of poor performance followed by poor performance reviews that result in a lack of upward organizational mobility, pay disparity, and further marginalization (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; O'Brien et al., 2016; Yang & Morimoto, 2011).

Racial wage disparity is still an issue in contemporary United States (Karageorge, 2017). Dettling et al. (2017) found that Black American families earn on average $35,000, a little more than half of the average income for White American families ($61,000). Zewde (2020) found that in 2015 the median net worth among young adult households was about $29,000 and reports that young Black American households median net worth was roughly a tenth of the overall median. Zewde (2020) reports that millennial White American households' net worth was significantly larger than that of their Black counterparts at approximately $46,000, which is 1.5 times higher than the overall median and 15 times larger than the African Americans median.

Cruz-Cerdas (2017) found that even after earning a four-year degree, Black millennials still earned significantly less than White millennial college graduates earn. Cruz-Cerdas (2017) tested a sample of 7,665 American millennial college graduates and found that Black American millennials on average made about $5,000 less than their White counterparts. Wood III (2019) found that the racial income disparity gap in Texas has widened at nearly twice the national pace. Wood III (2019) states that in 2017, the median wage for Black people in Texas fell from 79% to 70% of White Texans' median wage. In addition, Wood III (2019) points out that in the ten largest Black majority American cities, Black people experience an unemployment rate that is at least five times greater than White residents.

Compared to White American millennials, Black American millennials have also accumulated higher levels of student loan debt and have been found to be more likely to default on their loans (Haughwout et al. 2019; Welbeck, 2020). The College Board reported that during 2007 and 2008, 27% of Black American college students who earned a bachelor's degree borrowed at minimum $30,000 compared to their White counterparts at 16% (Baum & Steele, 2010). This is due in part to Black families' historical inability to contribute to their children's education (Scott-Clayton, 2012). Zewde (2020) posits that the disparity in access to wealth and resources in the United States is influenced by race. For young Black Americans this means on average less access compared to young White Americans.

For Black American millennials, this issue was further compounded by the Great Recession which disproportionately impacted African American families who experienced a 53% decline in average household net worth (Kochhar et al., 2011). When Americans face adverse circumstances like these, though detrimental to all who experience it, the distribution of the effects are disparate; it is Americans from marginalized and underserved communities who

struggle the most (Cain, 2015; Grishby, 2019; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015). This is evidenced by the increased levels of unemployment experienced by Black people during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which Fairlie et al. (2020) reported getting as high as 16.6%. Further disproportionate economic hardship can be seen in current disparities in home ownership. Choi et al. (2018) notes that Black home ownership rates have been consistently lower than all of American racial groups and though home ownership rates have fallen for all American racial groups, the decrease in Black home ownership in the United States has been disproportionately greater compared to other groups. Choi et al. (2018) asserts that decreased rates of homeownership is an indicator of decreased wealth and an accelerating financial divide based on race which places not only Black American millennials at a further disadvantage, but future generations of Black Americans as well.

The unique and cumbersome burdens of being an American millennial are only further compounded by one's race as is typical across generational cohorts (Adams et al., 2020; Bowman & Howard, 1985; Jones-Eversley et al., 2017). For Black millennials, their intersectionality puts them in a peculiar position in an already adverse society, putting them at further disadvantage when compared to their White counterparts (Cohen, 2011; Gaddis, 2021; Lee & Hopson, 2019; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015). This reality is evidenced by declining black home ownership (Choi et al., 2018), disparity in wages (Cruz-Cerdas, 2017), higher rates of unemployment (Wood III, 2019), and increased levels of debt (Welbeck, 2020). These are just some of the many indicators that the realization of the contemporary American Dream is endangered for Black American millennials, as many of them have become disillusioned with the construct (Adams et al., 2020) and the United States' "broken promises" (pp. 6, Allen, 2019) of equal access to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (The United States Declaration of

Independence, par. 2, 1776; Jefferson, 2009). In addition to their economic strain, the emotional

toll of being young and Black in America cannot be overlooked (Eichstaedt et al., 2021; Jones et

al., 2021; Lee & Hopson, 2019; Perez, 2021) particularly when turning a critical eye to the

current pernicious social climate in the United States (Ho, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Tanne,

2021). The COVID-19 pandemic brought into focus long standing racial issues within the

American healthcare system (Chapman, 2020; Ibrahimi et al, 2020; Peek et al., 2021) and how

historical systems of racism, such as redlining, influenced the disproportionate loss of Black life

(Bertocchi & Dimico, 2020; Choi & Unwin, 2020; Lynch et al., 2021). 2020 also saw increased

mobility in the struggles against the inequities that plague Black women in the American health

care system (Chinn et al., 2021; Obinna, 2020; McLemore et al., 2021) most notably in the area

of maternal health for Black millennial women and their infants (Chambers et al., 2020;

Oribhabor, 2020).

In the wake of former president Trump's election, the American social landscape has

become increasingly caustic and unpredictable (Baker, 2020; Benjamin, 2021; Giroux, 2020;

Pulido et al., 2019). Instances of White American nationalism and racism are more prevalent in

American society due in part to changing attitudes (Giroux, 2017, 2020, 2021; Pryce & Gainey,

2021; Reny & Barreto, 2020) and also due to the pervasive nature of modern mass

communication. This is most notable in the broadcasting of the loss of Black life due to unjust

murders (Chang et al., 2021; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Kilgo & Mourao, 2021; Nguyen et al.,

2021; Shrikant & Sambaraju, 2021). Events of racial injustice, in conjunction with struggles

experienced due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, triggered racial stress and laid bare

generational trauma for Black Americans (Anderson et al., 2021; Eichstaedt et al., 2021;

Johnson, 2016; Threlfall, 2018) which became the impetus for social demonstration and protest

(Perez, 2021). The year 2020 was notable for protest efforts nationwide, with participants across

racial groups and generational cohorts being led by young Black Americans (Chang et al., 2021;

Crichton, 2021). They have grabbed the baton of social protest and inherited their "birthright"

(Baldwin, 1984, pp. 123) as Black Americans (Durham, 2015; Jones-Eversley et al., 2017;

Milkman, 2017) fighting in the ongoing struggle against racism and injustice in the United

States.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Method

Through the use of inductive reflexive thematic analysis methods (Boyatzis, 1998), this study aimed to gain a better understanding of the African American millennial experience and highlight how Black millennials' awareness of American ideals like the "American Dream" (Armstrong, 2019) as well as their awareness of the contrast between that and their own reality, as members of a historically oppressed group of Americans, impacts their sense of being American with particular focus on their sense of American pride and their perceived ability to "achieve" the American Dream. Learning more about how they perceive their positionality in the American context, understanding their feelings towards America including its practices and ideals, and highlighting ways in which they both do and do not align with their own individual realities as minorities can show how a perceived lack of patriotism may be indicative of perceptions of mistreatment and inequality.

Paradigm and Research Design

The stated purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black American millennials in order to gain a better understanding of their reality as young Americans and highlight how an awareness of American ideals like the "American Dream" (Armstrong, 2019), as well as the contrast between themselves and an imposed idyllic reality impacts their sense of being American.

The study was conducted from two research paradigms, critical and constructivist. The constructivist paradigm emphasizes focusing on the unique reality of an individual as constructed in their minds (Hansen, 2004) utilizing deep reflection stimulated by the interaction between the

researcher and participant to bring forth meaning (Ponterotto, 2005). The critical paradigm takes a liberation-oriented stance, seeking to "challenge the status quo," and facilitate emancipation from oppression (Ponterotto, 2005, pp. 129). It explores the impact of social and historical contexts on societal power dynamics and the construction of lived experiences (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000).

Reflexive thematic analysis was selected for such a study based on the emphasis it places on the deeper meaning individuals create from what participants are able to share about their unique lived experiences in relation to the study's focus (Braun & Clarke, 2020). It is also complimentary to the chosen research paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) as it facilitates the exploration of the participant's distinct reality and its relationship to the encompassing social and historical context in which they exist. The findings generated contribute to the emancipation of a historically oppressed population within the American context (Ponterotto, 2005) by providing an understanding and creating an awareness of stumbling blocks that African American millennials may be struggling to overcome.

This qualitative study utilized inductive reflexive thematic analysis methods and was conducted from both the constructivist and critical research paradigms (Ponterotto, 2005). This study was aimed at exploring the unique perceived experience of African American millennials as they contend against historically constituted social powers that influence their reality as Americans, for example, exploring their response to the imposition of the idyllic American Dream in a society within which they and their ancestors have been perpetually oppressed (Schiele, 2005). This study aimed to validate and bring more awareness to the Black experience in America as the reactions of African American millennials can elucidate the disparities between the oppressed and privileged in American society (Armstrong et al., 2019).

With an emphasis made on the exploration of the African American millennial experience and its relationship with the "American Dream," it is vital that the meaning created by African American millennials in relation to both elements be examined. This can only be done by first seeking to understand how African American millennials create their own meaning and subsequently define their own realities (Fassinger, 2005).

Utilizing reflexive thematic analysis methods enables researchers to do such exploration and work with participants to create deeper meaning (Boyatzis, 1998). To facilitate this process, this study utilized a semi-structured interview guide to elicit discourse and generate reflection. The interactive process allowed for exploration and an interpretive understanding of participants' lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). This process enabled participants to express their own narratives in their own words which is essential when working with marginalized communities (DiAquoi, 2018) particularly when considering how powerful these narratives are and how necessary it is for them to be heard. The interviews provided the researcher with necessary data fulfilling the requirements of qualitative research in a way that is conducive to clinical or research contexts. What's more, research conducted from the critical perspective can assist researchers with laying the groundwork for social change. Through systematic research, qualitative researchers can take an organized and methodical approach to social justice work (Charmaz, 2015; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011).

With the radical stance taken in this research's aim of upsetting an established paradigm, a critical-ideological research paradigm is apt for this sort of research. This study places an emphasis on the contemporary sociocultural contextual conditions in which Black American millennials live and the central role these conditions play in their sense of their positionality in American society (Richie et al., 1997). In allowing African American millennials to express their

narratives, this study empowers them to be the "knowers" or experts in their own reality (Ponterotto, 2005), simultaneously validating the experiences of the oppressed and exposing the deceptive and prejudicial nature of systemic racism in American society as well as the role it plays in fostering disparity in regard for American ideals such as the American Dream (Armstrong et al., 2019).

This Reflexive Thematic Analysis research study attempted to answer the following questions:

R 1.   How do Black American millennials perceive their reality in relation to American ideals such as the American Dream?

R 2.   How does the lived experience and perceived social positionality of Black and African American millennials influence their perception of the American Dream and other American ideals?

R 3.   What impact does awareness of the American Dream and other similar American ideals have on Black and African American millennials' sense of American identity?

These questions were chosen to highlight the distinctness of the reality of Black American millennials within a historically racist and oppressive contemporary American society. Highlighting the uniqueness of this population elicits contrast with the antiquated and inequitable American ideals such as the American Dream and elicits insight in the Black American millennial experience. These questions also bolster a better understanding of the African American experience as a whole and Black identity development within the American context.

Participants

For the purpose of this study Black and African Americans were defined as individuals who descend from Black racial groups indigenous to the continent of Africa (Kane & Leedy,

2013). Millennials are defined as individuals born between the years 1981 and 1996 (Allen et al.,

2020). In an attempt to capture the complexity of the diverse experiences of African American

millennials while also trying to facilitate homogeneity among participants, certain inclusion

criteria were included. The first is that participants self-identified as Black, African, Afro-

Caribbean, or African American and possess American citizenship. The second criterion is that

participants were born and raised in the United States or have been living in the United States

since infancy. This factor is important as researchers have found that Black immigrants who are

less assimilated to the American context are more likely to switch between their racial and ethnic

identities, identifying with either African American or their own ethnic culture depending on

which is deemed more favorable to the context (Joseph et al., 2013). Joseph et al., (2013) posit

that Black immigrants' ability to switch identities based on context is a protective factor that

promotes psychological well-being. Additionally, given the steady increase of Black immigrants

in the United States over the past several decades (Tamir & Anderson, 2022), the increased

likelihood of researchers grouping their unique immigrant experiences with those of American-

born Black people can present an issue in research. Specifically, this can lead to the oversight of

cultural differences and distinct lived experiences as well as a lack of understanding of each

groups' unique challenges and intersectionality (Johnson, 2016; Pierre, 2004). Individuals who

are of "mixed" or multiracial heritage were eligible to be participants as long as they self-

identified as Black, African, Afro-Caribbean, or African American and met the second criterion.

There were no sex, gender, or sexual orientation restrictions for potential participants.The third

criterion was that participants be born between the years 1981 and 1996. Despite there being

several age ranges used in existing literature to define the millennial cohort, there is a significant

consensus that this generational cohort's birth year parameters are between 1981 and 1996

(Dimock, 2019; Taylor et al., 2014). In 2023, these individuals are approximately between the ages of 27 and 42 years old and considered to be in their prime financial earning years. Understanding that the contemporary idea of achieving the American Dream is an economic one (Hecht, 2018) and the critical role race plays in economic disparities (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021) the fourth criterion is that participants either be currently or recently gainfully employed (within the last year) and have earned at least a bachelor's degree. Competitive job markets and unprecedented levels of educational achievement and debt (Hanson & Gulish, 2016; Patten & Fry, 2015) are fundamental elements to the American millennial reality. Participants between the ages of 27 and 42 were chosen for their likely ability to be able to reflect upon not only these experiences, but their experiences as Black or African Americans as well. Participants needed to be high school graduates or GED recipients who were not illiterate or limited in their English reading and writing proficiency as they were required to read the inclusion criteria and respond to the demographic material, complete consent forms, and review interview questions being asked in English. Minimal computer literacy was also necessary as informed demographic and informed consent forms were distributed and collected electronically.

To collect necessary demographic information and confirm eligibility, each participant was asked to complete a pre-screening questionnaire and an additional demographic questionnaire once eligibility was confirmed. Both questionnaires were accessed by a unique website link distributed via email and collected and stored on Qualtrics, an internet-based software that allows researchers to construct and distribute surveys. Once eligibility was confirmed, the participants were contacted to schedule an interview appointment.

Prior to conducting an interview, participants were required to read, sign, and return an informed consent form affirming their consent to have the audio of their responses recorded for

later transcription. Participants were also notified that the results of the study may be presented at a professional conference or published in an academic journal with all identifying information removed or anonymized. Additionally, participants were notified of an offer of monetary compensation of $25 for their time conducting an interview.

The study consisted of 15 participants. Data saturation was realized (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005), occurring once novel themes or information related to the study's research questions no longer arise (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). The participants were between the ages of 27 and 41 (*M = 32.5*) and born between the years 1981 and 1996. All participants were identified as being a part of the African diaspora. They were all born, raised, and currently residing in the United States, while identifying as either Black, African American, or with the nationality or region of their family of origin. All of the participants have pursued higher education; 11 of the participants have earned a master's degree with two currently pursuing one; one has earned a doctorate degree, and three have earned bachelors. All except two participants disclosed that they currently owe student debt. Of the two without student debt, one was able to rely on scholarships to earn both her bachelor's and master's degrees; the other paid, and is currently paying his way through school. The sample consisted of four male and 11 female participants. All but two of the participants were employed during the time of the study. The two participants who were not employed have been employed within the last eight months.

Method for Data Collection

This study utilized a reflexive thematic analysis research design that involved the collection and analysis of interview data. A semi-structured protocol was used to interview the participants. The protocol included lead questions and probing questions designed to elicit deep reflection, recollections, and insightful, or detailed responses from each participant. Each

interview lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted virtually via webcam through Doxy.me software. Doxy.me is a telemedicine platform that meets the necessary requirements for confidentiality. All the interviews were conducted via Doxy.me to ensure uniformity in the interview process across participants.

Interviews were audio recorded via a separate audio recording device. Due to the interview process, participants are not anonymous to the primary researcher. Upon completion, the interviews were transcribed and coded. Transcripts and audio recordings were de-identified prior to analysis. The audio recordings and transcripts are stored in separate secure locations that only the primary researcher has access to. Typed transcripts, demographic data, and the audio recordings are saved on separate encrypted flash drives as well as in a Seton Hall password protected One Drive folder. In accordance with the American Psychological Association's (2017) ethical guidelines, all data collected will be retained for a minimum of 5 years after which it will be destroyed.

Procedure

This study was reviewed and approved by Seton Hall University's Institutional Review Board. To recruit the necessary sample of 12 to 15 participants, word of mouth and snowball sampling was utilized. Recruitment emails were also sent to listservs that Black millennial Americans are a part of.

Interviews were semi-structured and guided by a protocol created in alignment with the critical and constructivist research paradigms. The protocol consists of open-ended questions created to elicit reflection and detailed discourse on the topic of discussion. Interviews were conducted via Doxy.me software and audio was recorded using a separate audio recording device. Recorded audio was transcribed and analyzed post interview. Each transcript went

through three rounds of coding to identify salient themes and categories. To ensure participants' anonymity and limit bias from peer debriefers, each participant was identified by a number before the transcript was shared with the research team. A master list with the participants' names and identifying numbers is being held in a private location separate from the data.

Throughout the coding process, comparative analysis was utilized to facilitate consistency and credibility of codes as interviews were being analyzed. The study used a second coder and an auditor, both of whom had access to the transcripts throughout the coding process. The second coder assisted during the initial coding, and subsequent theme development processes. The auditor was responsible for confirming that codes were present in the interviews and assisting with refining emergent themes. The second coder was a doctoral student during the time of the study, and the auditor a recent doctoral graduate, both from a counseling psychology Ph.D. program.

Qualitative Analysis

The transcripts went through an iterative analysis process which consisted of thematic coding which is geared towards highlighting common experiences and providing meaning to the participants' narratives (Fassinger, 2005).

An inductive and idiographic approach was implemented to explore participants' understanding of their lived experiences or the meaning participants created out of their realities (Ponterotto, 2005). In using inductive strategies, themes were developed from the collected data and were highlighted (Braun & Clarke, 2020). These themes were used to construct a framework by which the participants' understanding of the reality that they shared can be reflected and thus provide others with a better understanding of participants' distinct lived experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Fassinger. 2005).

The qualitative data collected from each participant went through an iterative coding process which entailed constant comparative analysis. The first level of coding consisted of analysis of participants' transcripts with line-by-line coding. The primary investigator provided the other members of the research team with access to participants' interview transcripts. This allowed members of the research team the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019, 2020; Lorelli et al., 2017). The primary investigator was responsible for developing line-by-line codes, and the second coder assisted with analyzing the line-by-line codes. At this stage, small units of meaning or concepts were identified and labeled in the participants' own words, or as close to it as possible. After being identified, these small units of meaning were critically analyzed for additional meaning (Fassinger, 2005). This process was completed by the primary investigator and the secondary coder.

The next stage entailed grouping the small units of meaning previously identified and grouping them into similar larger key categories. Both the primary investigator and the secondary coder were involved in grouping codes at this stage. This process went on until saturation was achieved, or when no new themes or insights related to the research questions no longer appeared in the collected data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). At this point, there was satisfactory delineation between each category and each category was dense enough to encompass the diversity in each participants' unique experience and represent a theme (Fassinger, 2005). To ensure the consistency and credibility of themes, the auditor was brought in to assist with analysis of the categories.

The auditor, primary investigator, and secondary coder then worked to further review, refine, and combine related themes into larger patterns of shared meaning. The themes created during this stage were grounded in the participants' experiences (Fassinger, 2005). Both the

second coder and auditor assisted the primary researcher with auditing the data and ensuring quality and trustworthiness.

Quality and Trustworthiness

Quality in qualitative research refers to its "goodness" (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 217), or the research's adherence to its paradigmatic principles and the standards of credible qualitative research (Morrow, 2005). Credible qualitative research possesses internal consistency which is characteristic of a rigorous research process. This quality is identified as credibility or trustworthiness (Gasson, 2004).

As a means of bolstering the credibility of the study, the data collected was gathered from a sample of individuals with diverse lived experiences that are directly related to the study's research questions which enabled them to provide rich and relevant perspectives (Levitt et al., 2017). Created in alignment with the study's research paradigms, the interview questions inspired deep reflection on the meaning African American millennials have created of their experience in relation to their exposure to the historical and social power dynamics present in American society (Ponterotto, 2005). Participants had the opportunity to share their personal narratives as experts in their own reality as the "knowers" while the interviewer, or "would-be knower" (Ponterotto, 2005, pp. 131), inquired with a stance of naiveté (Morrow, 2005). To further foster credibility, after the interview, transcripts were sent to participants; they were provided the opportunity to review the transcript, correct any misinterpretations, and provide supplemental information to the researcher.

When conducting reflexive thematic analysis, the meaning generated from the collected data is context-dependent and shaped by researcher subjectivity, thus an avoidance of bias is not a goal of this method (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The primary researcher endeavored to boost the

study's trustworthiness by implementing strategies to aid the researcher in being mindful and reflexive regarding their subjectivity, perspectives, biases that may potentially influence the researcher's interpretation of the data. This was done through reflexive journaling and critical reflection from the primary researcher on their own positionality and its role on shaping the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This process required the researcher to reflect on their personal reality, identity, lived experiences, beliefs, and biases in relation to the research process and the population of focus (Morrow, 2005). It was necessary for the researcher to actively acknowledge their reflexivity and record their biases or preconceived notions as they arose throughout the research process (Ahern, 1999; Morrow, 2005).

For reflective purposes and to supplement the reflexive journaling process, memoing was also used. Memoing consists of keeping a record of general thoughts post-interview (Birks et al., 2008). Keeping a record of cognitions such as the researcher's reactions to participant responses assisted with the conceptualization of transcripts, the interview experience, and the shared personal experiences of the participants. Memos recorded after each interview also served to assist with either maintaining continuity or making adjustments between interviews (Birks et al., 2008). Both processes were necessary for ensuring the quality of the interviews.

To bolster trustworthiness, an additional coder and an auditor were utilized to review initial codes and the theme development during stages of analysis. Members of the coding team were given transcripts along with analyses and were asked to audit the primary researcher's analysis procedures, and critically examine the analyses for bias and validity at each stage with the intention of coming to a consensus regarding the analyses and determining the findings' dependability (Morrow, 2005; Sikolia, 2013). Additionally, this study's literature review, participant demographic information, behavioral observations during interviews, memos, and

reflexive journal entries were all used to aid in confirming findings and fostering dependability (Carter, et al., 2014; Denzin, 1978; Morrow, 2005).

Researcher Reflexivity

Conducting qualitative research from constructivist and critical-ideological paradigms requires researchers to understand how their lived experiences and identity can impact their data collection and analysis process (Berger, 2015; Ponterotto, 2005). Mindful of this, I acknowledge my identity as a heterosexual cisgender Black male who is also an immigrant who has lived and worked in the United States for close to ten years. Additionally, I was born in 1991 and would be identified as a Black millennial. I acknowledge that though I am a Black millennial who lives in the United States, my experience is not entirely synonymous with that of Black or African American millennials with American citizenship who were born or raised mostly in the United States. As a Black millennial living in the United States, my experience is more of an adjacent one, making me an outsider or out-group member in relation to Black American millennials. Thus, it is vital that I remain aware and reflexive regarding my own positionality and biases.

As an individual of Caribbean descent living in the United States, my most salient identity is my immigrant status. My heritage as someone who was raised entirely in a Caribbean country comes with its own implications (Johnson, 2016) that in some ways are similar to those of Black people raised in the United States. We are members of the African diaspora who share historical trauma and still contend with the lasting effects in the form of internalized racism, disenfranchisement, lack of generational wealth, and lost history (Nunn, 2007; Thorton et al., 2017). Regardless, just as people of the African diaspora have similar lived experiences, the populations it is constituted of is not homogenous (Rotimi et al., 2016). While I, as a Black millennial immigrant living in the United States, can identify with aspects of the African

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American experience based on my own upbringing as a Black person raised in a majority Black country, the context in which I was raised makes my worldview distinct and disparate from my African American counterparts (Johnson, 2016; Joseph et al., 2013). For example, both groups contend with forms of racial oppression, but the forms of institutionalized oppression are stark in presentation for African Americans who were raised in a majority White country with a historically dominant White culture (Johnson, 2016).

Several researchers have argued that it is crucial that as an outgroup member, I share with participants before our interviews that I am not African American (Holmes, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). It was important I disclosed this because it is important that participants were aware that we do not share the same heritage. This disclosure mitigates assumptions that participants may make regarding similarities in our lived experiences. While my disclosure may have inhibited the participants' openness, it may have also inspired openness and facilitated the participants' process of being experts, teaching me, the "would-be knower" (Ponterotto, 2005, pp. 131) about their reality (Holmes, 2020). It was also important to me that I disclosed my intentions for conducting my research. Failing to do this could have significantly altered how participants interacted with me as the interviewer, which in turn could have influenced the data I collected. This is why disclosure of my positionality is important, if only for the fact that it could have influenced the way participants interacted with me.

Additionally, I remain ever vigilant about the stance I take when engaging in research related to an oppressed group of people particularly if I am not a member. For this reason, I am cautious about the potential of my research to become exploitative of the members of this oppressed group. It is for this reason that as the primary researcher, I sought to put safeguards in place to protect against exploitation in my interviews and analysis of data (Bourke, 2014) and

promote reflexivity. My safeguards included relying on another coder and auditor who are themselves members of the group being researched. Critical reflection on my own positionality and its role on shaping the data analysis, along with reflexive journaling and memoing were also helpful. All three methods facilitated deep reflection on my state of mind throughout the research process most notably when generating context-dependent themes and patterns of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Based on the data analysis, five patterns of shared meaning were developed. These patterns were derived from 15 corresponding themes which were developed from data collected in relation to the study's three research questions. The first research question pertains to how Black and African American millennials perceive their reality in relation to American ideals such as the American Dream. One pattern of shared meaning developed based on participants' interviews in response to this question was that Black millennials identify themselves as a pivotal generation that is trying to navigate historical disadvantages in order to construct a more ideal future for themselves and future generations. Black American millennials expressed feeling misaligned with the country's professed ideals and subsequently misplaced within the current American context. The corresponding themes are: 1) Black millennials bear generational burdens, 2) Black millennials are more liberal in their expression and exploration of their Black identities, and 3) Black millennials feel a duty to strive for success despite the evident hurdles. All three themes indicate Black American millennials responses to existing in an adverse reality.

The second research question asks how the lived experiences and perceived social positionality of Black and African American millennials influence their perception of the American Dream and other American ideals. Two patterns of shared meaning were developed based on this research question, the first being that to Black millennials, the American Dream is a White myth. This code was derived from three themes: 1) Black millennials believe the American Dream is unrealistic for Black People, 2) Black millennials are rejecting the American Dream, and 3) Black millennials are defining a dream for themselves. Participants labeled the American Dream as fantastical and identified it as not being a realistic aspiration based on their

current realities. The participants unanimously identified the dream as being achievement-oriented, specifically noting its association with a well-paying job, the ownership of a home surrounded by a "white picket fence," the establishment of a nuclear family, and equitable treatment. The uniformity in the description of the American Dream speaks to its ubiquity and influence within American society. The other pattern of shared meaning that emerged based on the second research question is the acknowledgement of inequitable application of "unalienable rights" amongst Americans. A common sentiment across all participants was the acknowledgement of the broken promises of the protection of Black people's most basic rights while living in the United States. This present reality is compounded by an awareness of the lack of rectification or acknowledgment of historical and current abuse and trauma against Black people in favor of upholding White supremacy. Three corresponding themes were observed based on the analysis: 1) the American ideal of liberty as a human right is not applied impartially, 2) the pursuit of happiness is not meritocratic, and 3) American lives are not all treated equally.

The third research question explores the impact the American Dream and other similar American ideals have on Black and African American millennials' sense of American identity. Two patterns of shared meaning were developed based on this research question. The first being that the American Dream highlights disparities in American reality. Within this larger theme, there are three themes: 1) Black millennials are hyperaware of social injustices and disparities, 2) Black millennials' perceive disparate realities between White and Black Americans, and 3) systemic racism inhibits American identity development. Participants acknowledged the disparities in social resources and protection under the law and the impact it has on their lived experiences and their ability to identity as Americans compared to their White counterparts.

Differences in reality are exemplified by the disproportionate rate that injustices are experienced by Black Americans compared to White Americans as well as the privileges historically afforded to White people. The second pattern of shared meaning derived from this research question is Black millennials reckoning with internal conflict towards their American reality. This pattern of shared meaning is derived from three themes: 1) Black millennials experience internal conflict in identifying as American, 2) Black millennials have an absence of American pride that is oppositional to their racial and ethnic identities, and 3) Black millennials experience civic insecurity within the American context. Black millennials reckon with the emotional bind seemingly characteristic of being a Black American and acknowledging the history of disenfranchisement and oppression. Black millennials express uncertainty regarding their standing in the United States and disillusionment with their American identities and American ideals.

Black Millennials Identify as a Pivotal Generation

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed their identities as millennials in the context of previous generations, most often their parents and future generational cohorts. Numerous themes emerged but noticeable among them was the idea of the Black experience in the United States being synonymous with struggle. All of the participants spoke about what their struggle meant for them as millennials and how it informed how they look at themselves and choose to show up in various domains. This theme is emblematic of how Black millennials view themselves and other Black people within the American context. Participants acknowledged the abundance of opportunities available to them as Americans specifically opportunities that older generations did not have access to. They are also aware of the numerous historical factors that beset them and future generations comparatively to their White counterparts. Despite this reality,

Black millennials continue to strive knowing that the ideal notions of being American are not aligned with their realities. Black millennials find themselves at a pivotal time as many participants noted. They are building on the foundations created for them by their parents and grandparents while also trying to propel themselves and future generations forward to a more ideal and favorable social standing.

Bearing Generational Burdens

All of the participants discussed their past and the foundational impact it had on their identity development and outlook. What was expressed was a desire to build upon the foundation laid by their parents. Participants acknowledged the inherent obstacles they faced but could also acknowledge that their road ahead was not as difficult as their parents or grandparents. Thus, they felt a duty to excel beyond them in terms of education and financial earning potential. Stacey, a 32-year-old Black female school counselor discussed how she feels related to excelling beyond past generations and the impact of historical factors on how she navigates.

> It's easier being Black [now] than [it was during] my parents or my grandparent's generation. But, I think my struggle as a Black millennial and having that history is, I don't know how to move forward… it's like I'm the first in my family to do so many things that I'm normally by myself doing it. I can't go to like my dad and talk about college because my dad's—like, he never imagined me going to college because he never had, […] he went to high school. He was fine with me just going to high school. I feel like I'm navigating a lot of firsts by myself… it's lonely.

Stacey's quote reflects the difficulties some Black millennials face as they aspire to reach new heights and realize opportunities that may not have been afforded to past generations.

Frederick, a 41-year-old Black male school social worker expresses a similar sentiment related to his view of the previous generation's efforts to guide Black millennials.

> I think there are a lot of opportunities that we don't take advantage of whether it's from us being in junior high school, high school, colleges, or adulthood, and seeking out progressive opportunities for us to grow… I think for our parents like, there is a space of like, if they had known more, right, they would have instilled more in us than they already were trying, like I think that I've always been led by my parents and my grandparents. They were like *I'm trying to teach you to be better and get more than I did.* But it's also like, *How are you teaching that?* And I think, you know… I always feel like, you know, White parents are always gonna teach their kids more because there's been opportunities to do it. They have a wider financial spectrum, you know, having like, the financial knowledge, having school knowledge, having the connections…

Frederick's views reflect the historical disparities in social capital, resources, and knowledge between White and Black families which has put millennials at a disadvantage compared to their White counterparts.

Maya, a 34-year-old Black woman who recently lost her job, talked about the role she believes parents of Black millennials, including her own, play in influencing millennials' drive to achieve more than their parents did.

> Millennials are in this weird space where, like, we know the hard work and where it can get us, but our parents basically raised us to do things one way. Because they didn't like how they did things, like they pushed us to do things differently, like go to college. Not many of our parents are college-educated, and if they are, they pushed us to go as an extension of the good things that they received because of their college education, you

know… It's like millennials are in this weird space where, like we know, and we know how to navigate the systems, and we know the systems are ancient and that we don't need to exhaust all of our energy in changing the systems, but we're also tired and we are trying to be happy and live these lives that our parents promised us, because they told us that if we went to school and we listened to them and we graduated, and we got all this debt, and we now have all these things, where's the happy? …the millennial generation, I feel like is the first one where somebody is like, *Oh, we might have messed up, we might have given them too much…*

Several participants noted that this was a goal they were uncertain that they could achieve. Most participants acknowledged the disparities in knowledge base and resources compared to their White counterparts which subsequently made their aspirations to exceed beyond their parents even more difficult. Most of the participants also expressed a strong desire and sense of duty to provide for both older and younger generations as described by Stacey.

A lot of my friends make more than their parents, right? But then they feel the need, or [feel] that they have to take care of their family or, you know, like we're making more, but we don't know how to spend our money. We don't know how to invest our money. We don't know how to build that wealth because a lot of us are, because we are the first in our family, we do feel the need to help our family get out of the financial crisis that they're in. Which is hard… it is exhausting, but it's also a drive, or it's inspiring to want to continue to build the wealth for, like my future kids or you know, so I would say tiring, but also inspiring.

Stacey expressed a drive to build wealth for her children, while others expressed a desire to ensure future cohorts' well-being and progress through investing their own time and energy in

young Black people and advocating for improved educational resources through civic engagement. Audre, a 30-year-old Black woman, who currently works in higher education, described civic engagement and the realization of financial and educational aspirations as not only a means to make the future a better place for her future generations, but to honor her ancestors.

> I want to operate in this system or in this structure in a way that's of service to me, my children, and my ancestors, which is why I think for me, civic engagement is important, even if it's just like a presidential election, because we have to acknowledge that there was a time when that wasn't granted to all, or education wasn't granted to all, or homeownership wasn't granted. Also, it's like as a Black American, I do that because someone died for that.

Being More Liberal in the Expression and Exploration of their Black Identities

The ability to express themselves liberally and explore their own identities is another opportunity afforded to millennials because of the sacrifices made by older generations. Each participant discussed in some manner how they express their identities as Black people and the sense of empowerment they feel in doing so. Maya spoke about this and her privilege to explore her identity as she reflected on the experiences of her mother and grandmother.

> I've talked to my grandmother about her experiences and it's like I can't imagine worrying about going to work and worrying about getting killed on the ride home from work, you know? It's the capacity for the millennial generation to have this emotional connection and open moment for ourselves that our parents gifted us with by us not dealing with that type of blatant racism you know... I feel like we are the first generation of people that like, literally have had the opportunity to say, *Okay, I didn't have a kid at 18. I didn't start*

a family, I didn't get married super young. I've had time to figure out who I am, and what I like, and what things I wanna invest my energy and my soul into.

Ruby, a 35-year-old Black female school social worker and therapist reflected on how their upbringing in the late eighties and nineties influenced racial identity development and exploration amongst Black millennials as they were coming of age.

Growing up in the late eighties, you start seeing more and more what it means to be Black, right? 'cause when we're kind of thinking about the Black and Proud era of the sixties and seventies, that's the generation our parents were raised in and building off of that, you as a millennial start living it in the eighties, actually growing up in a space of like being aware of, like the systematic flaws, right?... You're kind of at the end of the crack epidemic, the war on drugs. That was part of the millennial upbringing. Flash forward right to where you see it now, like the conversations about Blackness, the conversations about what it means to be Black in America and you start seeing all of these different conversations happening that didn't happen before so, it influences your identity to be okay with saying, *I'm Black*.

Regarding her own expression of her Black identity, Ruby discussed the freedom she now feels to wear her hair as she pleases without concern of ramifications.

Yes, there's a lot of flaws happening, but there's a level of acceptance, right? Like being able to wear your hair however you wanna wear your hair. Whereas, when I was growing up, that was my thing, but like you couldn't. […] Everybody got a perm, or you got a weave, right? And so, now transitioning as I kind of go through my years of living–in high school I started wearing my natural hair, right? Because it was more accepted than before when I was growing up. And then being in college, it seemed like everybody was

kind of transitioning to it, so it gave me more of a pride in my identity of being a Black American, especially as a millennial 'cause, you're transcending so many different things that people forget about.

Rosa, a 36-year-old Black female who recently lost her job in finance remarks on the comfort and empowerment with which Black millennials seem to adapt across contexts particularly corporate settings where they feel able to be their authentic selves compared to older generations.

We've gotten so good at navigating spaces that the code switch doesn't take a whole train ride home anymore, you know? You're not driving from Wall Street, getting up to Harlem, and then you feel like you can breathe, you know? We've become so aware of where we are that it's like, *Alright. You may not like me anyway, but you let me into this space. So I'm gonna be my Black self in this space*… It's a millennial freedom that I think not many of the boomers or anyone before us got to experience.

Upon reflecting on how she is received by people from older generational cohorts when she shows up as her authentic self in such spaces, Rosa shared:

Sometimes it's harder in these spaces to be a Black millennial just because of the age ranges. It's like you're struggling with older Whites, but you're also struggling with older Black people who have a lot to say about how you want to live your life, or how you're living your life is so different from how they live theirs which is also a struggle for the Black millennial because, it just feels like they are upset…

As a Black millennial who openly identifies as a sexual minority, Malcolm, a 30-year-old male who works in higher education, talked about his intersectionality and his experience openly expressing not only his racial identity, but his sexual and gender identity.

I don't know if it is perceived by American Society because I'm different. I would say I

have like a lot of different things going on, I'm, you know, sexually fluid. I am bisexual. I

am, you know, very free in the way that I do my life. So, in my opinion, I feel like that's

more of an eye opener, like I feel about anything, when it comes to being a Black man

and doing something out of the ordinary because I am the type of person where I'm going

to do whatever I wanna do when I wanna do it. Like when I do wanna have children, it's

gonna be great. I may be old, but I'm still gonna be great. And I'm still gonna be fit. So, it

doesn't matter what age it's gonna be.

Sense of Duty to Strive for Success despite Hurdles

Participants acknowledged the setbacks they have experienced both as a cohort and as

Black people because of historical events and racial disparities. Despite this, all of the

participants were able to identify areas where they and other Black millennials were thriving and

striving for higher heights in spite of evident hurdles. Stacey discussed the inspiration she feels

witnessing Black millennials advance in society.

I think we're changing. I think we're breaking barriers that weren't broken before. It's

inspirational; I think we're moving towards the right direction. It's helpful, and I think

we're also healing and you know we are recognizing that some of the things our parents

or our grandparents did for work were for survival, and we don't feel the need to survive

anymore. Like we could live, you know? We're breaking barriers, but we're also taking

off our armor for our future generations, you know?

Ella, a 27-year-old Black millennial female who identifies as Nigerian and currently

works as a therapist, discussed her own aspirations and confidence in her ability to break barriers

of her own.

Thinking about my experience, I haven't had a handful of Black supervisors. A majority

of my supervisors are still very much White so I do think as a millennial, I'm seeing that

maybe there will be a change in a few years. Once the White folks start to grow a little

old and retire, I think it's gonna look different. I also think more and more Black

millennials are accessing education or advancing in corporate jobs, taking the risk in

applying for those director positions and I think I can see myself 100 percent doing that. I

would have said, when I was in college or high school, I definitely felt a glass ceiling.

Like, *Oh, no way I'm getting there, no way I could be a director.* Like what? Now that

doesn't feel that far-fetched. You know? So that feels almost at arm's-length if I really

wanted to do it.

Harriet a 29-year-old woman, who identifies as being of Black and Native American

ancestry and also works in human resources, acknowledged the obstacles that have hindered her

in her career field because of her identity. In the face of these obstacles, she still expressed

resolve towards achieving success.

I feel as though I have worked very hard to get to where I am, but I don't think that has

necessarily been as easy as, if my gender was different or if the color of my skin was

lighter, or how I choose to identify myself was different… but I'm not gonna get myself

in a pity party, you know, I'm not gonna say *Oh, you know, I can't have this because I'm

not a White man*, absolutely not!

With her comment on her current reality, Harriet indicated a theme that was common

amongst the study's female participants, which is the additional struggles they face as Black

female millennials. Participants like Harriet discussed their concerns and challenges with how

they are perceived and the biases they face within the American context. Harriet provided insight into how this reality impacts how she navigates her American life:

> … I'm the youngest person in my department. Uh, I'm also a millennial. I'm also a woman of color–most of the department is predominantly white… I don't necessarily wanna say that I walk on pins and needles, but I'm more conscious of how I have to present myself because of what's associated already with being a young black professional... I can't act in certain ways... I don't want to come off as the angry black woman in the workplace... I have to be kind of more conscious of how I present myself.

In her quote, Harriet highlighted the need she feels to present herself in a particular manner in order to counter stereotypes or avoid negative labels like "the angry Black woman." This is a sentiment that Audre also corroborated based on her lived experiences. She stated:

> ...in the workplace, especially as a woman, there is a stigma of the angry black woman attached to stuff... because you don't wanna get that bad label, or you know, get fired too. And so, it just, in terms of navigating, it deals with how to deal with other people's prejudices to make sure that I am safe and that I am able to progress in life the way I want to whether it's professionally or financially. And that's like, even though others may label me one way, that doesn't mean I can't have the life that I would like to have.

Dorothy, a 31-year-old Black woman of Caribbean descent, disclosed the exhaustion she feels as she employs constant vigilance to contend with the complex dynamics of her intersectional identity across contexts. She shared:

> As a Black woman, I think people can overlook or underestimate me, you know... I'm always paranoid, or mindful of how people might be perceiving me and I think that's in

the context of stereotypes or other people's biases. And to me, that is exhausting, you know, like I can't just exist here.

Dorothy also mentioned feeling overlooked or underestimated because of her identity as a Black female millennial. Maya acknowledged this reality as well, as she stated, "Everybody knows a Black woman who's underrated, or everybody knows a Black woman who should be having more than what she's getting." Despite this, Maya also noted Black millennial women's persistent presence, visibility, and success in American society despite their setbacks. Maya stated, "I think Black women are like kicking butt right now in terms of visibility. Everybody knows a Black woman who's doing something bomb [great]." Ruby expressed a sense of empowerment and pride in being a Black female millennial as she noted successes she is witnessing her contemporaries achieve:

Being a Black female millennial right, where you start to see Black women kind of just like taking their fields by storm, getting higher education… You see so many Black women being successful… Look how amazing these women are doing as Black millennials... I know so many millennials who are navigating the space of having their own businesses. That wasn't a thing before. And so, you get to see that and it adds so much like pride to your identity as a Black millennial, right? As a Black, female millennial because your capabilities are now expanding right there. The ceiling is getting higher and higher. And inevitably then you kind of pass that down to the next generation… it's great just being that Black female millennial.

Both Maya and Ruby recognized and discussed the achievements Black millennial women have been taking advantage of and how they have seized on opportunities to increase their visibility and create positive change in spite of the challenges they face because of their

intersectionality. This speaks to their resilience and aspirations to live in a more inclusive and progressive American society.

The American Dream is a White Myth

Every participant identified the American Dream as an aspiration associated with the achievement of an idyllic reality for hardworking individuals and their families. Participants' similar understanding of what the American Dream means is emblematic of its pervasive nature and centrality to the American experience even in contemporary American culture. Each participant closely related the American dream to American dominant culture and by proxy to White Americans. They all described it as being out of alignment with their current realities and therefore not a viable aspiration they intended to pursue. Thus most participants expressed an outright rejection of the American Dream as they understood it. Participants favored dreams of their own specific to their own reality and personal values.

The American Dream is Unrealistic for Black People

On the basis of a lack of equality in the United States participants believed that an American ideal centered around achievement and meritocracy for all must inherently be false due in part to the Black experience in the United States. Martin, a 40-year-old male who identifies as Black and Caribbean and currently works in information technology as a project manager, associated the American Dream with classism and systemic racism:

This is supposed to be the land of the free. The home of opportunity and everything. But yeah, it's the home of opportunity for certain people, right? And it's just like, *Oh, that's the America that y'all don't promote and stuff.* Okay, I see it. So then that's the part that you kind of have to buy into along with the glitz and glamour of the American dream; that the system is still not set up for you, but you have to do everything possible to

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circumvent the negative parameters of the system. The class system in America is possibly the greatest creation that America has ever created, like better than any patent or anything because it has literally left so many people behind and moved so many people ahead for 400 plus years. It's the greatest system they've ever created.

Both Rosa and Maya expressed similar sentiments, that the American Dream is seemingly portrayed as inclusive of all American, regardless of race, but in practicality is not as evidenced by their personal experiences. Rosa shared:

The American Dream really probably looks crazy to everybody outside of America because it's literally telling you to work and make money but ignore everything else that's going on and force[s] everyone to kind of ascribe to this and do the things that you do, and it's like, that's so weird. But that's the American dream. Like if you do this, you can do that and it's supposed to be one-size-fits-all, but it's not one-size-fits-all. It's literally like the further you are from a White American, the more difficult it becomes.

Maya expressed indifference towards the American Dream, and the idea as her of buying into the ideal and the systemic construct it represents as futile. She described her pursuit of the American Dream as a road to success that is filled with potholes and designed for her to fail.

Like the American Dream isn't even really for me, like, because I'm African American… because it feels like for African Americans, people just assume that like, that's what we're trying to get to, that's what we're trying to do. And yeah, because we live in America, but we don't have it easy, you know, because this dream wasn't made for us. And not only was the dream not made for us, but then we were told that we could attain it. But then as we're running the race to get to the dream, they put potholes, very deep potholes to mess up the road… You know, I've always struggled with that term, and I think it's because

I'm familiar with being referred to as an African American, but I'm not gonna see the

American Dream and automatically feel like, *Oh, this is something that's for me too.*

Rejecting the American Dream

Because of its perceived perception of perpetuating American racial inequality, all of the

participants expressed a rejection of the American Dream, as they understand it. James, a 35-

year-old Black man, who identifies as Ghanaian and works in finance, conveyed his criticisms of

the American Dream, and his reason for rejecting it:

So, the American dream that was sold to us was, *Go to school. Get a good job*, right? *Get*

great benefits, buy a home. Get married. Have kids. And you're free. They didn't say that

comes with debt. They didn't say that that you couldn't move into certain neighborhoods

if you were Black. They didn't say that, you know, you can't travel to certain places after

a certain time, they didn't. None of that came with restrictions. But we were sold this one

particular dream. It's kind of like a cookie-cutter dream of freedom. And we looked at

these things and said, *I want that. I want that*. As I got older, I realized that's not what I

want. That dream isn't even a dream. It's more so like a program for them to just keep

taking money from you. You know, you work all those years, they tax you. You collect

your pension, it's taxed. You collect your 401k, or whatever the program is all that is

taxed. So, the dream that you thought was gonna be a dream is just a lifestyle of debt.

You end up giving away your life. And I think as millennials, we've realized that it's not a

dream. They suggest we make a few $100,000 and retire off that. We want millions, if

not billions of dollars so that we don't have to continue the same path of struggle our

parents have when they retire still trying to pay off a home and, you know, pay off a car

and things of that nature in their retirement. We're looking to own things now, live a full

life now.

In this quote, James touched on what he and other Black millennials believe to be the

falsehood of the American Dream. As they understand it, what was pitched to them as being an

aspirational lifestyle turned out to be exploitative in favor of a racially-biased capitalistic system.

Rosa discussed her process of coming to a similar conclusion after losing her job eight months

prior to the study:

> I was on my path of having this high salary, this high corporate role wanting to be a
>
> director, and I don't want all of that anymore. I really don't. I really want to be happy and
>
> do the things that it's gonna take to make me happy which is getting my mental health
>
> together. The American dream, it just looks different for me now and I don't even know if
>
> it's–I would just refer to it as the Black or the African American dream… I don't want
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> anybody to say at my funeral that I was such a hard worker. No, because the people that
>
> are dying that are our parents ages? I've been to a few funerals and I feel like all people
>
> have been talking about is how hard people work. I don't want that to be my legacy. I
>
> don't want that to be my life. I don't want people to say, *Oh, she did that*, and then like all
>
> you know is how hard she worked to make things happen… I don't want that to be my
>
> legacy and I think I had to let go of the American dream.

Some participants expressed a disillusionment with the American Dream, while others

like Martin expressed disappointment and frustration. Martin discussed his views on the

American Dream as he reflected on his understanding of Black Americans' history with it and

his decision to reject it:

I don't know what people had in mind for us like, and I don't care because I'm finding out that people have a high view for themselves, but not for others, or that when they created the American dream, they didn't really give a [expletive] about what our American Dream looked like. Our American dream back in the day was probably getting off these [expletive] shackles … Why do you think so many of these institutions were set up to not allow us in there? I don't know what the American Dream [is that] they wanted for us. All I know is that we're shattering it constantly. We're seeing so many different examples of these boxes that they put on us. So technically, for me, it wasn't a dream that they wanted for us. It was just a box that they wanted to put us in because they were afraid of how we were gonna impact, or how we were gonna hurt their dream.

Martin's quote sheds light on the fallacy of the American Dream, as it carries the title of being American, but it has not been inclusive of all Americans. Martin, like other Black millennials, views the American Dream as being symbolic of systemic racism in the United States and identifies it as a construct that, like many other American constructs, has become synonymous with the marginalization of people of color.

Defining the "Dream" for Themselves

In identifying that the American Dream is not a viable aspiration for themselves and their families, Black American millennials have opted to create dreams of their own, that are applicable to their own values and reality. Frederick stated: "it's reachable for some, but not to too many, but I think you have to figure out what your own dream is for yourself, and call it your own personal dream." All of the participants espoused their own dreams that they chose in lieu of the less favorable American Dream. Maya, who lost her job eight months prior to the study gained new perspective on her standing as it relates to her personal pursuit of the American

Dream. She, like many other Black millennials, rejects the pursuit of financial gain, associated

with the American Dream, in favor of an aspiration of protecting her mental health, by guarding

against the mental and emotional hazards that can beset Black Americans who chose to pursue

the American dream.

> Losing that job changed everything, I think because of so many other issues in terms of
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> culture and like familial relationships and different things like that that, protecting my
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> mental health and happiness is driving how I feel about being successful in America now
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> because. Literally, the fact that people with tons more than me are taking their lives says
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> a lot.

This quote speaks to a common theme among participants regarding prioritizing mental

health care and well-being over financial gains. Malcolm expressed a similar sentiment. He

discussed his rejection of the American Dream and defying expectations that have been imposed

on him in favor of a dream of being more comfortable embracing his own journey, where he

pursues his own goals his own pace.

> I feel like there has always been barriers where you have to choose, like, *You have to*
>
> *choose this. You have to choose this.* And that's just your reality. And you have to be
>
> comfortable with that. And I'm like, *Hmm, I wouldn't be the person I am today if I*
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> *decided to stay in that type of framework…* Historically, that is what everyone saw as a
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> reality, but in that reality a lot of people suffered a lot [with their dream]not being
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> fulfilled because it wasn't–it wasn't the dream that they actually wanted. It was a dream
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> that other people pushed down their throats and they had to be okay with it…The way
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> that I feel capable–I can survive and be positive even when sometimes it seems like
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> there's not a way to be positive… there also are these places where I feel like I can grow,

I think I've started to stop seeing a destination but see[ing] my life more as a journey, and I think in that, I've had higher success in feeling comfortable in those spaces. Because usually when it's a destination, it's like, *Oh, I should have got a house already. I should have did this. I should have did that.* You know, those are destinations, but just kind of sticking with the place of like, *Okay, this is your journey. Like, yeah, this isn't where I wanna be, but it's not forever.*

In addition to expounding on his own exploration of the meaning of his dream, Malcolm also expressed a sense of acceptance and empowerment in his decision-making after taking stock of the toll that the pursuit of the American Dream has had on others. Martin stated that his dream is to give back to his community and help others achieve their dreams.

The dream is me being able to do certain things when I wanna do it. I was just able to come back from vacation. I have a job that I'm learning constantly about. I didn't think that I would be able to do all of these things. My thought process of what achievement was back in the day was like, so small, but then I started experiencing more things, meeting more people. And then I'm like, *Cool, now how can I bring everybody else forward?* And for myself, I'm not going to stop. But how can I give back? So that's my thing. That's the dream for me. Paying it forward, basically having the ability to pay it forward.

Additionally, Martin, similar to many Black millennials, has a dream of getting rid of his student debt. When asked about this he exclaimed: "Hell yeah! C'mon now. Shoot, that will be the glorious day when I don't have student debt." His response is not dissimilar from all but two of this study's participants and emblematic of the prevalence of student loan debt amongst Black American millennials. Ida, a 29-year-old Black woman, who previously worked as a teacher

before transitioning to a career in the information technology field, had a similar notion. She posits that, given the prevalence and toll that student debt has on not just Black American millennials, but Black communities as a whole, it could be stated that the Black American millennial dream is to simply be debt free. Ida stated, "I feel like Black millennials might say, and I feel like it might be pretty bleak, but [the American dream is] like no debt, like no student debt." Angela, a 30-year-old Black mother of one working simultaneously at an insurance company and a civil service department, feels like she needs to work two jobs to make ends meet. As she considers pursuing a graduate degree for more gainful employment, she discussed her dream of being debt-free and being able to instruct future generations on how to gain financial freedom.

> So my own dream, to be honest–and I know it's gonna sound crazy–it's just not to be in debt… I feel like I am living check to check now. Hence why there's two jobs. Oh, but I feel like you can strive to have financial freedom. And that would be good, and if at any part of the dream you could have–it'll be good to have financial freedom and be able to teach that to your kids when we wasn't necessarily taught that growing up.

"Unalienable Rights" are not Applied Equally

All of the study's participants expressed an awareness of their rights as Americans. They were also able to note the frequency with which it seems like their rights, or the rights of other Black people, were infringed upon by the institutions charged with upholding them. Similar to the American Dream, Black American millennials have lost faith in American ideals like every American being entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Based on their experiences witnessing injustices perpetrated against Black Americans, they have also lost faith in American institutions and well-meaning promises or gestures. Not being able to trust that their most basic

of rights as Americans will be upheld, an intrinsic element of the American experience as set forth by the country's founding fathers, is just another reminder to Black Americans that their lives and sacrifices are not valued.

Liberty as a Human Right is Not Applied Impartially

Participants spoke of the ideal of American liberty with respect to their own American reality as a broken promise, yet another example of a falsehood of the American experience for Black Americans. James described his personal experience in this aspect, detailing how he navigated environmental snares that would have inhibited his liberty specifically because of an interaction with law enforcement.

I've seen a grittier side of America. I grew up in Brooklyn. It's one of the hardest places to grow up in as a Black kid... My American experience is staying out of gangs. My American experience is staying away from the cops. My American experience is making sure that when you go to school, you just get your work done so you can get out of here and make as much money as fast as possible so you don't get caught up with everything else. You know, and somehow, even though you do all those things to the best of your ability,you still get caught up, right? Like gangs are always gonna be around. The worst elements are always gonna be around. The cops are still gonna harass you. I've always had interactions with the cops since I was a little kid. I never understood why. My American experience has shown me that no matter where I've been,no matter what states I've moved into, as long as I was in the city the police were there too [to], I don't wanna say monitor me, but yeah, they were there to monitor me. And that was my American experience. So for me, my American experience has been to escape. To escape being watched, to escape, you know, being killed for no reason. To escape hearing the *You*

match the description. My experience has been to try not to match the description, but no matter how hard you try, you're always gonna fit into a mold where you've been seen as someone who matches the description whether it's by the police or somebody who thinks that you're in a gang.

Law enforcement in the United States is seen as a chief offender of Black Americans' civil liberties. Because of an extensive and sordid history of Black people and police officers in the United States across generations, it is no surprise that James, along with other Black millennials, feel negatively towards police officers. James also expressed a desire to avoid police surveillance, an element symbolic of racial oppression for many Black Americans as it harkens back to American slavery. James notes that in his experience, surveillance subsequently leads to trouble for Black people which could mean being caught up in a prejudicial system where Black people's lives and freedom have historically unjustly been taken away. Dorothy alluded to a sense of disenfranchisement as she reflected on how elements of racial oppression against Black Americans in the past still pose a threat to Black Americans' liberty today:

> We're in a country where it was legal for people to be three-fifths of a person or be enslaved and all these things and not have the right to vote, not have the right to be educated. That still can be seen through oppression today, like the laws and legislation that's made to hinder Black people from voting, or discrimination with banks, or discrimination with home ownership, issues with police officers, racist domestic terrorism; it goes on and on. Things like that kind of play into me not feeling American, 'cause it's like, if I'm technically an American, why are we still having certain experiences?

Dorothy, like other Black millennials cited the lack of protection for Black people's unalienable right of liberty as Americans as a cause for their difficulty identifying as American. Rosa discussed her process of reckoning with the presence of systemic racism and how it can encroach on her liberty. She identified the struggle as a matter of the denial of her worth as an American citizen. Acknowledging her own worth led to a sense of entitlement to her basic rights, a feeling of empowerment leading to recognition of her liberty, and a freedom to exercise her rights in the face of opposition.

> Being a Black person trying to find the balance between wanting more for yourself and acknowledging that systemic racism is gonna get in your way a little more often than not... I don't think people know how to deal with me figuring out that balance as a Black person because the main thing of me wanting and needing to have this is that I respect myself enough to know my worth and my rights. But if you don't respect me or my rights, you have no idea what my worth is, or what my worth could be. So, you will always attempt to lowball or cheat me if you don't respect me enough to pay me enough attention to understand what my true value is.

The Pursuit of Happiness is not Meritocratic

The ideal of merit-based achievement was identified by all of the participants as a dominant tenet of the American experience, but not true to their Black American experience. Ida described it as such:

> So, I would describe the American dream as a great American myth. You know, [it] basically involves pulling oneself up by their bootstraps like a, you know, rags-to-riches story. That, like, all it takes is a little bit of ambition and elbow grease or whatever to

make your way up in America. Yeah, it's not true; there are a lot of factors that are out of

one's control that affect your ability to succeed in America.

Ida espouses a belief that no matter how hard you work as an American, you're unable to

see equitable returns unless there are advantageous factors working in your favor. All of the

participants expressed a similar sentiment, including Dorothy, who shared her views on the

American bootstrap fallacy and expounded on why it excludes the under privileged and

oppressed based on her personal experiences:

Oh, 'Merica loves to believe in the meritocracy and it's pulling yourself up by the

bootstraps and all that nonsense. Yeah, I don't. I don't believe in that. This idea that if you

work hard enough you can get to the goal or whatever and you'll be rewarded for your

efforts because you work hard, and it's like *No*. There are other things that come into

play, like luck, where you are, your family or your knowledge base, and all of those

things could be obstacles. You can work really hard. I know, some pretty hard-working

people, but if you–if we're in a country where people don't have a living wage, you can

work as hard as you want, but you're not gonna get said American dream that people

want to get to or be able to provide for your family. There are hard-working people that

are barely making ends meet, living paycheck to paycheck. And so again, I don't agree

with the idea of meritocracy in America. I don't believe in the *pulling yourself up by your*

bootstraps because that idea suggests that you don't need help, or you shouldn't depend

on the government for any assistance which I think is a falsehood because there are a lot

of people who need it.

Dorothy's quote highlights the need for equity in order for all Americans to experience

equality. Participants acknowledged the impact that historic trauma and injustices have had on

Black people's collective advancement in American society. As stated by Dorothy, the notion of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps implies that the advancement of Black people rests solely on their ability to earn it for themselves, but as many participants noted, additional assistance is needed before equality can be realized. Coretta, a 29-year-old Black woman who works as a school counselor also shared her perspective on this:

> …I'm someone who believes in reparations. I feel like there's a lot of unequal footing, but people are expecting the results to be the same. It's like, *Oh, you know, this group is doing this. Why aren't Black Americans just like them?* Well, if we look back at it like, this group is ahead or these groups might be ahead of Black Americans because, you know, things have happened so... I completely understand the argument for reparations, I completely understood the argument for affirmative action. Like I understand why those things are needed... If the United States is all about being equal and equity, it's like maybe we should put more effort in doing things like that.

The expressed need for such legislation and societal reform speaks to the absence of equality and the need for increased equity for Black Americans. Amongst Americans, achievement in higher education is seen and touted as an assured investment whose return will yield financial gain and social advancement in society. For Black millennials, this is a process that although statistically proven to raise lifetime earning potential, has left many millennials with exorbitant debt and less than ideal returns on their investment. Many Black millennials looked to higher education as a means to improve their standing in American society. Several participants expressed disappointment in the subsequent outcomes as they acknowledged a sense of being misled by an ideal that they felt has been foisted upon them by the dominant American culture. Their unfavorable outcomes have been detrimental to not only Black millennials' advancement, but the

Black community's as a whole. Ruby provided her perception of this reality for Black millennials:

You know, first and foremost, Biden needs to get rid of those student loans, right? Life would be so much better without student loans. And I say that, and you know, it's funny, but I really do say that as a millennial, most of the millennials were raised with this idea of, like, hard work in college equals success. And so, you went to college with this understanding that, like, if I work hard, I'm going to be successful because that's the American value, right? You go to school, work hard, and naturally, like you follow that and you'll become successful. And so many of us are living either in poverty, or not, like barely middle class, and can't afford college. Right? So, you're taking on all these loans and trying to align to what it means to become successful in America. And so now you're stuck with all this debt right now. So many American millennials are in debt right now... It does hinder people. Because if you owe $180,000 as a Black person, you're always going to be in debt to something, and you're constantly working to pay that. But it's like you told me to get that, right? Our environment has told us to get that to be successful. And to live now and see, how sometimes it's like working against you, where people who aren't getting these things [higher education], are, you know, at a higher level of achievement.

Ruby expressed feeling misled in following the path prescribed to her to achieve success. Rosa opened up about her own experience of being fortunate enough to achieve success as a result of her hard work only to lose her job shortly thereafter when she was laid off.

Honestly, I lost a really, really good job for no reason of my own, and it felt like the wool was pulled from under me and I've worked really hard for that. And it felt like that was it!

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It was over. *You made it!* I don't know that many Black people that make over six figures. So ,for me it was like, *Girl... Yes! And then from there you only go higher!* Like, you know? So, it was like I had the finances, but I wasn't even at that job long enough to get through the debt from the last job that wasn't making enough money. So, I didn't even really get to enjoy that before feeling like it was pulled from under me and it shook me and like I was already having shaky feelings about this work, like you know, but it really just, it doesn't have to be like that. And if I'm putting in all of this work and one person can make a mistake which cost me my job...

Rosa's experience is similar to other participants' who felt like their prescribed path to success was compromised with what Maya referred to as potholes. She also detailed her experience of being laid off from gainful employment and the resulting mental distress she felt as she acknowledged the reality that she was at a disadvantage as a Black millennial:

I think that it makes it very scary to now be taking on all of these systems and then being responsible for somebody else's life. Like me, getting laid off. There is the potential for me not to be able to feed my child... and I lost a six-figure job. So that day is when I kind of feel like my ideas and thoughts about being able to reach this goal became very shaky and that's when I kind of started being like, *I need to figure out other options for myself.* Because they tell you work hard, you get the job, you get the salary, boom. And all of a sudden that line or process wasn't happening for me. So now I'm like *This is scary. I can no longer trust in this path that somebody told me to take because I wouldn't be successful.* Because I've done just that and I haven't been. I'm not currently successful, so it's very scary.

Maya expressed her distrust in her ability to pursue happiness as prescribed by American dominant culture. She believed that within the American context, systemic issues will always be present to deter her from success. In the following quote, she discussed how she was able to reckon with this reality due to support from her mother. She conceptualized that the potholes she faces on her path to success are symptomatic of a flawed meritocracy:

Losing that job did a lot to me emotionally. My mom was the only thing that saved me because she literally was like, *This isn't your fault. This system, no matter how you got laid off, is gonna make you feel like you let yourself down. You let your daughter down, but it's not, it's not you.* It's like this is what happened in this system. In the system where they tell you that if you work, you will get this. I remember when I got my master's my job was like, *Oh, you'll get 65k when you get your master's.* And I got my master's, and I was making 47k, and I was just like, *Wait y'all told me that if I want to get my master's that I would get this other salary.* And it's like, *Nope, it's up to the discretion of the people where you work...* Pothole, pothole, you know? ...I'm not for it anymore, nope.

American Lives are Not All Treated Equally

The sanctity and protection of life from marginalization is another core ideal of American life that this study's participants identified as being touted in principal, but not practice based on their lived experiences as Americans. Dorothy reflected on how historically this has not been abided by and consequentially still persists in contemporary American society as systemic forces continue to suppress Black Americans' rights.

Like if we were to say, "Oh what makes someone American?" Oh, they're born here. So, they're a citizen and all that. But when you have enslaved people, who you didn't see as human and over time they're still here, and they're still trying to make a way in this

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American fabric, heir history has been filled with struggle and fight to get their rights as opposed to someone who may have just came here, if they're another color, then it was granted to them. They didn't have to work as hard...

Dorothy also noted that the lack of admission and recompense of the historical injustices perpetrated against Black people is an affront to the value of Black life in the United States. She states:

I'm always curious why they can't blatantly make it known that this was something that was done and they're not proud of it, and also give reparations. I think we could be at a place where we move forward similar to how Germany did with the Holocaust or similarly to how the United States did with Native Americans. And you know, so it's like places have the ability to do it. So, to not do it, [to not] offer the apology and the compensation for such things… makes it seem like they still think we're three-fifths basically.

Audre spoke of the lack of acknowledgement as a means of promoting American and White exceptionalism at the expense of marginalizing Black history and Black people. To her, this indicates a lack of reverence for the sacrifice, injustice, and trauma experienced by people of color in favor of making the United States look like a haven of liberty and equality.

I remember going to school in South Carolina, the history always focused on Western Europe. You know, they glazed over the atrocities that were done to Native Americans, Black people, and other groups of oppressed people. The older I became, the more I was able to learn those histories and also take African American studies classes and actually get that knowledge on my own which again goes back to, if I am an American, Black people's history should be everyone's history, but that is not the case. It's like, *Take that*

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out, oh, this doesn't sound too good, or this doesn't make us look too good so let's not put

it in there, the history of the oppressed, but let's keep the stuff from the White oppressors

or conquerors… in terms of being an American, yes, there have been atrocities against

Black Americans, but there have been atrocities that America has committed against

multiple groups, and I think that's an understanding of being American. Sometimes we

like to see ourselves as a free country welcoming to all immigrants and all of the nice

things. But like any other country, there are some things, some histories or even present

things, like inequity, that we're not proud of. So, I think it's kind of like, you know,

there's many good things about America, and then there are some others that are not so

great.

The American Dream Highlights Disparities in American Reality

All of the participants endorsed a lack of alignment between the ideal of the American

Dream and their lived experiences. Participants elaborated on why they believed this to be the

case based on present disparities in their reality in comparison to their White counterparts in

particular. Black American millennials are persistently aware of the disparities as reminders are

constant. Consequently, they, like their ancestors, feel marginalized, and many identify as

second-class citizens. Participants discuss how their lived experiences as Americans inhibit their

ability to fully identify as American citizens, a notion that they feel is reciprocated by the

country they call home.

Hyperawareness of Social Injustices and Disparities

Participants cited disparities within Black communities and injustices against the Black

community as constant reminders of their second-class standing in the United States. Participants

noted imbalances in several domains and expressed negative feelings related to their reality as an

oppressed group. They also note the synergy between racial injustices and disparities in systematically keeping Black American oppressed. Martin remarked on his surprise regarding the widespread dissemination of injustices and disparate circumstances via social media:

> But like when you was in school, you didn't think that you was gonna see this crazy [expletive] on TV because that's like, that's not what they said. Or that's not what the history books said. But now you're seeing it. You're seeing all the injustices, you're seeing everything that's happening in real time. And we also have phones that are capturing the stuff that the news isn't giving us in real time.

Maya noted how increased exposure to instances of social injustices via social media is making it harder to disbelieve in contemporary times that Black Americans have equal standing within the American context when compared to their White counterparts:

> I think that it's becoming harder for Black people to ignore that they don't really like us that much. I think that's the struggle. Like we talk about exposure, and like seeing things in the news and the Internet has given so much exposure to people in a way that I don't know, if they thought this is what was gonna happen. But like, it's become very difficult to ignore that they don't really like us, or they don't understand the value of us. And again, it goes back to that perpetual racist system, because we are not the same, we're not treated like equals.

Dorothy expressed a need to be hyperaware in whatever environment she finds herself in to protect herself against prejudice and discrimination:

> So, for me, to navigate through American Society as a Black American millennial means that I have to be conscious of my environments whether that's digitally online or in person because of safety. As an African American, it's definitely very important. While

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we're not in the olden times, I am aware that certain people have different prejudices that exist, and you know, I don't live in a world where I can't afford to not be aware of other people's prejudices, so therefore I have to, like if I'm gonna go somewhere, I think about, *How do people in that area feel about Black people?* I need to be aware. Even if it's in the work setting or the school setting. You know, being able to control my emotions just because again, there are some, when they're pulled over by the police, they can afford to get irate and yell and cuss, but that is not afforded to Black Americans. You have to be able to remain calm because that could be your life...

Maya and Dorothy's acknowledgement of racism in contemporary American society dispelled the myth that Americans are living in a post-racial society and that there is no need to address issues of race amongst Americans; the lived experiences and testimonies of Black Americans across generations confirms otherwise. Several participants expressed similar sentiments and disclosed having reactions of fear, anxiety, and discouragement in response to these persistent reminders that the threat of racism remains. Angela acknowledged her emotional response to this and indicated that her hyperawareness has caused her to be more hyper vigilant in her surroundings and concerned for the wellbeing of her child.

…It brings a little bit of fear because, you know, I'm raising a daughter who is African American and the fear for her not being able to walk home from the bus stop because someone doesn't like the color of her skin, or because of the color of her skin, and how small she is, someone feels like they're entitled to take her from her family. You know, it just kind of makes you more scared than anything when you didn't have that fear before… Even now I have a safety notion that when I get out of my car, I'm checking my surroundings. Before I get to the door, I'm making sure my headlights are still on so that I

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can see the front and my surroundings. It just makes you be a little bit more intentional about making sure that you're safe in a place that is supposed to be, you know, a place of freedom.

Racial injustices against Black Americans serve to perpetuate racist systems and the racial disparities that they promote. Participants discussed disparities in multiple domains of Black American life. Stacey discussed the impact Black Americans' work can have on their health outcomes, stating:

You know, we beat ourselves up because everything like our work is physical so health-wise, we're not doing too well. There's a lot of gaps that I'm like, *I don't know*, we still need to fix the gaps, even though we're propelling forward.

Stacey noted that disparities in employment and wages are due to disparities in education. The achievement gap between White and Black students is due to present day injustices rooted in historic prejudice and discrimination. Coretta, a school counselor at the time of the study, stated, "Even when I look at like–at my school, I look at like graduation rates or the achievement gap like–there's still so much space for us to grow." Stacey, who also worked in a school during the time of this study provided her perspective on educational disparities seen in the students of color that she serves and how this issue is emblematic of a larger system of marginalization that extends across domains:

I work at a middle school in [neighborhood], Brooklyn. I think the education sucks. I don't think we're teaching the kids enough for them to do well in high school where they are able to go to college, or move forward like, very few. So many of our kids are underperforming, or don't read at their grade level, right? We have fifth graders reading at a second-grade level. Why? They have some eighth graders reading at a second-grade

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level. So, I'm like, how can we work to bridge that gap? Even working in [neighborhood], Brooklyn, we're working in poverty like, it's a high food desert. So, what do they get to eat outside? It's trash. Like the grocery stores are trash. I live in the East Village, so I can see the difference where when I go to work, I see what poverty looks like... Where I live used to be very impoverished and now it's changing which offers more opportunities which means the income level where I'm living changed and now I can barely afford it. But then you go to [neighborhood] and it's like, you see a lot of drugs, you see a lot of violence, it's unfortunate.

Stacey's quote indicated how a lack of funding for a school with predominantly Black and Latino students in a neighborhood that looks the same facilitates the widening of the achievement gap for students and communities of color. Stacey also touched on the issue of gentrification as she reflected on her own neighborhood, and noted how it has changed as it has become gentrified. She accepted that gentrification has improved her neighborhood, but acknowledged that it has made it more difficult for her to afford to live in the neighborhood she where she grew up. This is the case in numerous urban centers, where gentrification highlights disparities in wealth and financial income, and heightens disparities in home ownership as neighborhoods become too expensive for less fortunate inhabitants to continue living there. It also serves as a deterrent for potential buyers who would like to purchase a home in these particular neighborhoods. Thirteen participants lived in a major city at the time of this study, with 10 of them expressing an interest in buying a home in the immediate future in a city while also expressing concerns about their ability to afford one. On this topic Ida stated, "It's not as easy to have a house the way it was for our parents and our parents don't have the same like, debt that we have..." This is a common theme amongst millennials and a major impediment to Black

millennials shortening the wealth gap between their White counterparts. Frederick elucidated the systematic impact debt accrual can have on Black millennials, he stated:

> ...by the time you finish paying off your debt, or if you ever pay it off, you know, it messes other things up in your life, like credit and stuff like that. And so now you can't really get the American dream because now you're indebted to school. But then, now you're indebted to yourself or you're indebted to America, or indebted to a loan company, and you can't reach it, so I can't even get the house part. I get the kids part, but then again like, how am I supporting my kids?

Ella also addressed the disparity in homeownership for Black people and discussed the difficulties they experience based on her own firsthand experiences in attempting to buy a home.

> Even if you make enough money and build your credit, it's very difficult for a Black woman, a Black family, or [a] Black couple to buy a house. And we've seen that firsthand actually this year. I've had several obstacles that I'm pretty sure my White counterparts don't think about so, yeah, as a Black woman, I think the American Dream–like it just doesn't, like the other American values and principles and things like that, just doesn't apply to me.

Ella's sentiment regarding the American Dream and other American values not applying to her as a Black person is representative of a lot of Black millennials' sentiments on the topic. Ella's expressed dejection towards the fallacy of the American Dream compared to her reality is an indicator of the mental and emotional impact racial disparities in the United States has on Black millennials as they contend with injustices that serve to widen the racial wealth gap.

White and Black Americans Live Separate Realities

All of the participants alluded to, either directly or indirectly, feeling as though their White counterparts exist in a separate American reality compared to them, one in which their White privilege affords closer access to the American Dream. Participants cited racial inequality, bias, the prevalence of disparities across multiple domains, and White privilege as evidence for this. Regarding this Maya stated:

> ...you have certain access and certain opportunities, which is not just based off of skin color–family heritage, environment, like just culture in general. There are certain potholes from everywhere that are kind of on your path; it's not all white America and systemic racism. But those things still are not devoid of the influence of White America and systemic racism, yeah, it's hard.

Maya pointed out that though there are other extenuating circumstances that can promote or obstruct one's ability to realize success in the United States, these factors do not influence outcomes in a vacuum; in the United States, the specter of White supremacy looms over everything. Thus, it is disadvantageous to not be White. Ida discussed her experience with this facet of her reality as an under-represented minority in her workplace. She disclosed a struggle with imposter syndrome as the only Black woman amongst her majority White colleagues. She opened up about dealing with an issue in her workplace that her White colleagues do not have to and how it impacted her emotionally:

> When I first got hired at my job, I realized I was the only Black UX researcher on my immediate team of like 30 people all over the US, and I was the only Black woman on there on the UX research team and I had really bad impostor syndrome, and one of the things I told my mentor was like, *I'm kind or worried that I just got hired so you guys*

would have, like, some diversity on here, so that you'd have a little bit of color, and it made me discredit my skills and everything that I had done to work up to like, getting this, this internship because I just kept thinking like, *I'm only here so they can look like this great, inclusive company*. No offense to [place of employment], and I love them, but they still have a Black problem. So yeah, I think it has made me a little bit paranoid just because I always, in the back of my head whenever there are like, weird interactions or I'm feeling weird, or I can't identify why something's not working out the way that it should be, when I'm interacting with people in the back of my head, it's always like, *Is it because I'm Black and there are these, like, stereotypes of Black people that might be working against me or that people might be considering when interacting with me?* So yeah, I feel like I'm always trying to be mindful of how I might be being perceived, it's complicated.

Harriet discussed her own experiences in her own workplace, where her reality is disparate from that of her White counterparts, in that she feels like she has to work harder than her them in order to advance in her field. Harriet stated that:

Just in terms of experiences, in terms of racial background... My experiences are so vastly different from like my White counterparts, I feel like I have to work twice as hard just to get half as far and yeah, whereas we're all American-based, off of where we grew up at but at the same time, based off who we are as people, I can't really relate much to their experiences.

Similarly, Angela was open about the disadvantage that she perceives she has in the workplace because she is Black. She acknowledged this as a fact of her existence as a Black person. It has been engrained in Angela, as well as numerous other Black millennials, that being

Black in the United States means a more difficult career path compared to her White counterparts.

> In jobs, they say that, you know we don't discriminate based off of race and all this stuff, but they do... It's hard not to recognize facts. You know, it's hard not to forget facts as well. Is it that, because I am African American, that life would be a little bit harder for me? Which we've always been told …Its a little bit different, when you walk through other doors, because they're gonna see your name. Like, it's even down to like how we name our children. You don't wanna give them a name that the employer can guarantee that they're Black or White or anything like that, because then they're automatically gonna, I would hate to say, stereotype you based off your name. It does change your view on how you do things just because you know you're gonna be judged a certain way by the color, or even the way you sound or things like that. You will not be afforded the same opportunities as others.

In both their quotes, Angela and Harriet verbalized a common belief among African Americans; that as a Black person, in order to get ahead or even meet the mark of their White counterparts, they have to work significantly harder. Angela also discussed how she adjusts to anticipated judgement based on her race, to which James related as he reflected on his upbringing compared to his White peers, specifically how the difference in how he felt he was perceived impacted him as he navigated the world.

> You know, the minute your voice cracks they start looking at you differently. You're no longer a child. And because of the way I looked, I never was one of those kids who smiled a lot when I was outside unless I was playing with my friends. But if I was by myself, you're not going to catch me smiling because I know what it looks like to kids

who walk down the street smiling. You get picked on or you get looked at a certain way or things happen to you, so you have to keep your hard exterior. And then with having a deeper voice earlier on in life they think, *Oh this kid has to be bad. He's outside at eight o'clock at night, and he doesn't smile*. And you know, so they look at you like, you know, T*his kid has to be bad*. Not like, you know, this kid was standing in the grocery store parking lot helping women walk their bags to their car and pack their trunks just to get a few dollars so he could, you know, eat. Yeah, they look at you a certain way so you have to present yourself in a certain light so that you can escape certain situations. You have to look innocent enough, but also tough enough so that you don't get picked on from the police or people in the neighborhood.

What James described in his quote was his process of adapting to an adverse environment so that he can navigate safely, a process employed often by Black people to varying degrees. James also discussed his perception of differences he experienced growing up and attending a predominantly Black school with inadequate funding:

Someone who goes to a wealthy private school, [their] experiences are completely different than someone who goes to a poor public school. Their experience when it comes to having things taken away from them isn't as significant as it is for somebody who comes from a poor neighborhood, or goes to a public school, and they're defunding certain activities like basketball, football or just after school reading programs. Our experience is completely different... Having to fund sports yourself as a kid is expensive. So just imagine, you know in Brooklyn, we had this thing called beg and plead, right? …basically, the football teams would get together and stand in the street and wave and flag cars down or stand by the bank and beg for money to support the teams. When I first

heard of it, I'm like, *This is weird because when you look on TV, none of these other kids have to do stuff like that.* But for us, we have to do that. And it kind of turned me off from playing sports because I never had to beg for anything in my life… So, me having to go outside and beg, that's not something that I was comfortable doing, you know? But it was a part of our process. But when you look at a private school, those programs are funded. Their sports programs are funded, they have programs set up to collect donations for things like that. So those kids aren't outside doing the things that we were doing, so my experience as a Black kid coming up in America is completely different, especially in Brooklyn.

This quote from James depicts a disparate reality between White and Black Americans where contrasting educational outcomes lead to contrasting realities. James discussed the impact this has on Black youth, and the Black community as a whole:

I know you've heard this before, he [young Black man] was always a good kid. He was very polite. He helped me with my groceries. But you also found that at nighttime he probably, you know, was not into a good element, and wasn't doing the right things all the time. And we're kind of forced into those, or down those roads, because the opportunities that we have are different. I can't say that in other communities its better, but ours are different and they are limited...

Systemic Racism Inhibits American Identity Development

A substantial theme to emerge from participants' responses was a unanimous lack of connection to their identities as Americans. What participants revealed was that this reality is in direct response to the history of oppression, trauma, and marginalization that has become core to

the Black American experience. Regarding this, Audre shared her view on issues as she cited the persistent struggle she feels Black Americans have to engage in just to maintain their civil rights.

Yeah, I am an American. But I think that the oppression of Black Americans sometimes makes me feel not American in a sense, if I were to label it that. My ancestors earned the right for me to have these rights, my citizenship, and other benefits of being American, but sometimes it feels like I don't have that... When I went to the African American Museum in DC and they're telling the story of America and then you have the enslaved Africans in the backdrop while they're building the country... They're, you know, helping it become very wealthy, but not partaking in the rights or partaking in the benefits as the country was trying to build. So because of how historically Black Americans transitioned into becoming American, that struggle for not only citizenship, but being equal, or to have the right to vote, it's always been a struggle…

Coretta also acknowledged the role Black people played in the development of the United States. She opened up about how this history and her ancestry as a descendant of displaced people makes it difficult for her to feel like she belongs in the United States.

Yeah, the history of this country makes it really hard to, like, feel like you actually belong... It's so funny because like, Black Americans have had an integral role in this country, like descendants, at least of like building the foundation of the country's backbone of capitalism and all that, and like we've tried to equal the playing field in different ways, like through the Civil Rights movement and different things, but like, yeah, White supremacy stops that... Like the fact that I can't trace my, lineage in ways other Americans can. Even folks who immigrated here a very long time ago. Like, White folks could trace their lineage to Poland or to Italy, or to wherever, but we can't. So that's

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the main reason I feel like, not American. Outside of myself, just Black America in

general and just like, it's kind of like we were just kind of put here. It's a very

complicated relationship.

Ida discussed her experiences of reckoning with some White Americans' sense of

entitlement to being American, and it indicating to her by proxy a feeling that she herself does

not belong in the United States.

When I was younger, there were a lot of moments where I didn't feel American. Because

I grew up in the southeast, I grew up in predominantly White areas. I think White people

can–it almost feels like White people are allowed to be or feel more American because

they've always made it very clear that they belong here and no one else does. So, I think

those moments when I am a minority, I don't feel like an American very much. But I

think in general, I don't really identify as American. I mainly just feel like, *Oh I don't feel*

like I belong here at all, you know? Because it's just not something that I would label

myself as... I think I would label myself as Black before I would ever label myself as

American.

Ida alluded to the centrality of her Black identity, similar to all of the other participants,

some of whom identify it as a safety as it provides them with a sense of belonging and

community with other Black people with whom they share oppression. Ida also discussed what it

was like for her learning about the history of Black people in the United States. She makes a note

of the contrast in tone in what she was taught in school, compared to the reality of the history of

the United States of America:

Like growing up in school and you know, going through history classes, they don't really

talk about like, what it means to be an American. It's bright and it's shiny, and it's like,

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I'm a good person, I love my freedom. And it's very like, you know, like, it's very idealistic. And then getting older and experiencing racism in America, you learn that you're living in a country that like, doesn't really want you anymore. And when they did want you, they don't want you, they wanted like, your body and your labor... I've definitely become disillusioned to what it means to be an American and like, and there's that, like, burden of just knowing what that really means to be an American.

In reckoning with the American past and processing how it informs the present reality for herself and other Black people, and what it means to her to be American, Ida described herself as experiencing disillusionment with her American identity. Ruby expressed similar feelings as she conceptualized the current reality for Black Americans, and expressed ambivalence regarding what it means to her to be American.

I don't really know what it means to be American. Which is kind of sad, I guess… You know, speaking as a Black person, right, a Black American, I think you always have the underlying feeling that you're not American because of how society has constantly viewed us and treated us, right? And so whether we're talking about the political climate and the laws, that's constantly kind of created to work against us, or you know when you kind of look at what communities are impacted the most, right? You know, taking away from education, or we're talking about, you know, breaking down communities, most of that is done within the Black and Brown communities. And so often times, you do have the underlying feeling that like you're just not American.

Internal Conflict with American Reality

Something that all of the participants from this study brought to attention is just how difficult it is for Black Americans to accept the condition of their existence in the United States,

and also accept that they are Americans. Participants' experience of internal conflict speaks to the larger issue the Black American face within the American context. Participants have conveyed there is a chasm between their reality as Black Americans and what their reality should be as Americans as indicated by the American Dream, the American constitution, and the Declaration of Independence. The divide between what is, and what should be makes the maxim "All men are created equal" paradoxical, which thus makes it difficult for Black Americans' Black identity and their American identity to abide. Being millennials, they have a unique vantage point on what it means to be a Black American as they reckon with a difficult reality and try to navigate times of uncertainty that have led to insecurity in their futures as Americans.

Internal Conflict Identifying as American

Despite being able to identify the privileges and opportunities afforded to them as American millennials, participants' emotional responses ranged from ambivalence to rejection towards identifying as Americans. Participants conveyed the feeling of being in an emotional bind. Audre, like several other participants, described her relationship with her American identity as complicated. She explained her experience in the following quote:

It's hard when we have police brutality, or shootings or, people thinking the worst of Black people who–even if you're educated, just because of how you dress, or how you look, or your skin, people think the worst… I mean, I think that, it makes me feel, you know, it's complicated. Saddened a little bit, because it's like–you know that we could do so much better if the United States as a whole would just come out and say, *Slavery was wrong, we apologize.* Whether you give reparations or not... Thinking about independence, my people were not free when the United States got its independence. You know, it's like great to be in the land of the free and all of that, but that's for America,

which is great, but that's not like full ...because you have the independence, you still see

your people as slaves at that time... I carry Black and American together. So, with me

carrying those mindsets together, that duality is present.

Ida also acknowledged how American history makes being American complicated for

her. She described herself as having a sense of shame and feeling burdened by her nationality

and the related privilege she experiences as an American.

I think to me being an American also means carrying a burden, because I think when you

start to really understand America's history, you learn that it's not really great. It hasn't

really treated Black people very well. And so, sometimes it does feel kind of shameful to

be an American and yeah, and kind of burdensome because I'm carrying the weight of a

lot of really bad things that happened, even with my limited privilege y'know.

Stacey expressed certainty about her unwillingness to openly identify as American. She

attributed her feelings to the fact that the United States has not been a place that is conducive

towards Black people embracing their American identities.

I don't think I rep' America. Like I've never–I mean Fourth of July is just a BBQ. I'd

never be like, *I'm American! Woo!* I don't ever do that, so I don't know that I have

American pride. That's weird. That's–I don't, I think it goes back to like–I guess I don't

know, like I don't think Black people rep' America. Right? Like it hasn't been welcoming

to be American and Black. I don't like using the term African American because I'm like,

I don't know where in Africa my family's from and that just seems weird... I don't know. It

doesn't seem like something to be prideful for like, that's weird, I don't know.

In her quote, Stacey alluded to another issue that Black Americans face, the reality of

identifying as African Americans. This reality represents a peculiar emotional bind that Black

Americans find themselves in, as they live in a country that historically has not been welcoming or inclusive of their presence, and their identity is rooted in another continent and culture that many Black Americans have little to no ties to other than their displaced ancestors. A lot of Black Americans find themselves unwilling or unable to leave a country that they may not feel welcomed in as citizens which can perpetuate generational feelings of displacement.

Pride in Diverse Identities are Oppositional to American Pride

All of the participants denied having pride in being American and in the United States. The fervor with which they expressed their lack of pride varied, but their sentiments were the same. Ida shared why she believes it is so difficult for herself and other Black people to develop American pride in the modern United States.

> I think what makes it harder for a lot of people to have pride in America, or even feel like they are an American is a lot of our symbols have become, not a symbol of like, our nation, they've become a symbol of a certain I guess like, sect of American politics. So, you know, if you have the American flag on a jacket, you're saying basically that you're a conservative and that you love the country that you're in. Umm, so I think a lot of the symbols of America have been tainted...

Ida spoke to the current reality where Americans have seen a steep rise in radical White supremacy groups who have co-opted American iconography as symbols of militaristic White nationalism which has served to further alienate Black Americans from their American identities. Malcolm further identified this movement as being emblematic of the United States post-Donald Trump presidency. He posited that White individuals seem to feel entitled to be "grossly disrespectful to a group of people" for the sake of White American nationalism. Coretta, who is also the daughter of a Black United States veteran, stated:

...when I think America, I think, military, war, like imperialism... Those are things that come to mind, there's not like this warm-hearted feeling, waving my flag. I would never have a flag in front of my yard. I'm not the type.

In this quote, Coretta indicated that she associates the American flag with conflict and force, values that are misaligned with her own but seem to resonate with modern White supremacist groups. Coretta rejected the idea of displaying her American flag as an expression of her pride, stating that, "…when I think about the American flag, I start to think about the Confederate flag. So it's just like there's a line between being proud and doing what we do." Ruby expressed similar sentiment towards the American flag and the American national anthem. She also rejected the idea of Independence Day being July fourth, she stated:

Independence Day is not July fourth. Independence Day is Juneteenth. I can care less about the American flag. Like in my office, I have the Pan-African flag represented. Uh, so I can care less about any of these symbols, right? Uh, the national anthem? I don't sing it. I will always sing my Black national anthem. You won't find me singing the National Anthem... I think I have more pride in being a Black millennial than I do being an American.

Ruby's quote represented a significant theme amongst participants in which they rejected American pride in favor of pride in diverse identities like their race, ethnicity, or community. Similarly Harriet stated:

...I just don't see in my own experiences and just who I am as a person–I just don't really see this general pride in saying, *Oh, I'm an American*, you know?... I'm proud to be a Black American. I can say that, but not necessarily... I'm more proud of being Black than

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American, oh, I feel like it should come with some feelings of–yeah, no, I don't feel any type of way. I feel like that's just kind of like, what it is.

Stacey expressed similar views as well, overtly denying having pride in her American identity but instead her Caribbean identity and having a desire to develop connections with her Caribbean roots as well as her African ancestry. She stated:

I've never been prideful of being an American. Like, I'm proud to be Black. I'm proud to be from the Caribbean. I search for more like, cultural connection. I'm interested to see where my family comes from in Africa, but being American in this country... I just live here.

Frederick also denied having pride in being American, stating that he only thinks about his American identity on a conditional basis. In addition to expressing pride in being Black, he stated that he has pride in the numerous communities he represents and other facets of his personal identity.

I don't think I actually have any pride in being American. I think the only time I really think honestly about being American is when I travel to other countries where they, I guess we'll say …think highly of Americans because you're from America... I don't think there's really pride for me, I think I'm more prideful of being an African American male. I'm more prideful of, like, being from Harlem. I'm more prideful of like these spaces and places I worked in and I lived in more so than they represent America. I think for me they represent me, and they represent where I came from, and the spaces that I existed in versus it being American... I represent Harlem. I represent Catholic schools. I represent mental health. I represent education now. And so, I think those are my prideful parts. I don't think I've ever really faced or been in a space of, like, *I'm proud to be an American*.

These quotes all depict Black American millennials identifying pride in marginalized or diverse identities in opposition to their American identities. The participants' responses to the notion of American pride seem to be in a dichotomous or oppositional manner, but this does not inherently indicate a sense of anti-Americanness. It is, however, another signifier of the complex relationship between Black Americans and the United States.

Civic Insecurity

All of the participants expressed concerns for their futures. They cited the current political, social, and economical climates in the United States as the reason for their concerns. Ida disclosed having a complex range of negative emotions in response to the current political climate, she stated:

> There is a lot of, yeah, there's a lot of cynicism, and a lot of, I think, trying to think of the right word for it... I think I view a lot of it with just like a sense of like, amazement in terms of like, this is ridiculous. You know? Like, this is absolutely ridiculous. So yeah, I think I can definitely be jaded when it comes to a lot of political things that happen, or just like reading the news. I'm always trying to like, question what's actually being presented to me and what the truth might actually be, you know. And it has not only shaped the way I view society, it's shaped how I interact with society. There's definitely like a sense of, I think, paranoia...

Rosa, like a majority of participants, expressed a lack of faith in current government officials and indicated the need for more diversity in leadership:

> Every law made for this country was made by a group of old white men and there's only been old white men perpetuating those things. So, the top down governing in–it's just not working anymore. It really isn't working anymore.

Coretta expressed similar views and also stressed the need for Black millennials and women's voices to be represented and honored in American governance:

I think that our voice needs to be heard and honored more. Like, when I look at the political makeup in this country, it's like a lot of old folks. It's a lot of White old folks now. There have been like a lot of first, uh, the first Black this, or the first gay, or trans person here, like, there's been a lot of firsts, which is great. But also, the people making decisions sitting at the table are still the same, mostly men–even like, if we wanna look beyond race and look at gender, you know, I feel like leadership needs to change in this country at the highest level. And then hopefully there'll be some kind of trickle-down effect... Yeah, I just feel like we see all these problems that we're talking about it. And our voice still isn't heard, despite, like, the demonstrations and protests even.

Ella described herself as feeling fearful, helpless, and disappointed regarding the future of the United States and that of herself and her loved ones, she shared:

I think fear started to creep in whenever I thought about America and continues to do so even now… Yeah, I think there's a lot of fear, for sure, for people that look like me. I have a Black brother, I have a Black fiancé, I have Black loved ones. So you know, it's hard. I have people of color who I love dearly. So yeah, I mean fear, for sure. Fear of the unknown. Anything could happen. Unfortunately, umm, I feel some helplessness about sort of, the future of America and where it's going and feeling like there's maybe not so much in my control. Umm, so then it's like another–and so maybe I'll say disappointed, too.

The participants' expressed civic insecurity is representative of Black millennials' outlook on the present and future of the United States and their standing in it. From helplessness

to the need for improved representation–their reality speaks of a marginalized existence that will

grow increasingly worse without adequate intervention.

Chapter V

In the case of an American Negro born in that glittering republic, and in the moment you are born—since you don't know any better—every stick and stone, and every face, is white, and since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose that you are too. It comes as a great shock around the age of five or six or seven to discover the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you… It comes as a great shock to discover the country which is your birthplace, and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you… The disaffection, the demoralization, and the gap between one person and another only on the basis of the color of their skin begins there, and accelerates, accelerates throughout a whole lifetime, so at present that you realize you're thirty and are having a terrible time managing to trust your countrymen. (Baldwin, 1965, as cited in the Buccola, 2019, p. 380. Reposted with permission from Princeton University Press)

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to highlight and bring understanding to the lived experiences of Black or African American millennials with specific focus on Black or African American millennials' associated thoughts and feelings regarding their current reality and positionality within the American context and its relation to the idealized reality of the American Dream. The study sample consisted of 15 participants who identified as Black American millennials. The participants were between the ages of 27 and 41 (*M = 32.5*) and born between the years 1996 and 1981. They each participated in one individual interview in which they were prompted to explore their perceptions, experiences, and identities as Black American millennials in relation to American principles and ideals, most notably the American Dream. Five patterns of shared meaning were developed from the analysis of the participants' responses. They each correspond to the study's research questions and describe the participants feelings regarding being Black American millennials specifically the influence that their perceived positionality and associated feelings as millennials and African Americans has on their well-being, sense of national pride, and belief in their ability to achieve the American Dream. The patterns of shared

meaning were as follows (1) Black millennials identify themselves as a pivotal generation, (2) the American Dream is a White myth, (3) "unalienable rights" are not applied equally amongst Americans, (4) the American Dream highlights disparities in American reality, (5) Black millennials are reckoning with internal conflict towards their American reality. This chapter will discuss the implications of the results, limitations of the present study, and future areas of research.

Overview of the Results

Exploring and gaining insight into Black Americans' conceptualization of the American Dream and the impact it has on Black millennials perception of their status within American society is important as it can increase awareness and consideration for their unique lived experiences and the obstacles they face as members of an oppressed group of Americans (Andrews, 2009; Cokley, 2002; Dartson, 1999; Manning, 1998; Seaton et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2009). This study sheds light on how the roadblocks they face, particularly elements of systemic racism and other historical factors, impede their progression in American society, diminish their belief in their ability to achieve their aspirations (Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Cernkovich et al., 2000; Sellers et al., 2011), and infringe on their ability to identify as Americans (Cross, 1971, 1991). As is often the case with Black sub-populations, there has been limited research focusing on the unique lived experiences of Black and African American millennials currently living in the United States (Boone, 2020; Ingram, 2021; McCoy, 2019). This study adds to the literature by highlighting the impact of historic marginalization on a subgroup of oppressed people living within the American context and contending with constant disenfranchisement and forced assimilation in the form of the imposition of American ideals such as the American Dream (Schiele, 2005).

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Hope, Determination, and Skepticism

Participants openly discussed their perception of their reality in relation to being Americans and how they reckon with American ideals, most notably the American Dream. They all acknowledged experiencing generational pressures specifically conveying a sense of duty to both older and younger generations of Black Americans (Magubane, 2017). Participants expressed a complex array of emotions ranging from hope to skepticism, to determination. What can be surmised based on participant responses is that Black American millennials see themselves as a pivotal generation. They recognize the historical disadvantages they face as Black people, but they are also willing to acknowledge the bounty of opportunities and privileges afforded to them because of their age and status as American citizens (Adams & Schneiderman, 2017; Hing, 2018; Opie & Roberts, 2017; Ruetschlin & Asante-Muhammad, 2013; Williams, 2018). Despite setbacks and disparities, Black millennials strive to construct an ideal future for themselves and future generations according to their own aspirations and not in alignment with their perceptions of the American Dream (Forman 2002). Participants endorsed belief in the principles of the American Dream with skepticism in their belief regarding their ability to realize them (Abowitz, 2005; New Strategist Publications, 2015, 2018). Despite this, participants unanimously expressed a drive and necessity to strive for success despite setbacks. Their drive is rooted in a desire to build on the foundation set for them by their parents and grandparents, to improve their living standards, and to achieve economic success (New Strategist Publications, 2018) in order to make life better for their own children and grandchildren.

Participants also acknowledged the notable racial and generational divide between themselves and their White and older Black generational counterparts especially the lack of

wealth accumulation and social capital (Berry, 2006; Gooding, 2018; Kraus et al., 2019; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021; Ryabov, 2020). Participants made a special note of how economic divides across older generations are hindering their progress presently (Kurz et al., 2019; Levenson, 2010; Taylor et al., 2014). Participants addressed the unique challenges that they face in their pursuit of trying to realize an ideal reality and how they are weighed down by the burden of historical disadvantages most notably financial ones (Devore, 1983; Fongwa, 2019; Hood et al, 2018). Some participants noted that their parents and guardians did the best they could, but they themselves were limited in what they could provide in comparison to their White counterparts (Hood et al, 2017; Mhlongo, 2019; Mlondo, 2022). All of the participants discussed the burden of student debt on Black millennials from first-hand experience and witnessing their peers' struggles (Haughwout et al., 2019; Welbeck, 2020). Unprecedented levels of student loan debt and unfortunate economic trends have put American millennials at a significant disadvantage (Haneman, 2017) which for Black millennials is only exacerbated by the intersectionality of their race and generational identity. They are contending with declining home ownership rates, wage disparities, higher unemployment rates, and increased levels of debt (Cruz-Cerdas, 2017; Haughwout et al., 2019; Welbeck, 2020). These factors contribute to decreased opportunities for wealth generation and transfer (Jones et al., 2020; Adams et al., 2020; Ryabov, 2020). The disparities Black American millennials face can be attributed to historical wealth inequities, limited access to resources, and discriminatory practices like redlining that impeded the transfer of wealth among Black Americans (Baum & Steele, 2010; Scott-Clayton, 2012).

Participants expressed a desire to own a home as a way to secure generational wealth for their families, but most admitted to having a sense of uncertainty regarding their ability to do so based on their current lack of resources and uncertainty surrounding their economic futures

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(Choi et al., 2018; Zewde, 2020). Despite increased levels of educational attainment in comparison to older generations, participants stated that their economic prospects are still hindered (Fry, 2018; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Taylor et al., 2014). Participants shared that earning tertiary degrees have not helped much in alleviating generational financial stressors and issues associated with navigating the ever-changing American economic landscape; this is due in part to systemic barriers and a lack of social capital and financial literacy (Cohen, 2011; Gaddis, 2021; Lee & Hopson, 2019; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015).

The prolonged presence of older professionals in the workforce and the increased prevalence of educational attainment has made the American job market markedly more competitive, limiting upward mobility and wage parity for millennials particularly when compared to their older generational counterparts (AbouAssi et al., 2021; Levenson, 2010). Participants communicated having a sense of disappointment that their academic achievement is not resulting in more adequate financial outcomes (Haughwout et al. 2019; Welbeck, 2020) as it was instilled in them that education equated to success (Choi et al., 2018; Kurz et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2014; Xu et al., 2015). This financial burden is further compounded for African Americans who face additional obstacles such as institutional racism, poor health, and systemic disadvantages in their communities (Grable & Joo, 2006; Ruetschlin & Asante-Muhammad, 2013). Participants additionally acknowledged the impact of generational events on their present realities with particular focus paid to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Goodman & Mance, 2011; Hidalgo et al., 2022; Myers et al., 2020) and higher costs of living relative to their parents' generation (Brodman et al., 2018; Ehlenz et al., 2020; Rubenstein, 2017).

Participants described themselves as having a more liberal sense of their Black identities with them being more willing to explore and more open with how they express their identities

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particularly in the face of their obstacles (Cross, 1991; Vandiver et al., 2002). Their increased

liberality, which participants acknowledged was afforded to them by their ancestors' sacrifices,

enables participants to feel more willing to challenge societal norms and redefine what it means

to achieve an ideal living in the United States. Accepting their ancestor's sacrifices for their

realization of better privileges is identified as a further impetus in their drive for success and

their desire to create a better future (Welburn, 2016).

The numerous obstacles faced by Black millennials (Kraus et al., 2019; Haughwout et al.,

2019; Choi et al., 2018; Zewde, 2020) coupled with their unique vantage point and liberal sense

of their intersectional identities have combined to form a complex and nuanced perception of

their American realities which has been endorsed in full by all participants. Participants'

responses indicate that Black American millennials may perceive their reality in relation to

American ideals like the American Dream through a complicated and tenuous lens of hope,

skepticism, and determination.

American Dream versus Black Reality

Participants readily shared their perception of the American Dream and other American

ideals and expressed how their perceptions were heavily influenced by their lived experiences

and perceived social positionality as young Black Americans (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021;

Combs, 2016; Craemer et al., 2020; Ibrahimi et al., 2020; Perez, 2021; Seider et al., 2019).

Participants indicated a lack of alignment with the American Dream and American principles,

primarily because of their perceived social positionality as Black Americans (Anderson et al.,

2021; Threlfall, 2018). They described the American Dream as a meritocratic ideal based on

financial aspirations, consumerism, and individualistic values (Hecht, 2018; Yoon & Kim, 2016)

which in their opinions favored White Americans (Chetty et al., 2017; Cox et al., 2017; Nelson,

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2019). Some participants overtly described it as a myth; they all described it as an unrealistic

aspiration for Black Americans as they feel it does not account for the systemic barriers and

racial inequities they encounter (Allen et al., 2020; Boone, 2020; Bush & Bush, 2015; Hanson &

Gulish, 2016; McClelland & Tobin, 2010; McCoy, 2019). Consequently, the participants voiced

rejection of the traditional American Dream and instead chose to define their own aspirations and

visions for success.

Similar to the American Dream, American principles, chiefly the "unalienable rights" of

all Americans to equal opportunities and protection under the law, have become synonymous

with American life (Dyer, 2012; Jefferson, 2009). Conversely, participants shared sentiments

that violations of their rights are synonymous with their American reality (Berry, 2006; Johnson,

2016; Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). Their experiences with the inequitable application of "unalienable

rights" further reinforces the perspective that the ideal of liberty as a human right is not

experienced uniformly by all Americans and the pursuit of happiness is not meritocratic (Berry,

2006; Bush & Bush, 2015; Stiuliuc, 2011). Participants noted how easy it is to observe that

American lives are not all treated equally. They highlighted persistent racial disparities in areas

such as policing, criminal justice, voting rights, housing, workplace discrimination, and

economic opportunities (Alvarez et al., 2008a; Bor et al., 2018; Chama, 2019; DeGue et al.,

2016; Kochhar & Fry, 2014; Manza & Uggen, 2004; McIntosh et al., 2020; Pitcan et al., 2018;

Sue et al., 2007). Participants also discussed how the historical context of systemic racism and

generational trauma resulting from slavery plays a significant role in shaping their perception

(Berlin, 2004; Brady et al., 2020; Combs, 2016; Craemer et al., 2020; Macedo, 2021; Nunn,

2008; Philogène, 2000). These experiences and disparities have shaped their perception of the

American Dream and American ideals as either too costly to pursue, or entirely exclusionary and unattainable for marginalized communities.

Participants regard American principles of equality and liberty as incongruous with their reality as they have witnessed and can attest to the ongoing mistreatment and disenfranchisement of Black Americans which results in seemingly ever-widening disparities (Cain, 2015; Rogowski & Cohen, 2015). Participants vividly highlighted the stark disconnect between the idealized American Dream and the realities they navigate. Participants asserted an understanding of their rights as Americans and the need for social justice in the United States in order to uphold their rights. They expressed an appreciation for past advocacy efforts on their behalf but also declared the need for Black millennial voices to be hear in response to disparities and exclusionary ideals.

In opposition to the barriers they face, participants discussed the ways in which they are working to challenge and dismantle the systemic barriers that limit their opportunities and hinder their sense of belonging in American society (Craemer et al., 2020; Ibrahimi et al., 2020; Johnson, 2016; Lynch et al., 2021; Perez, 2021; Stern, 2021). Embracing their unique identities, participants reject the traditional American Dream in favor of redefining success on their own terms and creating alternative visions that encompass social justice, equity, and empowerment for their families and others regardless of their race, sexual identity, gender, or background (Bush & Bush, 2015; Stiuliuc, 2011). Some participants extolled the achievements of Black millennials and noted that through their activism and resilience, some Black millennials are at the forefront of forging a more inclusive and equitable American society that acknowledges and addresses the lived experiences and aspirations of all its citizens (King Jr., 2000; Miles, 2020; Perez, 2021).

Oppositional Identities

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Participants acknowledged the impact that awareness of the American Dream and other similar American ideals has on them as they reflected on their own unique realities within the American context. Their perceived inability to realize American ideals represents to them an exclusion from being able to identify as Americans as experiencing the fulfillment of American ideals are purported to be core elements of identifying as American (Carter & Perez, 2016; Cernkovich et al., 2000; Damak, 2018; King Jr., 1963, 2000). Participants shared that the prevalence of social injustices and disparities signify to them that they should not identify with, celebrate, or express pride in anything related to being American. Participants' hyperawareness of this reality has manifested in them having a fraught relationship with their American identities (Cavalhieri & Wilcox, 2021). Participants shared a sentiment that there are disparate realities between White and Black Americans and that the presence of systemic racism inhibits their American identity development (Belgrave & Allison, 2009; Cross, 1991; Durkee et al., 2019; Forsyth et al., 2015; Odafe et al., 2017; Trotter, 1995; Young, 2003).

Participants experienced and expressed internal conflict with identifying as American due to their to their conflicting realities (Cross, 1991; Halter & Johnson, 2014; Neville & Cross Jr., 2017) which is compounded by the lack of acknowledgement and reparations for the historical injustices perpetrated against people of African descent in the United States (Brooks, 2020; Darity Jr. & Mullen, 2020; Hannah-Jones, 2019; Walker, 2021). Participants also endorsed civic insecurity due to the failure of the American government to enact substantial police reform policies despite evidence and protests against racial injustice (Aitken, 2021; Hewitt, 2021; Redbird & Albrecht, 2020).

Additionally, participants identified the extolling of American historic emblems, symbols, and iconography, like the flag, Independence Day, and the national anthem as offensive

to Black Americans as they are representative of oppression and White American nationalism (Andrea & Sheffield-Hayes, 2019; Demetriou & Wingo, 2018; Madriaga, 2005). The participants denied fostering any pride in being American and vocalized an aversion to celebrating the United States as a country (Carter & Perez, 2016; Flanagan et al., 2009). Some described the practice of doing so as off-putting and marginalizing.

Participants label the imposition of American Dream and related ideals, along with the subsequent pursuit necessary to achieve them, as being associated with emotional distress and dissonance among Black individuals and conducive to perpetuating racial oppression (David et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2016; Huguley et al., 2019; Odafe et al., 2017; Schmidt, 2005; Speight, 2007). The participants also made note of the increasingly caustic social climate in the United States, pointing out that the increased instances of nationalism, racism, and racial stress are adversely affecting Black Americans (Baker et al., 2020; Giroux, 2017, 2020, 2021; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021; Pulido, 2019). Participants' responses conveyed that their awareness of the American Dream underscores the present disparities and injustices along with the historical and ongoing struggles faced by Black Americans which creates a sense of dissonance and internal conflict with their American identities thus inhibiting the development of any congruence between their Black and American identities (Cross, 1991; Durkee et al., 2019; Forsyth et al., 2015; Young, 2003).

Implications for Theory and Practice

In addition to providing insight into the lived experiences and perspectives of Black or African American millennials, the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding their reality living in the United States yielded several significant clinical implications; chief among them is the need to address the psychological impact of systemic racism. The study participants

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noted the adverse effects nationalism, racism, racial stress, and racial disparities has on their daily lives.

Participants discussed the anxiety and discomfort they feel in response to the systemic barriers they encounter on a regular basis, with some stating that they feel like Black people are unwanted by the United States. Some participants also discussed the adverse impact that generational racial trauma has on how they navigate American life. This complex reality has facilitated an emotional bind that Black Americans experience in relation to their identities as Americans (Odafe et al., 2017; Sellers et al., 2011; Speight, 2007). Participants were able to unhesitatingly acknowledge both the bevy of privileges and grave disadvantages that they and other sub-groups of Black Americans encounter.

Their complex relationship with their American identity and the internal conflict experienced by these Black American millennials highlights the need for cultural sensitivity when interacting with this population. Their perceived exclusion from realizing American ideals due to systemic racism and historical injustices can result in emotional distress and dissonance (Durkee et al., 2019; Molina & James 2016; Mouzon & McLean, 2017; Young, 2003). This speaks to the need for the cultivation of safe and validating spaces where Black American millennials' lived experiences and aspirations of Black individuals can be recognized and validated, allowing for the exploration and integration of their multifaceted identities. Therapeutic interventions should also address racial trauma, promote coping strategies, and empower individuals to navigate and endure the caustic social climate they contend with in hopes of ultimately fostering mental resilience and well-being.

Participants also expressed feeling burdened within their identities as Black American millennials, indicating a sense of duty to their families and future generational cohorts.

Participants conveyed a sense of fidelity to their communities, with some noting that the privileges afforded to them because of prior generations' sacrifices made them feel obliged to work towards uplifting their racial group. Because of the sacrifices made to help them realize opportunities that past generations could not, they feel responsible for improving their living standards and achieving economic success not only for themselves, but also for future generations. Therapeutically, this understanding can serve as a source of hope and determination in their pursuit of a better future, helping them navigate setbacks and disparities.

Some participants cited their desires to elevate themselves and their communities as motivation to pursue higher education, viewing it as the most likely means of achieving their aspirations. Unfortunately, as a group they must grapple with significant challenges in the racial and generational wealth divide and the burden of student debt (Jones et al., 2020). Despite their increased levels of education, participants expressed concern that systemic barriers and a lack of social capital and financial literacy hinder their economic prospects. This highlights the need to address financial stressors through individualized action planning and the provision of resources to bolster financial literacy and promote economic empowerment among Black American millennials.

The rejection of the traditional American Dream in favor of their own ideals for success can also be an effective means of reckoning with the disadvantages they face as it promotes empowerment and identity development (Steffy, 2016; Zilberstein, 2023). However, the redefinition of success on their own terms reflects a need for therapeutic support in helping them navigate their aspirations and visions. While embracing alternative ideals of success can be helpful in fostering malleability and self-esteem, their pursuit can be mentally taxing, particularly pursuits centered on achieving social justice, equity, and empowerment in an unfavorable

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environment (Allen & Harris, 2018; Woods-Giscombé, 2010). As Black American millennials seek to challenge and dismantle systemic barriers, they require therapeutic interventions that facilitate the exploration of their alternative visions, promote resilience, and provide tools to affect positive change within themselves and their communities. The numerous needs of Black American millennials speak to the necessity for multidisciplinary collaboration across domains and the development of interventions that promote social justice (Fouad et al., 2006) and support the well-being and resilience of Black American millennials by addressing their unique needs and aspirations, facilitating personal growth, empowerment, and ultimately creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

Recommendations

In exploring the relationship between their realities as Black American millennials with the idyllic American Dream, the participants shared several notable insights and actionable recommendations to improve the lives of African American millennials in the United States. Their recommendations shed light on the key areas that require attention and change on the part of both Black millennials and stakeholders in their success, notably policy makers and community advocates, indicating the need for a collective effort in bridging the gap between the African American Dream and the Black American millennial reality.

From a policy making standpoint, the need for American government intervention regarding student loan debt relief was a common theme. As this is an issue that disproportionately affects African American millennials (Jones et al., 2020; Welbeck 2020), participants stressed the importance of addressing this issue as a means of leveling the playing field in the United States. Implementing measures to alleviate student loan debt can empower African American millennials economically and provide them with the ability to create a solid

foundation for their future (Ghaoui, 2020; Levenson, 2010). Participants also discussed the need to assuage the burden of the increasingly high cost of living as this issue impacts them disproportionately both as Black people and millennials (Albouy, 2016; Myers et al., 2020; Taylor 2020a). Participants recommended the implementation of policies to reduce financial barriers and provide access to affordable basic needs like food, housing, healthcare, and mental health services. By addressing these issues, the quality of life for Black American millennials and subsequent generations can be improved, enabling them to thrive and contribute to society. Participants also recommended that community leaders do more to promote financial literacy within Black communities. Additionally, some participants charged Black American millennials to do more themselves to increase their financial literacy, extoling the benefits it has had in their lives, and noted the increased access to such knowledge due to the proliferation of related information on the internet.

Addressing gentrification was also a critical concern for the study's participants as they noted its role in displacing Black communities. Their inability to prevent outside businesses from entering their communities has taken away economic opportunities from Black people and siphoned economic capital out of their communities leading to decline (Chronopoulos, 2016; Yonto & Thill, 2020). Participants recommended the implementation of policies and initiatives focused on preventing external entities from exploiting their community's resources with a focus instead on supporting local Black entrepreneurs and encouraging the growth of Black businesses within Black communities. Participants also emphasized the importance of Black millennials being centered at the forefront of these efforts and being role models for younger generations as they pursue economic empowerment in their communities.

Additionally, the study's participants recognized the need for increased engagement with mental health support for African American millennials. They recommended that increased utilization and accessibility to culturally competent mental health services be prioritized amongst Black millennials (Cofield, 2022; Woods-Giscombe et al., 2016; Yeazel, 2015). They cited the need for Black millennials to address their unique challenges; most crucially among them, intergenerational trauma. By providing the necessary resources, African American millennials can overcome the effects of trauma and develop resilience and a positive self-image which is vital for their personal success. Participants also pointed to community support and engagement as a means of improving mental health outcomes amongst Black American millennials (Brown, 2008; Wilkins et al., 2013). Participants shared the positive impact that engaging with their communities has had on their lives particularly with social media which some participants acknowledged as being a great resource while some also noted its disadvantages. Participants recommended that Black millennials do their part in fostering a sense of community amongst themselves by sharing experiences, ideas, and struggles, thereby combatting feelings of isolation and self-doubt and cultivating a sense of belonging.

Along with developing community amongst themselves, participants recommended that Black American millennials be more active in representing their communities in the political domain by being more civically engaged. Some participants noted how apathy on the part of Black millennials has and will continue to impede their progress in the United States (Matthews, 2018) as it reinforces an antiquated system that participants noted no longer works for them because it is not representative of their ideals or their communities. Participants expressed that active political involvement is essential for African American millennials to shape their reality. They emphasized the importance of Black American millennials increasing their participation in

elections, running for political office, and advocating for policies that address systemic

inequalities most notably those in the education system. The study participants emphasized the

need for Black millennials to advocate for increased funding and improved educational facilities

and resources in Black communities, including better teachers and early career pipelines so that

future generations have comparable opportunities for personal growth and professional success

to their White counterparts (Nam, 2020). By engaging in the political process, African American

millennials can have a direct impact on policies that shape their lives and contribute to positive

social change for future generations (Cheng, 2017). Furthermore, participants strongly

recommended increased racial and gender diversity in American government to improve

representation and diversify leadership to ensure that the voices of underrepresented Americans,

like Black millennials, are heard and respected.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include some that are inherent in a qualitative design

including the lack of generalizability of the findings as fifteen participants are far from sufficient

in being representative of the broader population. The participants' characteristics, such as

socioeconomic status, education level, or geographic location is not reflective of diversity within

this group, therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to the entire population.

Additionally, self-selection bias may have played a role in limiting generalizability as those who

choose to participate may have specific characteristics or experiences that differ from those who

decline to participate.

The inclusion criteria also may have narrowed the range of experiences and perspectives

captured in the study. The requirement that participants have at least a bachelor's degree, be

currently or recently employed, and possess proficient English and computer literacy skills

excluded individuals who do not meet these criteria but may also have invaluable perspectives and insights on the topic. Social desirability bias is another concern. Participants may have felt compelled to present themselves in a favorable light or conform to within-group expectations, particularly when discussing sensitive topics like disenfranchisement. This bias may have influenced the accuracy and authenticity of the data collected.

Another limitation of this type of research is the potential impact of historical factors that exist outside of the interview setting for each participant such as socioeconomic background, societal pressures, or global and local events. Moreover, the study's cross-sectional design limits the understanding of how the experiences of Black American Millennials have and will evolve over time. By not considering the historical and developmental context of these individuals, the study may have missed important insights into the changes and challenges Black American millennials have faced and responded to during their lives. Another factor worth considering is the role participants' gender plays in their perspectives and experiences. Participants' intersectionality complexly shapes their experiences. For example, some female participants discussed the unique forms of oppression and intersectional discrimination which has affected their perceptions of disenfranchisement in the United States differently compared to Black men. Regarding intersectionality, another participant spoke about how his religious beliefs and sexual identity shapes how he presents himself and how he is perceived in the United States.

The positionality of the interviewer may have also served as a limitation to the quality of data received. As an identified out-group member with an adjacent lived experience as a Black millennial living and working in the United States, participants may have felt the need to limit sharing their experience. On the other hand, participants may have seen the interviewer as an in-group member despite disclosures otherwise and assumed that the researcher identified fully with

their reality. Thus, participants may have assumed a shared understanding and omitted important details regarding their experiences.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, conducting qualitative interviews virtually was seen as an efficient and pragmatic means of collecting qualitative data as it is cost-effective and convenient, and it allows researchers to reach a wider array of diverse potential participants (Gray et al., 2020). Despite it being divergent from the traditional and empirically supported method of face-to-face qualitative interviews (Ponterotto, 2005), researchers have found that virtual interview participants can be more open and expressive, particularly when they are aware that their interviewer is interacting with them from another state or city, thus lowering the likelihood of an in-person encounter (Mabragana et al., 2013). Despite its merits, collecting qualitative data via virtual means can also serve as a hindrance, not solely because of the potential technical difficulties, but because it can alter both researcher and participant behavior. Some authors have noted a contrast between how participants and researchers would behave if the interview was conducted in person compared to virtually (Curasi, 2001; Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Virtual interviews also inhibit the researcher's ability to observe the interviewees' whole body and identify body language cues and other possible physical reactions to the interview process occurring outside of the web camera's view.

Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study can be built upon to further advance the understanding of the lived experiences of Black American Millennials and their aspirations in relation to the American Dream and other American ideals. Given the purpose of this study and its limitations, future research geared towards exploring the lived experiences African American millennials and their perspectives on their American reality can consider several directions in order to increase

understanding of this population. The first would be to increase the diversity of the sample. This could be done by having a more inclusive criteria that encompasses a wider range of experiences within the Black American Millennial population. By avoiding the exclusion of individuals who do not meet specific educational or employment requirements, future researchers can recruit participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds, educational levels, and geographic locations, ensuring a more comprehensive exploration and understanding of Black American millennial experiences and perspectives. This could enhance the generalizability of the findings and allow more voices to be heard that may have otherwise been neglected.

Another possible area for future research could be exploring the impact of intersectionality and how it shapes this population's perspectives or further influences their response to living within the American context. Futhermore, exploring the role of identities like gender, socioeconomic status, religion, and sexual orientation could create insight into the interactions between social identities and their influence on Black millennials' American experience. Quantitative measures could also be integrated for a mixed methods approach. The integration of methods can provide a more nuanced analysis and allow for statistical comparisons, strengthening the robustness of the research and shedding light on the complex interplay between various dimensions of identity as well as the experiences and factors influencing how they navigate their American reality.

Additionally, future research could focus on other American racial or ethnic group, and generational cohorts, most notably Black Americans born between 1997 and 2012 who identify as belonging to Generation Z (Dimock, 2019). Immigrants to America should be studied as well, particularly those of African descent as their rate of immigration to the United States is expected to increase over the next several decades (Tamir & Anderson, 2022). The concept of the

American Dream and the pursuit of American ideals are a crucial part of the immigrant experience (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Mahler, 1995). It is vital that immigrants' unique lived experiences and culture be highlighted rather than grouped together within a larger sub-group as their distinct realities being overlooked or misunderstood could have adverse implications (Johnson, 2016; Pierre, 2004). Within the American context, immigrant sub-groups also contend with the pursuit of American ideals and they experience them to varying degrees.

Black millennials in other countries can be studied as well to explore cohort effects and their impact on their perspectives related to their home countries. Furthermore, comparative analyses can be conducted to compare the experiences of Black American Millennials with those of other American racial or ethnic groups and Black generational cohorts, like Generation Z, as well as across nationalities. A comparative approach can provide cross-cultural perspectives and shed light on the unique challenges and disparities faced by Black American Millennials compared to other related sub-groups. More specifically, it can provide insight and help identify factors that contribute to the disparities, such as the impact of national policies and systems. Another alternative research approach would be conducting a longitudinal study with this population to capture the developmental trajectories and changes in the experiences of Black American Millennials over time. A longitudinal approach can provide a rich understanding of the evolving dynamics between Black American millennials and their American realities while accounting for historical context and individual change over time in consideration of the various factors like employment and social policies that affect them.

Lastly, future research can be geared towards informing community interventions or public policy. Future researchers can collaborate with political or community organizations to develop research questions and methodologies grounded in the lived experiences and priorities of

a target group of Black American millennials, thus fostering improved understanding and leading

to more direct and impactful findings. The implications of such a study can inform policy

development, intervention strategies, and advocacy efforts for change that addresses systemic

barriers and disenfranchisement faced by Black American Millennials. This can subsequently

contribute to creating evidence-based solutions and improving the outcomes for this population

as well as facilitate positive social change and promote more equitable opportunities for them,

and future generations of Black Americans.

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APPENDIX A

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
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April 4, 2023

Simon Miller
Seton Hall University

Re: Study ID# 2023-422

Dear Simon,

The Research Ethics Committee of the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved your research proposal entitled "The African American Dream Deferred: Exploring the Relationship Between the "American Dream" and the Black American Millennial Reality " as resubmitted. This memo serves as official notice of the aforementioned study's approval as exempt. Enclosed for your records are the stamped original Consent Form and recruitment flyer. You can make copies of these forms for your use.

The Institutional Review Board approval of your research is valid for a one-year period from the date of this letter. During this time, any changes to the research protocol, informed consent form or study team must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to their implementation.

You will receive a communication from the Institutional Review Board at least 1 month prior to your expiration date requesting that you submit an Annual Progress Report to keep the study active, or a Final Review of Human Subjects Research form to close the study. In all future correspondence with the Institutional Review Board, please reference the ID# listed above.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Phyllis Hansell
Phyllis Hansell, EdD, RN, DNAP, FAAN
Professor
Co-Chair, Institutional Review Board

Office of the Institutional Review Board
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Informed Consent Document

Title of Research Study: The African American Dream Deferred: Exploring the Relationship Between the "American Dream" and the Black American Millennial Reality.

Primary Investigator's Affiliation: Simon Miller is a student in the Counseling Psychology PhD program, Seton Hall University.

Department Affiliation: Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University

Sponsor: This research is supported by the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy in the College of Education at Seton Hall University.

Brief summary about this research study:

The following summary of this research study is to help you decide whether or not you want to participate in the study. You have the right to ask questions at any time.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of Black American Millennial. This study will explore the possible influence that multiple identities and associated feelings as millennials and African Americans have on their well-being, sense of national pride, and belief in their ability to achieve the American Dream.

You will be asked to complete a demographic form, and an interview via Doxy.me software. Interviews are expected to last 60 to 90 minutes, and you will be asked to review the transcript for accuracy. We expect that you will be in this research study for a total of about two hours, over a period of 2-3 weeks.

The primary risk of participation is loss of confidentiality, in the unlikely event that someone recognizes your story, or that data transmitted via the internet is breached. The main benefit of participation is that you will contribute to the shallow body of literature related to the Black Millennial experience in the United States.

Purpose of Research:

You are being asked to take part in this research study because you identify as an American-born and raised Black millennial (including African, Afro-Caribbean, or African American), U.S. citizen and current resident, born between 1981 and 1996, have graduated from high school, and are either currently or recently employed. Your participation in this research study is expected to be for a total of about two hours, over approximately a 2-3 week period. You will be one of 12-15 people who are expected to participate in this research study.

What you will be asked to do:

Your participation in this research study will include the following steps:

1.   If you agree to participate in this study, you will also be asked to sign the informed consent document and return it to the primary investigator, Simon Miller, and to complete the demographic questionnaire (which asks questions such as your age, gender, occupation, and income level) online.

2.   After you complete the demographic and consent forms, a virtual interview will then be scheduled with the primary investigator (Simon Miller). Scheduling will be done through email.

3.   You will participate in a one-time interview. The length of the interview will range from 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will take place on Doxy.me software, and can be done in a confidential and quiet location that you deem appropriate. Please be advised that audio from the interview will be recorded on a separate audio recording device. These recordings will be used solely for the use of later transcription. The interview will focus on your experience of being a Black American Millennial who currently lives in the U.S. You will be allowed to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, and you can withdraw your consent to participate at any time during the interview. The following are some examples of questions asked:

    a. What does it mean to you to be American?

    b. How would you describe your sense of pride in being an American?

    c. Describe your feelings related to your social position in America, as well as other African American millennials.

    d. Have you heard the term "American Dream" before?

        i. How well does your idea of the American Dream align with your current reality?

    e. What things, if any do you think should be done to improve life for African American millennials in the United States?

4. After the interview is complete, you will receive a $25 Visa gift card.

5. After individual interviews are transcribed, the primary investigator will send the transcript to you to review the accuracy of the transcription, and offer you the opportunity to omit or elaborate on anything said during the interview. You will also have the opportunity to request the excerpts from the interview be omitted from any publications or presentations. The principal investigator may also ask your permission to include specific things you shared in the results of the study. All data will be de-identified for data analysis purposes and data storage.

Right to participate, say no, or withdraw:

Participation in research is voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate. You can choose to participate in the research study now and then decide to leave the research at any time. Your choice will not be held against you.

The person in charge of the research study can remove you from the research study without your approval. Possible reasons for removal include missing study visits, non-compliance with the study procedures.

Potential benefit:

There may be no direct benefit to you from this study. However, possible benefits may include having the opportunity to share your lived experiences and provide insight related to your unique reality as a Black American Millennial. This may provide increased insight and understanding of the lived experiences of Black or African American millennials, and how the imposition of antiquated American Ideals (like the American Dream) influences their beliefs or sense of being American.

Potential risks:

The risks associated with this study are minimal in nature. Your participation in this research may include a breach of confidentiality, and/or experiencing negative emotions when discussing your experiences. Your participation in this research may include risk to privacy due to audio recording of interviews. Although every measure will be taken to ensure confidentiality, there is always a risk that it may be breached.

If you experience significant distress, please inform the research team immediately. If this happens, possible options will include taking a break, postponing the interview, or ending the interview.

If you experience great distress, you can find a mental health provider using the American Psychological Association psychologist finder at https://locator.apa.org/, by calling the National Crisis Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

Confidentiality and privacy:

Efforts will be made to limit the use or disclosure of participants' personal information. This information may include the research study documents or other source documents used for the purpose of conducting the study. These documents may include the demographic questionnaire and this informed consent form. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that oversee research safety may inspect and copy your information. This includes the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board who oversees the safe and ethical conduct of research at this institution.

This survey is being hosted by Doxy.me and involves a secure connection. Terms of service, addressing confidentiality, may be viewed at https://doxy.me/en/terms-of-service/. Upon receiving results of your survey, any possible identifiers will be deleted by the investigator. You will be identified only by a unique subject number. Your email address, which may be used to contact you to schedule a study visit will be stored separately from your questionnaire data. All information will be kept in a password protected One Drive folder and an encrypted flash drive.

The One Drive folder will only accessible by the research team, and the flash drive will only be accessible to the primary investigator, Simon Miller. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Data sharing: Data collected from this study will not be shared with anyone outside of the study team.

Cost and compensation:

You will not be responsible for any of the costs or expenses associated with your participation in this study. If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be paid $25 at the completion of your interview for your time and effort. You may choose to receive payment by either being mailed or emailed a $25 Visa gift card.

Conflict of interest disclosure: The principal investigator and members of the study team have no financial conflicts of interest to report.

Contact information:

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this research project, you can contact the primary investigator, Simon Miller (simonleigh.miller@student.shu.edu). Simon's faculty research advisor, Dr. Pamela Foley can also be contacted (Pamela.Foley@shu.edu or 973-275-2742), or the Seton Hall University Institutional Review Board ("IRB") (irb@shu.edu or 973-761-9334).

Audio recordings will be performed as part of the research study. Please indicate your permission to participate in this activity by writing your initials.

I agree   I disagree

_____   _____   The researcher may record my audio interview. In understand this is done to help with data collection and analysis. The researcher will not share these recordings with anyone outside of the study team.

I hereby consent to participate in this research study.

_____   _____

  Signature of participant   Date

_____

Printed name of participant

_____   _____

Signature of person obtaining consent   Date

_____

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Pre-Screening Questionnaire

Please complete the following information, remembering that we cannot identify anyone with this data.

1.   How do you identify yourself racially?
  _____Black/African American
  _____West Indian/Afro-Caribbean
  _____Afro-Latinx
  _____African
  _____Asian
  _____ Indian/South Asian
  _____White
  _____Hispanic/Latinx
  _____Indigenous American
  _____Biracial/Multiracial (Specify: _____)
  _____Other (Specify: _____)

2.   What year were you born?
  _____1976 or before
  _____1977 - 1980
  _____1981- 1984
  _____1985 - 1988
  _____1989 - 1992
  _____ 1993 - 1996
  _____1997- 2000
  _____2001 or after

3.   Are you a United States citizen?: ___ Yes ___ No

4.   Were you born in the United States?: ___ Yes ___ No

5.   Are you currently living in the United States: ___ Yes ___ No

6.   Do you have a high school diploma or an equivalency (for e.g. GED)? ___ Yes ___ No

7.   Are you currently working in the United States: ___ Yes ___ No
a.   If not, how long has it been since you last worked? _____ less than a year
        _____ more than a year

Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the following information, remembering that we cannot identify anyone with this data.

1.   Current Age: _____

2.   Birth Year: _____

3.   Gender: _____

4.   In which region were you raised? (You can select more than one if applicable)
      _____Northeast
      _____Southeast
      _____Midwest
      _____Southeast
      _____West

5.   In which region do you currently reside?
      _____Northeast
      _____Southeast
      _____Midwest
      _____Southeast
      _____West

6.   What is your highest level of education?
      _____Some High School
      _____High School Diploma
      _____Some College
      _____Associates Degree
      _____Professional Certificate
      _____Bachelor's Degree
      _____Master's Degree
      _____Doctoral Degree

7.   Do you currently, or have you previously, owed student debt? ___ Yes ___ No

8.   What is your current or most recent occupation _____

9.   Which of these describes your personal income last year:
      _____ Less than $25,000
      _____ $25,000 - $50,000
      _____ $50,000 - $100,000
      _____ $100,000 - $200,000
      _____ More than $200,000
      _____Would rather not say

APPENDIX E

Interview Protocol

1. <u>Experience as an African/Black American</u>
   a. In terms of your race/ethnicity/nationality, how do you prefer to be identified? (American/African American/Black etc.)
      i. Please elaborate on why you prefer to identify yourself this way.
   b. Other than citizenship, what do you think makes someone American?
   c. Who is someone you think of as representative of America?
      i. Why?
      ii. Do you identify with this person?
   d. What does it mean to you to be American?
      i. Other than your citizenship, in what ways if any, do you feel like an American?
      ii. Are there any ways in which you don't feel like an American? If so, please describe them.
   e. As a Black person in America, has your feelings and understanding regarding being American changed over time?
      i. How does it feel to acknowledge these thoughts and/or emotions?
   f. How would you describe your sense of pride in being an American?
   g. How do you feel about the American symbols like national anthem and Independence Day? (possible probe: are these things that you celebrate or admire?)
2. <u>Black Millennial Experience</u>
   a. How do you think your identity as a Black or African American millennial impacts:
      i. How you navigate in American society?
      ii. How you view American society as a whole?
   b. How do you think your identity as a Black or African American millennial influences how you are perceived in American society?
   c. Describe your feelings related to your social position in America, as well as other African American millennials.
3. <u>Exploring Possible Difference in Realities</u>
   a. Have you heard the term "American Dream" before?
      i. How would you describe it?
      ii. How well does your idea of the American Dream align with your current reality?
         ➢ If not well, is this something you are striving to achieve?
      iii. To what extent do you feel capable of achieving the American Dream?
   b. Does American dominant culture, principles, or values align with your current reality as a Black or African American millennial? (possible probe: these could be things you've seen, learned about in school or at work, or heard anecdotally)
      i. How do they compare to your own culture, values, or principles?
4. <u>Wrap Up</u>
   a. What things, if any do you think should be done to improve life for African American millennials in the United States?

b. What things, if any do you think African American millennials should do to improve their lives in the United States?
c. Is there anything that we did not discuss that you were hoping to discuss during our meeting?

Appendix F

Table 1

Patterns of Shared Meaning and Themes

Patterns of Shared Meaning	Themes
I. The American Dream is a White Myth	A. American Dream is unrealistic for Black people B. Rejection of the American Dream C. Defining the Dream for themselves
II. "Unalienable rights" are not applied Equally	D. American ideal of liberty as a human right is not applied impartially E. The pursuit of Happiness is not meritocratic F. American lives are not all treated equally
III. Black Millennials Identify as a Pivotal Generation	G. Bearing generational burdens (using foundation of the past to build the future) H. Liberal Expression and Exploration of Black Identity I. Sense of duty to strive for success despite hurdles
IV. American Dream highlights disparities in American Reality	J. Hyperawareness regarding Social Injustices and disparities K. White and Black Americans exist in separate realities L. Systemic racism inhibits American identity development
V. Internal conflict with American Reality	M. Internal conflict identifying as American N. Pride in Diverse Identities Oppositional to American Pride O. Civic Insecurity

Appendix G

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Pseudonyms	Racial /Ethnic Identity	Birth Year	Age (at time of interview)	Gender	Highest Level of Education	Student Debt Currently Owed	Occupation Field	Income
Audre	Black	1993	30	Female	Master's	Yes	Higher Education	$50,000 - $100,000
Ruby	Black	1988	35	Female	Master's	Yes	Social Services	$50,000 - $100,000
Martin	Black / Caribbean American	1982	40	Male	Master's	Yes	Project Management	$100,000 - $200,000
Stacey	Black	1990	32	Female	Master's	Yes	School Therapist	$50,000 - $100,000
Coretta	Black	1993	29	Female	Master's	No	School Counselor	$50,000 - $100,000
Maya	Black	1989	34	Female	Master's	Yes	Project Management (formerly)	$50,000 - $100,000
Harriet	Black Am.	1993	29	Female	Master's	Yes	Human Resources	$25,000 - $50,000
Ella	Nigerian	1996	27	Female	Doctorate	Yes	Therapist	$25,000 - $50,000
Malcolm	Black	1992	30	Male	Master's	Yes	Higher Education	$50,000 - $100,000
Frederick	Black	1981	41	Male	Master's	Yes	Social Services	$50,000 - $100,000
James	Black/ Ghanaian	1987	35	Male	Bachelor's	No	Finance	$50,000 - $100,000

Angela	African American	1992	30	Female	Bachelor's	Yes	Insurance and Civil Services	$50,000 - $100,000
Ida	Black / Haitian American	1993	29	Female	Bachelor's	Yes	Information Technology	$25,000 - $50,000
Dorothy	Black / Caribbean American	1991	31	Female	Master's	Yes	Social Services	$25,000 - $50,000
Rosa	Black	1987	36	Female	Master's	Yes	Finance (formerly)	$50,000 - $100,000