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**AND STILL THEY RISE:
College Enrollment of African American females
from low income communities**

by

Eunice Matthews

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York**

1997

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1/29/97
Date

William Kornblum
Chair of Examining Committee

1/30/97
Date

Kulia Wrigley
Executive Officer

William Kornblum

Raymond Franklin

Setsukum Nishi

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

ABSTRACT**AND STILL THEY RISE: COLLEGE ENROLLMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
FEMALES FROM LOW INCOME COMMUNITIES**

by

Eunice Matthews

Adviser: Professor William Kornblum

This is a qualitative study of seven African American women ages 17 to 21, from low income communities around the New York Metropolitan area, all of whom completed high school, and some of whom enrolled in a four year college. The study examined participants' perceptions of relevant aspects of their social world (family, peer group, school environment, and community) as they relate to their ability to take action to enroll in college. Utilizing a comparative case study approach, examining the life histories of these young women, themes were identified which appeared to distinguish those young women who enrolled in college from those young women who did not. Based on these distinctions, conclusions regarding the significance of the themes in relation to college enrollment were developed.

This researcher developed a model, the African American Women's Journey to enrollment (AAWJE), depicting the factors that appear significant in regards to these young women's ability to take action toward college enrollment. The findings of this study point to the pattern of perceptions regarding how they view themselves, how they

view themselves in relationships with others, and how they view themselves in the context of their social environment. These perceptions interact in the context of the reciprocal relationship between the individual and their social environment to create a powerful source of motivation which assists them in reaching a risk taking stage. It is when they reach the risk taking stage that they appear able to take action toward enrollment and information about college becomes useful and efforts at encouragement effective.

Information and encouragement prior to reaching this stage appears to be of limited impact. However, to complete their journey to enrollment structural opportunities such as financial aid, and liberal admissions policies on the part of college institutions must be in place.

The results of this study may be useful for those interested in college recruitment and retention programs. With the increased significance of education and professional certification, our continued discussion and exploration of this topic becomes critical to the economic and psychological viability of African American women in their endeavor to escape poverty.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Graduation from high school marks a critical turning point in the lives of the graduates. The decisions they make regarding post secondary school plans will likely set the direction for their futures. In today's economy of decreasing employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector and an increased emphasis on credentials, a college education becomes important in terms of future employment opportunities (Karsardas, 1989). The decision to attend college, followed by the action of enrollment, can be viewed as a major step that enhances the possibility of upward mobility for individuals growing up in low-income communities.

There exists a population of young African American women from low-income communities who complete high school and enroll in a four-year college virtually unnoticed by the intellectual community and the general population. These young women are not among the conventionally talented teens, nor have they demonstrated outstanding academic abilities. Their accomplishments during their high school years would not likely make the headlines. Traditionally, a supportive family system, a peer group which shares similar values about education and occupational goals, and a responsive school environment have been identified as major determinants for positive educational outcomes. According to previous research on educational outcomes, these young women would not be among those whose college enrollment would have been predicted. Their family

interactive patterns, peer group relationships, and school environments differ from those described in the literature as promoting positive educational outcomes (Clark, 1983; Clark, 1991; Jenkins, 1989; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991). Still, these young African American women are able to rise up and take the first step toward upward mobility and enroll in college. How these unlikely candidates for success manage such an achievement is the focus of this study.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS STUDY

The objective of this study is to gain insight into the process by which African American young women who are not among the conventionally talented teens come to take action toward college enrollment from their perspective. This study brings to the attention of the intellectual community the strengths and skills of a group of African American young women who are often overlooked and gives them a voice, through the telling of their stories, which was previously silenced by neglect.

Much of the existing research on scholastic achievement among low-income African American students has focused on the issues of poor academic performance and negative educational outcomes. Researchers have typically emphasized the pathology of this population by concentrating their efforts on the identification of risk factors (poverty, inadequate educational institutions, family disorganization, etc.) and the documentation of the adverse effects that these risk factors have on adolescent educational attainment such as high dropout rates, teen pregnancy, and poor academic achievement (Norman, Turner, and Zunz, 1994). This research perspective has seemingly ignored the strengths and skills

found among members of this population, overlooking the reality that not all adolescents living under these conditions experience negative school outcomes (Clark, 1991; Garnezy, 1993; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994).

There exists today an intellectual void within the research literature which leaves the impression that all African Americans are men and all women are White (Hull, Scott, Bell, and Smith, 1982). The struggles and successes of African American women remain, for the most part, unexamined by the intellectual community. Low-income African American women are forced to function within various systems of oppression -racism, sexism, classism- which operate simultaneously to effect their life outcomes. The circumstances of low-income African American women are unique and require recognition and further examination (Beale, 1970; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; James & Busia, 1993).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study incorporates both the concept of resilience and the ecological perspective to understand how the interaction of forces in their social environment of African American women from low income communities influences their ability to take action toward college enrollment.

Over the past two decades there has been an upsurge in interest in the concept of resilience. This interest has resulted in a shift in emphasis away from a focus on deficits to one on coping. The resiliency construct examines individual variation in people's responses to factors of risk, stress, and adversity. The concept of resilience encourages the recognition that some individuals are able to cope successfully under seemingly

devastating circumstance. The resiliency researchers reframed the question from asking what puts individuals at greater risk of experiencing a negative outcome to how do individuals obtain a positive outcome despite the adversities they face (Garmezy, 1993; Norman et al., 1994; Winfield, 1991; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994).

Researchers have tended to examine the impact of particular domains of influence or types of social relationships on resilient behavior separately, as if the family, peer group, or other external social systems do not impact on each other. Much of the research in the area of resilience has focused on how the family system is able to encourage or discourage the development of resilient behavior in the area of educational attainment (Garmezy, 1991; Norman et al., 1994). Other studies explored alternative single domains of influence such as peer relations and school environment (Clark, 1991; Taylor, 1991; Winfield, 1991), and community and other adult relationships (Nettles, 1991). In reality, however, the social world of the individual is a complex system within which the various social systems interact with each other and have an impact on each other.

Research has shown that the individual's family system impacts how the individual chooses and relates to peers and that peer relationships of adolescents can influence the parental relationship (Mitchell & Tricket, 1980). It has also been found that, if the school is successful in creating an appropriate environment, it can offset the effects of dysfunction in the family (Garmezy, 1991) and can influence the types of peer relationships that develop within the school environment (Clark, 1991). In addition, interactive patterns within the family have been found to offset the negative influences often associated with living in a low-income community (Clark, 1983). Thus, in order to gain an understanding

of resilience among African American women in the area of educational attainment, it becomes important to examine the variety of social systems in concert that make up their social world, which is a perspective that is missing in the resilience literature.

The ecological perspective assists in addressing this weakness in the resilience literature. This perspective incorporates the importance of the individual by considering the individual's impact on the environment and on the individual's own perceptions. The ecological perspective suggests that the researcher look to the complex interactions between the individual and the various levels of the social system in order to gain a better understanding of human behavior. This perspective also emphasizes the importance of exploring the meaning the individual assigns to those interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, and Buriel, 1990).

The Black Feminist's identification of the unique circumstances of the African American women as being victims of multiple systems of oppression and their concern with making her visible to the intellectual community gave this study a population on which to focus its inquiry (Beale, 1970; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; Hull et al., 1982). The resilience literature was instrumental in the formulation of the question for this research study. It provided a framework for the discussion of strengths and adaptive strategies utilized by the young women of this study in their efforts to take action toward college enrollment. The ecological perspective focused the attention of this study on the interactive processes that take place between the individual and her environment and how aspects of the larger social context impact upon her behavior. The discussion among these theorists converge to form the theoretical framework for this study.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

With the changes in the economy and the increased significance of education and professional certification, enrolling in college becomes critical to the economic and psychological viability of African American women in their endeavors to escape from poverty. Understanding ways that women, families, schools, communities, and government can promote college enrollment among African American young women is important to all segments of society. The descriptive case study data of the participants of this study can assist us in better understanding the factors that impact positively on the ability of African American young women who grew up in low-income communities to enroll in college. The findings of this study can provide additional direction to programs which are concerned with college recruitment, enrollment, and college retention of African American young women from low-income communities. In addition, this study can serve to encourage the continued discussion and exploration of this topic by providing information from which hypotheses for future research can be generated.

CHAPTER TWO

RESEARCH DESIGN

INTRODUCTION

This study addresses the question of how young African American women from low income communities manage to beat the odds and enroll in a four year college. The study focuses on understanding the process involved in moving from high school to college for a small group of young African American women and, those social factors which they perceived as having an impact upon the process. This chapter describes the research method utilized to address this research question.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. How do young African American women from low income communities move from high school to college?
2. What was the perceived impact of their social relationships, social environment, and social status as African American women, on their ability to enroll in college?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilized the comparative case study approach. The comparative case study approach involves carefully selecting a group of people with common attributes such as age, general background, ethnicity, etc., and yet treating each member of the group as an individual. The groups similarities enables the researcher to look for subtle differences as well as possible common themes. The comparative case study is an extension of the individual case study (Hamel, 1993).

The case study approach has long served as an important tool for understanding human behavior. The case study approach recognizes the importance of placing meaning to action. A basic assumption in case studies is that the meaning people apply to their experience affects the way they carry out their behavior (Hamel, 1993; Sediman, 1991).

Howard Becker states:

To understand an individual's behavior, we must know how he perceives the situation, the obstacles he believed he had to face, the alternatives he saw opening up to him. We can not understand the effects of the range of possibilities, delinquent subcultures, social norms, and other explanations of behavior which are community invoked, unless we consider them from the actor's point of view (Becker, 1977, p.64, cited in Hamel, 1993, p. 17).

Becker highlights the importance of the subject's perspective. Therefore, given the purpose of this study, the use of the comparative case study approach appears to be an appropriate methodological choice.

SAMPLE SELECTION

In qualitative research, the sample size is typically small for the aim is for depth, to maximize information, not to facilitate generalizations. The participants were engaged in the study through the use of referrals and professional contacts. Each of the participants were informed of the purpose of the study and agreed to participate. Consent forms were signed by the participants (See Appendix).

Criteria For Selection

The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. They identify themselves as African American women who are descendants of the Africans who existed in the United States before or during slavery,
2. they are between seventeen and twenty two years of age,

3. they grew up in a low income community in the New York Metropolitan area,
4. neither of their parents graduated from college,
5. they are from a low socio-economic background.
6. they completed high school,
7. and they were not referred to any college preparatory program by any school official.

Profile Of The Respondents

The names of the participants were changed to protect their identities. To minimize confusion as we engage in the discussion of the data, the young women who enrolled in college were assigned names beginning with "C", and those who took no action toward college enrollment were assigned names beginning with "N". Those who enrolled in college were Cori, Charity, Carla, Candy, and Carol. Those who took no action toward college enrollment were Nancy and Neda.

This study originally involved eight African American Women from low income communities, four who enrolled in college and four who had not taken action toward college enrollment. However, during the course of data collection, one participant who took no action toward enrollment moved away during the interview process and was not available for follow up consultations. Due to her unavailability, she was dropped from the study. Another young woman, Carol, who initially took no action toward college enrollment, took action toward enrollment during the interviewing process. She is expected to attend school in the fall of 1996. These changes in the participants situations made the participant grouping five who enrolled in college and two who did not take action toward enrollment. Due to the fact that the changes from the original groupings took place during the later stages of the process and the fact that this study does not focus on statistical issues, it was decided to proceed with the current participant groups.

The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 21 at the onset of the study: Cori age 19, Charity age 21, Carla age 18, Candy age 21, Carol age 17, Nancy age 18, Neda age 17. All the young women were raised in low income single parent female-headed households. None of the young women had children. The young women varied in terms of birth order: Charity and Nancy are the oldest of two children, Carol is the third eldest of seven, Neda is the middle child of five, Candy is the second to youngest of five, Carla is the youngest of three, and Cori is an only child.

In regards to educational accomplishments, all the participants completed high school. With the exception of Nancy and Candy who graduated with a "B" average, the participants' academic performances were marginal at best with them barely passing most of their classes. Charity was a senior in college at the onset of this study. Candy was a junior. Carla, Cori, and Carol were expected to enter their freshman year in college. None of the young women were referred by any school official to any sort of college preparatory program.

DATA COLLECTION

The qualitative interview was the investigative tool utilized in this study. The qualitative interview is defined as "A purposeful conversation usually between two people that is directed by one in order to get information from the other" (Bogan & Bilken, 1982, p. 96). The major purpose of the qualitative interview is to learn to see the world from the eyes of the person being interviewed (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Gardner, and Steinmetz, 1991).

The interview process began during the fall of 1994 and continued until the early part of 1996. With the exception of Nancy, the interviews with the participants were conducted in local restaurants to balance participant convenience while at the same time ensuring privacy and limited interruptions. Nancy's interviews were conducted in her home while no one was there. Cori and Candy, the first two participants, were seen three

times for a little more than eight hours total for each of them. The remainder of the participants were seen twice for a total of between four to six hours. As the interviewing process progressed, it became more efficient. The interviews were taped and transcribed word for word by this researcher. Following each interview, the researcher also took notes. The researcher prepared for the subsequent interviews by reviewing notes and transcripts from the previous interviews. In addition, there were periodic telephone conversations for the purpose of gathering additional information.

The interviews entailed asking open-ended questions which allowed participants to answer from their own frame of reference. Initially, questions were broad "grand tour" questions that sought general information (Spradley, 1979); later the questions became more focused. The intention was to allow the questions to emerge from the process through the recursive study of interview transcripts and field logs. The participants were full partners in the process rather than subjects for examination. They guided this researcher through their life stories, highlighting the events and images that they felt were significant in relation to their post secondary school plans. The major areas of focus were family, peer group, educational experiences, and community.

DATA ANALYSIS

In analyzing the data, this researcher followed the principles of grounded theory as developed by Glasier and Strauss (1970) and elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Data derived from the interview transcripts were analyzed inductively to formulate themes and theories to describe and explain the phenomenon under study. An open and selective coding procedure was utilized. The final analysis involved a synthesis of all categories and themes developed through the recursive process established during coding. The synthesized data was transformed into narrative profiles on each study participant which were used for comparison. The participants remained involved in the process until the final draft of the document was written. The researcher contacted them for the purpose of

which were used for comparison. The participants remained involved in the process until the final draft of the document was written. The researcher contacted them for the purpose of verifying conclusions drawn from the data in order to minimize researcher bias and assure the trustworthiness of the data.

STANCE OF THE RESEARCHER

In qualitative research, the researcher is part of the research process. The way the participants respond to the researcher, the kind of information the participants share, how the data is interpreted, and even the choice of topic to be studied, is all influenced by the identity and experiences of the researcher. Thus, it is important that the qualitative researcher be forthcoming with who she is and from where her interest in the topic comes. By so doing, the researcher affords the reader a better understanding of the data presented because, the reader has a better understanding of the researcher through which the data comes (Ely et al., 1991). Meyors states (1991) “ Rather than eliminating subjectivity, which is anyway impossible, one must deepen it “ (p. 21). Therefore, in concurrence with this notion this researcher will present a brief statement of her early life experiences, who she is, along with a statement indicating from where her interest in the topic originates

Early Life Experiences

In this study a great deal of significance is placed on the family backgrounds and life experiences of the study participants in terms of understanding who they are and how they arrived at the position they were in at the time of the study. Thus, in my attempt to share with the reader who I am, I thought it appropriate to share some information about my family background and early life experiences that appeared to me to be relevant to this study.

I grew up in a working class African American family with middle class values. I am the second to the youngest of five children born to my mother and father. I have one

was one of the approximately fifteen African American families living in our European American town. The African American families were segregated in two areas in this small town, or, more to the point, sprinkled over two short streets on each side of town. The African American families, all of which were working class, formed two close knit social circle on each side of town. In my neighborhood all the adults shared the child care responsibilities in that every child was responsive to every African American adult in the neighborhood.

My early childhood experiences with my family were uneventful. We were a close family with a strong ethnic identity and traditional values. We went on family outings and all the children ate dinner together at the same time every night. My parents did not eat with us because my mother usually ate with my father who worked nights. My father was a hardworking man. He worked two jobs for most of my life. He was a factory worker and maintained his own business as a photographer, which was his true passion. For the most part, my father was a self educated man. He got his GED when he was in the Armed services and attended a school for photography during my childhood. However, he got most of his knowledge from reading books which is something he did whenever he got the chance. My father had a great respect for knowledge. He liked people and loved to talk. Around the neighborhood he was nicknamed the professor. Although religion was a big part of my father's life, he supported his children in the development of their own views about life and religion. So though my father was a regular churchgoer, he never forced his children to go. We all believed in God; however, attendance at church was strictly voluntary with myself, my mother, and my siblings mostly opting not to go. When I did go, it was more because I wanted to be with my father than because I wanted to go to church. When my father passed away January 1, 1993, he and I were very close. He was, and still is, a big influence in my life.

My mother is a shy, socially introverted woman. During the early years of my childhood, my mother did not work outside of the home but worked very hard inside. My

mother kept a very neat and orderly household. She, too, was a strong supporter of education although, I believe her motivations were far more instrumental than my father's. My mother was clear that she wanted all of her children to do better than she and my father had done. Our house was filled with books, educational magazines, flash cards, educational toys. My mother generally took the lead in regards to discipline, but my father was never far behind. The rules of our household were very explicit and consistently supported. My mother was also the practical one who kept a tight watch over my father's earnings. I can remember my mother always reminding us of how poor we were and how limited our resources; yet we seemed to get everything we needed and most things we wanted.

My siblings and I have a good relationship. Although in our adult lives which are all very busy, we do not see each other frequently we find time to get together usually around holidays. We all attended college. My sister is in the process of pursuing her doctorate degree. My third eldest brother and youngest brother have bachelors degrees, and my eldest brother has an associate degree. They are all hardworking responsible caring individuals.

When I was eleven, my tranquil, secure life came to a rather abrupt end; my mother and father went through an extremely messy divorce. When my mother left our house, my siblings and I did not want to change schools so we stayed behind with my father. My mother did not move far away and maintained contact with us. My father and sister had a difficult time getting along with each other so she left soon after our mother to live with some friends. My father, unable to transform from his traditional ways, continued to work hard and moved me into the position of being the lady of the house. I still remember my father calling me into the living room, sitting me down with the checkbook and the household bills, and telling me that it was up to me to take care of the house now. One day I was playing jump rope with my friends; the next day I was going grocery shopping, paying bills, cooking dinner, and keeping house for my three brothers

and my father. However, unwilling to totally give up my childhood, I proceeded to live a double life. In school I was the happy coed and at home the lady of the house. This continued until I was around 14 when my father took my younger brother and me to stay with his mother, and my two older brothers went to stay with my mother. Although coming from different places we all continued to go to the same school and were able to maintain close contact with each other.

My brother and I stayed with my grandmother for what seemed like two of the longest years of my life. He and I walked the three miles to school each day so we could use our bus money for our lunch money. I slept on a broken cot with no mattress and only a blanket to cushion my back from the springs. When I was 15 years old, I lied about my age and got a job at the local fast food restaurant. Between this job and baby-sitting, raking leaves in the fall and shoveling snow in the winter, I was able to provide myself and my brother with some of the extras so that he and I could maintain the image of having a normal life with our peers. Even though my father gave my grandmother money we saw none of it. From my grandmother's house we went to stay with an elderly great uncle whom the family felt should no longer live alone. During that time, my father became ill and could no longer work. A year later when I was a senior in high school, my uncle died. I then went to live with my mother and one of my older brothers. My other older brother had already gone into the Armed service. My younger brother went to stay with my father. Those were confusing times for me, but in a way, I believe those hard times seemed to make me stronger.

In my small town, school was the center of all our social activities. I was very much involved in school participating in various clubs and playing volleyball, basketball, and softball. There was a strong competitive academic culture at our school, which was very college focused. With the exception of a handful of students most of the students went to college after graduation. The majority of the students were European American. It wasn't until college that I had the experience of having another African American in my

classroom. In my high school graduating class there were only two African Americans, myself and another young woman. However, the lack of racial and class diversity did not present a problem for me. I had a number of friends and was quite popular. Overall, I had a very positive elementary and secondary school experience. Yet, I did not gain a sense of academic competence during those years. I graduated from high school with a "B" average but, never got the sense from my teachers that I was smart or capable. It wasn't until my experience at the black college that I attended did I gain the sense that I had real potential in the area of academics. Although racial oppression did exist, in my high school it was more institutionalized than expressed by the student body. For example, none of my teachers ever offered me any assistance in regards to my college applications or ever mentioned anything about college to me but, my white friends seem to get a great deal of assistance. However, I did not notice it at the time and only identified the institutionalized racism in retrospect.

I went away to college. However, I had no money and had to work my way through. The second day after I arrived at school, realizing that I would likely not be able to pay for four years of college, I spoke with my advisor who helped me develop a plan to graduate in three years. I did graduate in three years with honors. During my undergraduate years, still unwilling to give up on the idea of experiencing college life to the fullest, I continued to live my double life. I worked thirty hours a week to support myself and still found time to participate in the college life. I was involved in the social life, student government, and held offices in various clubs. It was a challenge, but well worth it. One year after graduating from undergraduate school I got my masters degree in social work, and began working as a social worker. I worked as a social worker in various programs, always servicing low income minority communities. I stayed in the field of social work for ten years before entering academia.

Who I Am

I am an African American women in her early thirties. I perceive myself as being an ambitious, strong, independent, capable, hardworking women who is determined to be successful. To me , being successful means gaining the respect of others in my profession, owning my own home, and being able to afford some of the comforts in life. I believed that the major source of my success thus far could be explained by my early intimate exposure to wealth and the mainstream culture, my lack of exposure to many social problems that plague low income communities like crime and violence combined with my strong family values which supported education, independence, and family loyalty. However, during the course of this study I found myself reassessing the value and meaning of these factor in relation to my ability to achieve what I have thus far.

During the process of discovery, I discovered some additional things about myself. Prior to this study I viewed my role as a caregiver which had taken a central place in my self definition, as representing a defect in my early socialization. The young women of this study forced me to see the functional aspects of this role in my own life. So as I look back on my early life experiences in attempts to answer the question of who I am I see things differently having conducted this study.

My Interest In This Topic

My desire to pursue the topic of this study evolved from my experiences as a social worker working with young minority children and my own experiences as an African American woman. My interest in this topic could best be explained by sharing my experience with one young women. I first met this young woman years prior to conducting this study. She was a participant in a youth program that I was directing. This young woman was not particularly talented, she struggled academically in school and did not appear to have a great deal of guidance from her family This young woman had few objective characteristics that would indicate future success other than a strong sense of determination. Yet, there was something inside of me that said this young woman is going

to make it. Years later as I began to struggle for a topic for my dissertation something inside of me told me to follow up with this young woman and find out how she was doing and I did. Unlike many of the young people that I had worked with from her community, she had graduated from high school and was making plans to go to college. The question of how she was able to get to that point came to mind. What was it that I saw in her years prior that made me feel that she would in fact be successful. My interest in this topic evolved out my desire to understand how young women like her are able to beat the odds.

I recognize there are some similarities between my story and the stories of the participants. However, I was able to let the stories of the participants lead the way and used my experiences as a reference that assisted me in hearing and understanding what they were saying. My participation in the process had an impact on me and the young women of this study. As we talked and got to know each other, my role as researcher expanded to that of confidante, advisor, and supporter. As these young women proceeded to trust me and shared their feelings and the intimate details of their lives, I kept in mind the words of Joyce Ladner (1995):

I proceeded to conduct my research with the full knowledge that I could not divorce myself from the problems of these women nor should I become so engrossed in them that I would lose my original purpose for being in the community. (p. xxvii)

It was that statement that I used as a guide in the development of my relationship with the young women of this study and the balancing between my commitment to African American women and all that goes along with my work as a researcher.

CHAPTER THREE

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE SELF CONCEPT

INTRODUCTION

There is consensus in the literature as to the significance of the self concept in understanding and predicting human behavior. The self concept, also referred to as the global self concept and the self schema, refers to the "totality of the individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 8). The self concept serves as a pivotal referent point and as a central meditating filter for processing information relevant to the individual. The self concept is based on a complex combination of perceptions which are the product of the person's experiences in relation to their physical and social environment which are assembled over time. The self concept is viewed as a cognitive motivational system which provides incentives, standards, and scripts for behavior (Oyserman, Grant, & Ager, 1995; Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993; Powell, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Ross, 1992; Spears & Deese, 1973).

The self concept has been used to explain the variance in academic achievement and educational attainment among African American youth in the inner city. Traditionally, researchers viewed the self concept as a unitary, trait-like entity, concluding that some people have a positive self concept and others a poor self concept. A poor self concept has been implicated as a causal factor in the academic achievement problems of African American youth in the inner city. By making such implications, these investigators assume a congruency between the self concept and people's perception of their academic performance. Such an explanation fails to account for the multidimensional construct of the self concept (Powell, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Ross, 1992; Spears & Deese, 1973).

The self perceptions which make up the self concept can not be considered as merely a laundry list of self perceptions whose sum total equals the self concept. The self

concept is a complex, hierarchical configuration of self perceptions which are of unequal value to the individual in terms of their construction of their self concept. There is a tendency on the part of some investigators of academic achievement and educational attainment to assume that academic performance reflects the core of the African American youth's self concept. To conclude that the African American youth's poor academic performance must be a reflection of a poor self concept is to ignore the multifaceted nature of the self concept (Powell, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Ross, 1992; Spears & Deese, 1973).

Certainly, school is a major social structure in the lives of African American youth and does have an impact on their self concepts. However, it is not the only social structure in the lives of African American youth; one can not merely assume the level of significance or meaning that academic performance represents for African American youth. Hare (cited in Powell, 1989), conducted a longitudinal study which explored the changes in self perceptions and achievement among African American youth. Hare found that even though the perceptions of African American youth relative to their academic abilities became more negative as they got older, their perceptions of self in other areas moved in a positive direction. Lay and Wakstein (1985) found that African American youth rely less on academic achievement in high school to determine their self concept than their white counterparts. Overall, African American youth felt relatively good about themselves even if they did not do well academically. Perceptions of academic ability can be considered one source of the self concept of African American youth, but not its equivalent (Lay & Wakstein, 1985; Powell, 1989).

Consistent with the findings of Hare (cited in Powell, 1989) and Lay and Wakstein (1985), the academic performance of this study's participants during high school was not reflective of their self concept. All the young women of this study expressed a positive self concept, even though, with the exception of two participants, their academic performance during high school was poor, with them barely passing many of their classes.

Because all the young women expressed a positive self concept, an assessment of their general self concept was not helpful in distinguishing between those who enrolled in college and those who did not. The key to understanding the actions of the participants appears to be in the "precise statements of the discriminations within the self system and their interrelation" (Spears & Deese, 1973, p. 146). The question then becomes, what configuration of components of the self concept of African American women from low income communities appears to support college enrollment?

This chapter identifies components of the self concepts of the participants that appear central to their self definitions and tended to distinguish those who enrolled in college from those who did not. The findings of this study indicate that among the study participants who enrolled in college, their perceptions of themselves as being self directed, competent, and self reliant appeared to represent key components of their self concept. These components were interdependent, with each being critical to the development of the others, and together forming a powerful motivational force to support their enrollment in college. As the young women told their stories, the presence or absence of these components became clear. These same components of the self concept were noticeably absent among the self perceptions of those young women who took no action toward enrollment. Instead, they expressed perceptions of themselves as being passive, dependent, and incompetent.

PERCEPTION OF BEING SELF DIRECTED vs. BEING PASSIVE

The study findings indicate that the young women who enrolled in college perceived themselves as being self directed, whereas the young women who took no action toward college enrollment viewed themselves as being passive. The discussion begins with the presentation of the perceptions of the young women who enrolled in college, followed by a discussion of the perceptions of the young women who did not enroll in college.

The College- Bound Participants' Perceptions of Being Self Directed

When people are self directed, they have a sense of some measure of control over their lives, and a sense of feelings able to take responsibility for their decisions and actions. The issue of control, in terms of personal power, is central to the perception of oneself as being self directed. Patrick, Skinner, and Connell (1993) define control as being "the connection between behaviors and outcomes. It is the extent to which a person feels capable of producing desired and preventing undesired events" (p. 782). This perception is also referred to as an "Internal locus of control" (Findley & Cooper, 1983; Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993). A positive relation between locus of control beliefs and achievement have been identified. It is proposed that individuals who feel more able to control outcomes are more likely to exert more effort in order to achieve the desired outcome, thus, assuring a greater likelihood of achievement (Findley & Cooper, 1983; Patrick, Skinner, & Connell, 1993). The young women who enrolled in college perceived themselves as being self directed.

As the young women shared their aspirations for the future they projected a sense that their ability to achieve their desired outcomes was very much dependent upon themselves. Cori comments:

"You know that anybody in this world can have anything they want. I mean it. If you work hard, you could have it. Like if I wanted to get all 90's in high school, I could have done it. I could of stayed in the house and kept the door locked and did everything I had to do you know. I could do anything I want to"(18-25, p.127)

Cori expresses in this statement a perception of being in control. She speaks of being able to do anything that she wants which signifies an understanding of her ability to make choices. The implication of this statement is that Cori believes she has the power to choose, that she is in fact in the driver's seat setting the direction of her life. Cori

expresses a sentiment common among the young women who enrolled in college. They all spoke in terms of feeling that they were able to make choices about their lives.

The attributional style of the young women who enrolled in college indicated a sense of control. The young women who enrolled in college did not fair well academically during their high school years with the exception of Carol. However, in their discussions of their performance, none of the young women attempted to explain their poor performance by identifying problems at home, a lack of guidance from their parents, or lack of support from their teachers. The common explanation was that they did not apply themselves. Again, these young women implied that they did not do well because they chose not to do well. It was their decision, and they took responsibility for it. These young women are what Findley & Cooper (1983) referred to as "internals" people who feel personally responsible for the things that happen to them. A positive correlation has been found between internality and achievement-related behavior (Findley & Cooper, 1983; Graham, 1989).

Phrases such as " I did it", "I said it ,"and "It was because of me" were expressed frequently during the interviews with these young women. Carol goes on to say,

I feel like, really, that everything I accomplished in my life I accomplished on my own. I'm not saying that nobody gave me any help, but if I didn't want to accomplish it, it wouldn't have happened. It was me. (37-40, p.40).

Attached to their perception of being in control was their sense of responsibility for themselves and the outcome of their lives. They believed that they were responsible for their successes and failures in life. Carla comments on her reputation at school:

I had a good reputation because I worked hard. I didn't cut class. I did what I had to do. (51-52, p.146)

Carla was clear, as were the other young women, that things such as the positive reputation she established were not things someone gave to her but were things that she earned and had some control over.

These young women perceived themselves as being in control over the various aspects of their lives even their social relationships. They all described themselves as being very selective when it came to picking their friends, particularly their boyfriends. It was clear that these young women decided with whom they would be friends and with whom they would spend time rather than being chosen by others. When it came to boyfriends, they spoke of being particularly careful. They stated that they were not just going to date, hang out, or socialize with just anybody. They did not succumb to the pressure to have a boyfriend. They decided that they did not just want to have a boyfriend. They decided that they wanted to have a "good boyfriend" one that respects them and treats them right. Charity expresses the attitude of the young women when she states,

I never really had a relationship where I had a guy dog me out or hit me. I'm not going to say I don't know why I don't get the losers..... Its because I don't pick them. (4-11, p. 16)

Not all of the young women were as successful in choosing their boyfriends as Charity, but they were all clear that it was their choice. As Candy talks of some of her unsuccessful relationships with young men, she spoke in terms of making bad decisions rather than in terms of having the wrong young men choose her. A subtle distinction, but a significant one in terms of their perception of whether they are in control or not.

The Not-College Bound Participants' Perceptions of Being Passive

The young women who took no action toward enrollment did not perceive themselves as being self directed. Prevalent in their discussions were phases such as; "It just happened," "They left me," "They took me," "She made me". According to these young women most things happened to them. They are what Findley & Cooper (1983) describe as "externals" individuals who perceive the various outcomes in life as determined by forces beyond their control. Among the young women who did not enroll in college, there is a perception of powerlessness and passivity that was communicated in their descriptions of the various events in their lives.

As Nancy and Neda shared their aspirations for their futures their discussions were tentative and lacked a real sense of conviction. They projected the impression that their ability to achieve their desired goals were primarily not up to them but rather dependent on forces beyond their control. For example Nancy states:

I want to go to college. I just don't want to go to college and have my mother spend all that money and then end up dropping out. (1-7, p.10)

Aside from the self doubt that is communicated in this statement there is also a sense of powerlessness. Her use of the phrase " end up dropping out" gives the impression that her dropping out would be an occurrence which is beyond her control, it would be something that happen to her. Neda projects a similar impression of powerlessness in her discussion of her future aspirations. Eve expressed an interest in going to beauty school as well as going to college but, she was undecided which direction she would really like to take. It was suggested by the interviewer that she might want to seek some information so that she

could better decide which to pursue. However, in response to the suggestion Neda states:

“ That’s not me. I don’t do things like that. I don’t do nothing “ (10 -12,p.19). The idea of her taking some action toward her desired goal was not at all appealing to her.

However, Nancy appears to most clearly communicate the sentiment of both these young women when she states:” I guess I’m waiting for all these things to happen to me” (5-7, p.45)

The perceptions o themselves as being powerless and passive was also reflected in their attributional style. Their attributional style indicated a sense that they had no control over most things that happened to them. For example, Neda did not graduate on time because she failed some classes. However, she spoke of it in terms of the school not letting her graduate. During a discussion about a period in her childhood, from the time she was five until she was twelve, Neda expressed strong feelings of social isolation:

“They left me at my Aunt Hatty's house. They did they left me there (38-39, p. 27). It was lonely...Just me and her that's all (32-33, p. 28). Like nobody (meaning her family) would come over there..."(27, p. 29).

She expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation yet, she took no action to resolve it. Instead, she spoke of how she spent most of her time inside watching TV or playing alone on the kitchen floor. She mentioned that there were children in her neighborhood and even a young girl her age next door whom she could play with but rarely did. Neda seemed to make no connection between her loneliness and her reluctance to call or associate with others. Neda communicated a sense that the resolution of her feelings of isolation were beyond the realm of her control. She was unable to perceive the options in her situation or take responsibility for it. According to Neda, her isolation was due to the

fact that her aunt did not get along with others in the family who, consequently, would not come to visit her.

Nancy expressed a similar attributional style. For example, when Nancy spoke about how she was frequently late for her curfew, she described her reason for being late was that her girlfriend refused to leave parties on time. According to Nancy, many of the things that happen to her were not her fault. In the case of her missed curfew it was her girlfriends fault that she was always late. Similarly, Neda just happened to not graduate on time. Nancy was late because of her friend. Nancy just happened to get a job at the grocery store because her mother knew the manager who gave her the job. To Nancy and Neda things, both good and bad, seemed to just happen to them. There is a consistent theme of powerlessness and passivity that was presented throughout their discussion.

Summary

Both Nancy and Neda recognized that life as a whole offered them options. They spoke of wanting to do something with their lives other than just get pregnant or just get a job. They too wanted to have careers. Yet, they did not appear to feel empowered to access those options. They seemed to operate almost on chance, as if something magical was going to happen and they would be in school or on their way to pursuing a career. These young women seem to know what they wanted; they just do not seem able to reach for it.

In contrast, the presence and centrality of a sense of control over their own destiny felt by the young women who enrolled in college was evident in their conceptualization of self. Their perceptions of themselves as being self directed manifested itself in their language, their understanding of their ability to make choices, and their feelings of being responsible for the outcome of their lives. It was a theme that was expressed in the telling of their stories of how they were able to overcome the various situations and

circumstances that confronted them during the course of their lives. The presence of their feelings of being self directed in their perception of self was unmistakable.

PERCEPTIONS OF SELF RELIANCE vs. DEPENDENCE

The young women who enrolled in college perceive themselves as being self reliant, whereas the young women who did not enroll in college perceived themselves as being dependent.

For the purposes of this discussion self reliance, refers to the perception that one relies on one's own power. An individual who is self reliant depends on herself to get her needs met. It projects a feeling that one must do for one's self. The perception of dependence refers to the perceptions that one relies on others to get her needs met. This is not to say that the young women of this study were totally self reliant or totally dependent but rather points to which perceptions appeared to be more dominate in their discussions of self.

The College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Being Self Reliant

For the young women of this study who enrolled in college, their perception of themselves as self reliant appeared to be a major theme in the construction of their self concept. They consistently expressed the sentiment that, when all was said and done, it was themselves on whom they relied. Carol states:

I do everything on my own. Nobody really helps me and that's like okay, cause I'd rather do things on my own. I know I can count on me. (37-40, p. 40)

They all seemed to view the assistance they received from others with appreciation; however, assistance from anyone was viewed as a pleasant addition but not a necessary condition for them to reach their goals. Carol expresses the sentiment of all the young women who enrolled in college with this statement. They all believed that what they have

been able to accomplish thus far and will accomplish in the future will be due in large part to their own devices.

These young women did not like the idea of having to depend on anyone. To them, self reliance was not only a perception of themselves but a goal. It was something for which they were constantly striving . They believed that the more independent they became the better. They all told stories of how they began working very young; some of the young women started as young as 11. These young women did not wait around and hope to land a job but went out looking for one. Those who could not find paid employment volunteered in hopes that it would eventually lead them to a paying position. These young women took action to avoid having to rely on anyone as much as possible. Candy states:

I have to work. I don't care what it is. Like my job now. I hate it, but I need my job. My friends talk about how can I work for minimum wage. I get \$4.10 an hour. But hey, it beats a blank.... I know that at the end of the week I got some money coming. I don't have to wait around and hope some man or somebody gives me some money. I have to have my own. ... I hate having to ask anybody for anything. (35-42, 48-51, p. 67).

The women expressed strong feelings about needing to have their own their own money their own careers, and eventually their own apartments.

They articulated a necessity to be able to take care of themselves. Even though they expressed a desire to get married, they were very clear that their marriage would be about companionship, and that they did not need nor did they want to have a man or anyone else take care of them.

These young women also did not rely on others to work out their emotional concerns. They generally did not talk their problems over with their parents, friends, or others. They decided most often to work them out on their own. Cori states:

I don't talk to my friends about my problems. I don't talk to anyone I deal with them on my own. (8-9, p. 67)

For these young women, being self reliant was important. They viewed their self reliance as a kind of freedom. They believed that dependence made one vulnerable and equated it with weakness which was not part of their self concept. They felt they were strong. They were constantly striving to become increasing more self reliant and felt that being self reliant was a major part of being an adult. This is not to say that these young women felt that they did not need other people in their lives, for that was not the sentiment they expressed. What they appeared to mean was that they would prefer to keep their reliance on others to a minimum.

The Not College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Being Dependence

Those young women who did not enroll in college did not express the same passion and desire to be self reliant as was witnessed among the other young women in the study. These young women communicated a belief that they were capable of taking care of themselves if the need arises; however, they did not perceive it as a necessary goal for their ascent to adulthood. Nancy and Neda were far more concerned with maintaining their connections to people than they were with being self reliant. For Nancy and Neda the notion of being taken care of did not present for them any negative connotations as was the case among the young women who did enroll in college. Nancy and Neda did not equate depending on others as a sign of weakness, instead they viewed it as the way women should be. Nancy states:

I want to work but, I expect that my husband be able to take care of me and my children. (1-3, p.22)

For these young women dependence was not a bad thing.

They both worked, Nancy more consistently than Neda. These young women did not seek employment at a young age. Neda had only one brief employment experience outside of the home. Nancy began work at the age of 14 at the insistence of her mother who arranged for Nancy to be employed where her mother worked. The sentiment expressed around work was not about getting and having their own. It appeared more about being able to provide assistance, to contribute. They worked out of necessity due to demands placed on them by the household rather than to fulfill feelings self reliance.

Nancy talks about working in this way:

My mother doesn't have to worry about buying clothes for me you know.... I pay for my own telephone bill. I buy my own clothes. I could buy my own food. I even buy food for the house sometimes you know. I can do all that for myself. My mother still has my little brother to worry about. (26-33, p. 11)

For Nancy it does not appear to be about having her own. The emphasis seemed to be placed on her helping out her mother by taking care of the family. Nancy went on to talk about how she was considering quitting her present job because her boyfriend, who lives with her in her mother's apartment, is now working and can help out with the bills. The reluctance that she expressed about quitting was not about placing herself in a position to have to rely on her boyfriend, but rather her thinking was that now that he is also working, they could maybe save some money so they could get married.

Neda worked around the house assisting her aunt with her sick grandmother and younger siblings. In return, she received an allowance. Helping out at home does not afford Neda the same level of freedom and independence that employment outside of the home would provide; however Neda did not express feelings of being bothered by not working outside of the home. The idea of having to go out and look for a job was not at all appealing to her, because it meant that she would have to apply and possibly undergo

some rejection. The brief employment situation that she had outside of the home was obtained with the assistance of a friend. She did not stay on the job long because she did not like the work. Although Neda, did not speak of needing or wanting a job outside of the home, she did speak of wanting her own place some day. Her desire for her own place seemed to lack a sense of conviction. She had no plan as to how she would get her own place. The way she spoke of it, gave the impression that having her own apartment would be a nice idea, yet it did not seem to take on the character of being a goal something that she was actually striving for.

Nancy and Neda did not express the need to struggle over emotional issues on their own. They expressed feeling that it was not an issue for them to seek out support for their emotional concerns. Neda spoke of going to her cousin to talk over problems that she was having with her boyfriend or going to her aunt when she was sad about something. Nancy spoke of relying on her mother and boyfriend for support. She did not hesitate to go to her mother when she discovered that she was pregnant. And when she and her mother decided that an abortion was the best alternative they went through it together.

Summary

For these young women, having your own and being on their own did not seem to have the same significance as for the young women who enrolled in college. The young women who enrolled in college appeared to have an almost inflated sense of the importance of being self reliant, not depending on anyone. They pursued the notion of the need for an ever increasing sense of self reliance with an unmistakable passion and sense of conviction. For them it was a necessity. It appeared to be one of the perceptions which provides the young women who enrolled in college with the drive to keep going, working, and striving.

PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE vs. INCOMPETENCE

This section addresses the findings of this study as they relate to the presence or absence of the participants' general perceptions of themselves as being competent individuals in terms of their ability to take action toward college enrollment. The young women who enrolled in college perceived themselves as being competent individuals in regards to their ability to make it in college, whereas the young women who did not enroll in college did not project a similar perception of themselves. This section presents the perceptions of the college-bound women regarding their feelings of competence which will be followed by the perceptions of the not college-bound young women .

For the purpose of this discussion, competence is defined as a sense that one has sufficient skills, knowledge, and experience to achieve a certain task (Ogbu, 1981). A sense of competence results from the accumulation of experiences of perceived successful outcomes as defined by the culture. The notion of competence refers to the perception of ability. Thus, people's sense of competence speaks to their sense of their own ability (Ogbu, 1981). The competent person is one who has a sense that she can make desirable things happen. She has a sense of hope (Ramseur, 1991).

The College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Competence

The young women who enrolled in college perceived themselves as being competent. Their body language, the way they spoke, and what they said projected their sense of competence. The young women presented as self assured and self determined. They were of the belief that they were capable of achieving whatever they wanted as long as they were willing to work hard enough towards it. These young women were convinced about their own abilities to make things happen. Charity expresses the sentiments of all the college bound women when she states:

You can do whatever you want to. You just have to work for it and plan for it and it's as simple as that, you have to work for what you want. I see the results of just sitting around getting caught up in the life style, you know, drugs and stuff. And I don't want to go that way. I want too much out of life, you know, to get caught up in stuff like that. I have dreams. Big dreams. (1-15, p. 30)

It is simple as that she states. Her formula for success is hard work, determination, faith in yourself, and a plan. These are the things in which these young women believed in and felt that they were capable of following up on.

The college-bound young women operated partly on faith: A belief in something without having any concrete proof. There seems to be a kind of courage and confidence involved in faith which these young women seemed to have. They did not have to necessarily see it to want it. Carla talks about getting her own apartment away from her home town some day:

It's not so much that I see it, it's just that I want it, and I'm heading towards it, and I'm not stopping . I did the hard step [graduating from high school] but now I'm going to take an even bigger step now. I'm trying to be out on my own (6-11, p. 17)

These young women talked about going away to college, yet they had no real knowledge of what it would be like or what it could do for them. These young women expressed only a vague sense of what college was all about prior to their enrollment. With little concrete proof, these young women accepted the notion that going to college was the route they needed to take if they desired to obtain some level of upward mobility, and they decided to act on that vague idea. College offered them a chance to do something different from what they saw everyday, the hustling, drugs, crime, the things they knew did not work and were not for them.

College is school, and with the exception of Candy, these young women did not do well in school. Their academic performance was marginal at best. Yet, that did not seem

to deter them. They did not believe that their academic performance in high school was a true representation of what they were capable of doing. They had faith in their own ability to be able to do the work. They all seemed to agree that college would be hard, however, that assessment did not appear to waver their conviction that they were going and that they were going to make it and they did not waver. Despite their previous academic experience they believed that they were smart and intelligent. But to them more importantly they were determined and that it was their persistence that was going to make the difference rather than their talent.

During the interviewing process Cori experienced what she described as a minor set back, others might view it as a devastating blow. She was planning to attend college in the fall. The date was set for her departure. Her bags were packed, and off she went to college. When she arrived on campus to register for school, she was told that there was a mix up with her paperwork so she would not be able to register for class or move into her dorm room. As a result, she had to turn around and go back home. By the time the issue was resolved she had missed too much of the semester to begin and had to wait until the following year. Some young people may have been discouraged or, with a year's delay, one might have gotten a job and changed their minds about going all together. But not Cori. She replies this way to the question of what it is that she is going to do now,

What can I do? I have to re-apply now. But, I don't care,
you know, cause I'm going. If I can't go there, I don't care,
I'm going somewhere. I'm not going to just do nothing.
(49-53, p. 93)

Cori got a job at one of the local retail stores, was accepted to another school, and will attend in September 1996.

These young women perceive themselves as being competent, confident, and determined. They spoke in very definitive terms. They made statements such as "I'm going to college" "I can take care of myself" "I'm not going to end up like that". One could

not help but hear the sense of determination which underlined their convictions about what they were going to do. These young women were convinced that they could and would achieve their goals, that it was merely a matter of time.

The Not College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Incompetence

There was not that same sense of conviction in the voices of the young women who took no action toward enrollment. These young women also had desires and dreams for the future. They also did not wish to get involved with the street life, have babies out of wedlock, or work at dead end jobs. Yet, their desires and dreams appeared to be just that, dreams. Their dreams had not undergone the transformation from dreams to goals. They remained merely things that they would like to have happen. Neda spoke of her future goals in this way:

I don't want to turn out like my mother. I want to get a job and stuff. I want to go to beauty school. But then again I don't know. I don't really know what I want to do. But the two main things is to go to beauty school or work with kids that's to the main things I want to do. (36-40, p. 33)

Neda just was not sure. Her dreams were unclear. But it was not the lack of clarity that caught the attention of this researcher. What is of concern is Neda's lack of action to attempt to clarify her goals or to work toward either of them. At the time of the interview process, she had not called any schools or spoken to anyone that could assist her in going any further. During the interview it was suggested that she go to a really nice beauty shop and ask the beauticians where they went to school, or maybe even just call as a way of assisting her in getting information about beauty school and to help her to make a decision. Neda declined, stating that she just couldn't do that. Even after the interviewer gave Neda what she thought at the time was a very convincing and inspiring talk. Neda took no action. Out of perhaps professional impulse the interviewer picked up on Neda's lack of clarity and made what appeared, in retrospect, a superficial attempt to assist her

and possibly influence her to take some action. The interviewer provided Neda with information regarding college, the process of enrollment and potential benefits. She even obtained an application for Neda and assisted her in filling it out. There was nothing left for Neda to do but put the application in the mail. But, she did not mail it. She explained that she just wasn't sure that she could do it. Neda had the desire, but she just seemed to lack the confidence. Neda states; "I don't really know what I'm capable of because I haven't done anything" (1-4, p.34). Even after going through all that she had been through in her life, and achieving what she had already achieved, such as not getting pregnant, staying off of drugs, graduating from high school, Neda still appeared to lack a sense of confidence and self assurance that seemed necessary for her to take action.

Nancy expressed a desire to go to nursing school. She spoke of wanting to be a nurse ever since she could remember wanting to be anything. She spoke of always being fascinated by illness and how she enjoys looking up things in the medical dictionary. When asked why a nurse as opposed to a doctor, Nancy responded that its to hard to be a doctor and it takes to long to become one. Even though Nancy is clear that she wants to be a nurse she has taken no action toward enrollment. Nancy repeatedly explains her inaction by stating that she just is not ready to go yet. She told this to her guidance counselor at school who attempted to encourage her to continue her education based on her promising academic performance in high school. She told it to her mother who would inquire periodically about her plans for the future. "I'm not ready" seem to be Nancy's standard response to the question of continuing her education. Nancy states:

College is much harder. I'm just not ready. I don't want to have to worry about making it. I just want to relax from school. That's the real reason why. I just want to relax
(26-31, p.1)

Nancy expresses in this statement a sense of self doubt. She suspects that college is hard and questions her ability to be able to make it. Her apparent success in high school

appears to have limited impact on her perception of competence regarding her ability to do college work.

This researcher suspected that there was more to Nancy's reluctance than her concerns about the difficulty regarding the school work. As Nancy spoke, she revealed what appeared to be a reluctance to move into the realm of the unknown and a fear of failure. Nancy is not one to take risk. Nancy spoke of looking for another job. She states:

I'm not trying to go out there on my own. For real. It's like
if I go out there and try to get something and I don't get it.
I'm like forget it. (7-12, p.45)

Nancy's fear of the possibility that she may not make it in college appears to stagnate her and support her feelings of not being ready. Nancy describes herself as being reluctant to take risk. Nancy further illustrates this point in a discussion of her efforts to look for a job as a receptionist:

I 'm scared to like call you know. I see jobs advertised and
I won't go because I'm scared. If I an not real sure that I
can do the job I won't even try. (49-54, p.42)

For Nancy, there seemed to be a pattern of inaction. She also spoke of wanting to be a model. She explained that people often said that she should and that she would make a good model. Nancy mentioned that she even has a friend who is also trying to get into the modeling business and has offered to give Nancy the information that she has accumulated so far. Nancy needs only to give her a call to get the information. She hasn't, so far, done so. Nancy's friend made the offer about a year ago, and Nancy is still saying "Yeah, I'm going to call her and get the information". Again, her response to why she hasn't called is "I'm not ready"

These young women had dreams, and had experienced some successes in their lives yet, they seemed unable to take the next step. They expressed feeling good about

themselves in general; they described themselves as being intelligent, good people. Nancy even had the school records to prove it, but there seemed to something missing. They did not appear convinced about their own capability to make things happen, to take action toward college enrollment.

Nancy and Neda did not express the same sense of conviction and self assurance that was expressed by those young women who enrolled in college. The language of the young women who took no action was less definitive. They did express feelings of being capable in some areas such as being able to take care of themselves, due to their school work, and maintain a relationship with their boyfriends. Yet, something seemed to happen when it came to taking action toward college enrollment. There appeared to be a reluctance on their part to enter the unfamiliar, Neda more so than Nancy. Neda states,

I don't like to do nothing. I don't want to go bowling cause,
I never been bowling, so I was like I don't want to go.(13-
16, p. 29)

Neda seemed to have a general reluctance to do anything different, whereas Nancy's her reluctance seemed centered on career development activities.

CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed of the significance the self concept in terms of understanding human behavior. The self concept plays a central orchestrating and regulating role in the development of an individual's life course. It serves as a pivotal referent point for processing information relevant to the individual. The self concept is made up of numerous self perceptions of varying degrees of significance which the individual uses to understand herself and how to act in various situations (Powell, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Ross, 1992; Spears & Deese, 1973). This chapter focused on those self

perceptions that appeared to be relevant to the women taking action toward college enrollment.

The young women who enrolled in college identified their feelings of being self directed, self reliant, and competent as central themes in their construction of their self concept and relevant to their taking action toward college enrollment. It was those components of their self concept which also appeared to distinguish the young women who enrolled in college from the young women who did not, for those same components of the self concept were not among the self perceptions of the young women who did not enroll. Among the college bound young women, their perceptions of themselves as being self directed, self reliant, and competent appeared to be interdependent, each playing a critical role in the development of the other. The presence of all three components of their self concept operating in concert appeared to create a powerful motivational system for the young women who enrolled in college which assisted them in taking the necessary action to enroll in college. The not college bound young women perceived themselves as being powerless and passive, dependent, and incompetent to take action toward college enrollment.

This chapter focused on describing how the young women of this study perceived themselves. However, an individual's perceptions of self are developed in interaction with their social environment (Harrison et al., 1990). The following chapters discuss how these young women found support for their perceptions of self from their environment.

CHAPTER FOUR

WHEN WE WERE CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

The young women of this study grew up in female-headed households where economic resources were limited, in communities devastated by unemployment and underemployment, and saturated by drugs, crime, and violence. Their families were embedded in a supportive extended family network where resources such as child care lodging, food, and money were readily exchanged. Both those who enrolled in college and those who did not seemed to have experienced their share of hard times-homelessness, overcrowding, parental addiction, child neglect, and hunger- that appeared to be tempered by the good times-large family gatherings, Christmas presents, birthday parties, playtime, and childhood achievements. The childhood experiences described by these young women were similar and were not unlike the experiences of many African American young women growing up in poverty.

Based, in large part, on their early experiences within the context of their families, these young women developed their basic values and beliefs, perceptions of who they are and ways of functioning within their social groups. Its through the culmination of their early childhood experiences that these young women appear to have constructed their self concepts, the lens through which they view the world. Their early experiences, both good

and bad, provide a foundation on which they continue to build and influence the direction their development takes in later years (Harrison et al., 1991; Obgu, 1981).

There is a consensus in the literature that good parenting skills and positive parental involvement have a positive influence on educational outcomes (Jenkins, 1989). Clark's (1983) landmark study of low-income African American families and academic achievement, successfully directed attention away from the structural and demographic variables towards family processes and culture in the determination of educational outcomes in children. Clark's (1983) study identified 17 success producing pattern in homes of high achievers that appeared to be conducive to educational success among low income African American families. In examining the 17 success producing patterns in the homes identified by Clark (1983), 12 refer to the attitudes and activities of the parent, and only two that refer to the attitudes and activities of the children. Clark's (1983) findings are not unique in that respect (Harrison et al., 1990; Jenkins, 1989; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991; Taylor, 1991). Many of the studies exploring the impact of the family on academic achievement and educational attainment appear to focus on the parents as actors and the children in terms of outcomes rather than the reciprocal relationship between the two (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994).

The studies which focus on the attitudes and activities of the parents , or the individual attributes of the child, are limited in their ability to provide insight into why some of the young women of this study enrolled in college and some of them did not. The family interactive patterns, as described by the young women who enrolled in college , were not consistent with those family interactive patterns identified as being conducive to

educational success. In fact, the family interactive patterns of the young women who enrolled in college more closely resembled those families of low achievers in Clark's (1983) study.

The young women of this study direct attention to the issue of perceptions in the attempt to examine the relationship between the family and educational outcomes. The distinguishing factors discovered between the young women who enrolled in college and the young women who did not enroll in college, as related to their families, appears to be the socialization messages that the young women interpreted from their childhood experiences, more so than any particular events or circumstances that occurred during their childhood.

As the young women shared their childhood experiences, the distinction in their perceptions began to emerge. The young women who enrolled in college framed their discussion of their childhood experiences in terms of achievements, whereas, the young women who did not enroll in college framed their discussion of their childhood experiences in terms of enduring. The college-bound young women interpreted from their childhood experiences messages of socialization which supported them in being self directed and self reliant, whereas the not college-bound young women interpreted messages of socialization which supported them in being passive and dependent. The college-bound young women identified experiences in their childhood that appeared to support their feelings of competence. In contrast, the not college-bound young women focused on experiences which appeared to magnify their perceptions of incompetence.

This chapter shares the young women's reports of their childhood experiences which appear to support their perceptions of being self directed, self reliant, and competent, among the young women who enrolled in college and their perceptions of being passive, dependent, and incompetent among the not college-bound young women.

PERCEPTIONS OF OVERCOMING vs. ENDURING

An individual's childhood experiences within the family are important in terms of their human development (Garmezy, 1991). The perceptions of these young women regarding their childhood experiences have proven to be very telling in regards to their ability to take action toward college enrollment. Exploring those things which they identified as important memories and events in their lives and the way in which they tell their stories brought to the attention of this researcher a fundamental difference in the way the young women who enrolled in college and the way the young women who did not enroll in college perceived themselves in relation to their life circumstances. In the telling of their stories two subtle but distinct themes emerged, that of overcoming and enduring. The significance of these themes in relation to their ability to take action towards enrollment appears to be in connection to their relationship to perceptions of power and powerlessness.

The College-Bound Participants' Perception of Overcoming

As the young women who enrolled in college shared their childhood experiences they presented them in the context of a series of achievements. Their reconstruction of

significant events in their lives were reported in terms of problems or difficult situations and how they were able to overcome them. For example, Carla mentions her experience of almost not graduating from high school because she was having a difficult time passing two regents exams. The emphasis in the telling of the story is placed on how she was able to overcome. Carla states:

I was going in 6:00 in the morning to study and do test and whatever. I did what I had to do. I had no other choice but to. If I didn't I don't think I would have graduated. I stuck to my priorities. (47 -52, p.6) I went and took both test and passed (38 -39, p.6)

In another example, Charity speaks of how, as a four year old child, her mother left her and her infant brother with an incompetent baby-sitter. Yet, the emphasis in telling the story was placed on her being able, at four years old, to take care of her brother. Cori mentioned the problems of a troubled friend, but primarily talked about her efforts to assist her friend. In the telling of their life stories these young women seem to describe their childhood experiences in terms of a series of accomplishments, focusing on those areas where they have been able to demonstrate their ability to take care of themselves or others and to overcome difficult situations. According to these young women, life is an ongoing struggle in which they are thoroughly engaged. Their perceptions of their life experiences as being an ongoing struggle appears to signify their perception of themselves as actors in their lives with some control over their life outcomes. Their perceptions of overcoming are exemplified not only in the stories they chose to tell but in their use of language and their affect. These young women projected a feeling of intensity, determination and control.

The Not College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Enduring

The young women who did not enroll in college spoke of their childhood experiences in terms of things that happened to them, a series of events. Nancy and Neda describe situations which they seemed not to take any action. For example, Nancy, tells of the time she and her mother did not have money for food and had to share a slice of pizza, when her father failed to show up for her graduation, when her boyfriend did not take her to the prom, and when her mother abruptly lifted her curfew. Neda tells about being left by her mother as an infant under the care of her two older brothers, being left at her great aunt's home to live, being suddenly taken away from her great aunts home by her mother, and not being able to graduate on time. These and other events were presented in such a way as to project the image of enduring things during the course of their lives. Nancy exemplifies this sentiment in this statement: "Me and my mother have been through a lot, but we always seem to get by" (17-18, p.24). They projected a sense of pride in having been able to withstand the difficulties of their life. They appeared to perceive themselves in terms of reacting to external circumstances in their lives, however there is limited control over one's life to be found in merely reacting.

Summary

The subtle distinction between the two perceptions is such that those who perceive life as an ongoing struggle recognize themselves as actors having a significant role in how their lives turn out. In contrast, those who perceive life as a series of events tend to see themselves as reacting to circumstances and having a limited role in their life outcomes. It is really a situation where some, like those young women who did not enrolled in college,

believe that life imposes circumstances upon you that about which you have no choice and that you are forced to deal with the cards you have been dealt. While others, like the young women who enrolled in college, believe that no matter what life imposes upon you, one always has options. For the not college-bound women, their sense of strength appears to come through the withstanding, whereas the college-bound young women seem to find their sense of strength through overcoming.

PERCEPTIONS OF SELF DIRECTION vs. PASSIVITY

As the young women who enrolled in college spoke of growing up, they appeared to highlight those experiences during their childhood where they were able to assert their independence and engage in independent decision making. These young women projected the image that, in many ways, they were responsible for rearing themselves. They rarely spoke in terms of being taught or told about how they were to function as adults. Instead, they spoke as if they were products of their experiences; it was from those experiences that they developed conclusions regarding their socialization goals. In contrast, the young women who did not enroll in college spoke a great deal about rules and restrictions on their activities. They projected the sense that there was always someone else in control of their lives. Among these young women, there appeared to be a preoccupation with issues of authority and compliance.

The College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Self Direction

The young women who enrolled in college described their process of socialization as being one of limited guidance and high levels of personal accountability. They described a life course which involved ever increasing demands for independent problem solving and decision making. In the telling of their stories, these young women gave the impression of having blazed their own trails in life.

The young women who enrolled in college reported growing up in family systems where there was limited guidance around ideas and activities. The rules of the household were implicit. They could not recall incidents where they were given specific instructions as to what the rules of the household were. They described an understanding of the rules that appeared to evolve from their experiences, some occasional passing comments, and observations. Yet, however implicit the rules may have been, they were no less clear to these young women. For example, the young women denied ever being given a specific curfew in terms of what was the appropriate time to be in the house. Yet, they had a clear understanding that there were limits. Cori explains how she was able to stay within the seemingly invisible boundaries of her curfew:

I didn't have a curfew. But I knew what my limit was, like when I was 12 or 13 and I was hanging out . Being that I was hanging out with [my friend] and she had to be in at 10:00 in the summer. Being that I was hanging out with her I would go in the house too. And as I got older like about 15, whatever was the limit of who I was with that when I would go inside but I never over did my limit. I would use my common sense (3-10, p.88)

It was expected that they know how to stay within the seemingly invisible boundaries of their curfew through the use of “common sense” and if they failed in their attempt to do so, they were held personally accountable.

Carla shares a story which seems to speak to this issue of common sense and accountability. Carla went with her older sister to a dance that was being sponsored by the community center next door to her house. Her mother had not given her a specific time to return home. Carla concluded that, since she was there with her older sister and because the event was next door, it would be all right for her to stay until the danced ended, which was around midnight. However, when she did eventually return home, she discovered that she was mistaken and that her seemingly logical assessment was way off base. Her use of what she thought was common sense had failed her. In the apparent confusion of the severe beating that she got for being late there was no mention of the fact that her mother had not given her a specific time to be in the house. Instead, there were the angry ramblings of her mother telling her that she ought to have known better than to come into her house at that time of night.

The other young women shared similar stories from which they developed an understanding and appreciation for the importance of and how to -engage in individual problem solving or, in their words, how to use their “common sense”. In addition, there clear message of personal accountability supported their desires to think for themselves.

The young women who enrolled in college described childhood experiences which appeared to discourage their dependence on feedback from others to determine their decisions and behavior. They were encourage not to become preoccupied with the

approval or disapproval of others including their mothers. They expressed the belief that such expectations of approval or disapproval could develop into an unhelpful distraction. These young women perceived themselves as being more internally motivated. Candy states:

My Mother always told me that I shouldn't worry about what other people think. I'm not the kind of person that does things just because everybody else is doing it. (9 -12 , p. 84)

They expressed an appreciation for external feedback and encouragement but not a reliance on it as they pursued their individual goals.

The young women who enrolled in college received limited feedback or encouragement from their mothers in response to their achievements which appeared to support their development of a sense of self direction. I observed an interaction between Cori and her mother that illustrates this point. The incident occurred years prior to my beginning this study when I was director of a youth program in Cori's community. As a program participant, Cori enthusiastically became involved in a local community voter registration drive. On the first outing, Cori insisted that we begin at her house and that she go first. The other participants and I watched Cori excitedly ring the bell. Her mother answered the door rather abruptly and barked out " What do you want?". Her mother stood there with the door opened just enough for her to peak her head out. She did not invite us in nor appear the least bit pleased to see us. Cori continued with her presentation undaunted by her mother's obvious look of impatience. Upon completion of Cori's brief presentation, her mother respond abruptly" I don't vote". Cori, unwilling to take no for an answer presented her mother with further arguments about the importance of voting.

Still unmoved by Cori's arguments and somewhat taken back by Cori's persistence, her again responded "I don't vote", mumbled something else, and shut the door in our faces. Cori's mother offered no praises or encouragement for her efforts. Cori was visibly disappointed for only a brief moment and rushed to the next door where she proceeded to try again, almost as if nothing had happened.

During the interview process, I mentioned the incident to Cori. After providing Cori with some descriptive reminders, she expressed having only a vague recollection of what occurred. I was somewhat taken back by Cori's response to the incident and her lack of recall. I expected Cori to talk about how disappointed she was over her mother's lack of support. However, Cori did not present as being particularly bothered by her mother's behavior. Cori went on to explain how she was not disappointed because her mother's behavior did not come as a surprise to her. Cori mentioned that her mother rarely showed her any support as she engaged in various activities. Her mother never attended her performances in the marching band or in the choir, nor did she attend any of her of the events or activities. According to Cori, her mother's lack of recognition in regards to her individual achievements was "No big deal". Cori expressed feeling satisfied with having a general knowledge, although rarely communicated, that her mother was proud of her. Instead of relying on the praises of their mothers and others, Cori and the other young women tended to sing their own praises. As they shared their stories, there was no lack of stories which appeared self promoting.

As the young women spoke, they gave the impression that, over the years, they had developed some established notions regarding who they are and therefore tended to

censor the external information accordingly based on the content and the source. For example , the fact that many of them did not do well in high school academically does not seem to impact upon their perceptions of themselves as being intelligent individuals. A telephone conversation that took place between Carla and myself appear to illustrate this point.

Carla: I am an intelligent person.

Interviewer: How do you know that you're intelligent? Did someone tell you that like in school or something?

Carla, No! I know because I said so. Because I am.

This same sense of self knowledge was expressed in varying degrees among all the young women who enrolled in college.

The childhood experiences of these young women provided them with ample opportunities to engage in independent problem solving and decision making. Sometimes the situations were orchestrated by their mothers such as when they were small children and were allowed to pick out their own clothes. Cori describes an experience she had as a child when she was around five:

I dressed myself. It was like 95 degrees outside and I would put on corduroy pants. But, I dressed myself all the time. My mother would let me go out like that. She wouldn't say a thing (7-12, p. 96)

Cori went on to mention how she eventually discovered that corduroys may not be the best choice of clothing in warm weather, but it was an issue she had resolve on her own. Her mother allowed her to make her own decisions and gave her the room to explore the soundness of those decisions.

In their description of their childhood experiences, there appeared to be a pattern whereby they were provided with expectations with limited instrumental instruction about how to fulfill those expectations. Although these young women spoke very definitively of their families belief in the importance of completing high school, descriptions of interactions within their family system did not include instructions or rules that supported them in their ability to fulfill those expectations. They did not describe efforts on the part of their primary caregivers to monitor their homework or rules about going out on a school night. Their households were not filled with educational toys, books, or encyclopedias. They were told they needed to complete high school and were left to do it the best ways they knew how. Even when their ability to complete high school was in crisis, such as Carla and Candy, they were left to resolve the crisis on their own. Candy, after being thrown out of her high school, stayed home for a few months intending to eventually drop out. However, after finding staying home extremely boring coupled with the fear of ending up like her older siblings, she returned to enroll in an alternative school program without the assistance of her mother. Carla confronted with the task of passing a regent exam which she had previously failed twice, decided to increase her studying efforts. She manage to arrangement for extra help and improved her study habits by turning off the TV on her own. These young women clearly incorporated the expectations of their family system into their development of their goals.

The Not College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Passivity

The young women who did not enroll in college described a process of socialization in which the emphasis was placed on being compliant, as opposed to being self directed. They interpreted from their experiences a sense of powerlessness and passivity. These young women tended to be preoccupied with the demands of others particularly, but not limited to, those in authority. The overarching themes in their experiences was that it was important to be compliant.

Nancy and Neda describe their childhood experiences as providing them with a great deal of structure and few opportunities to engage in independent decision making and problem solving. For example, Neda had this to say about growing up in the home of her great aunt:

My great aunt was very strict. I couldn't wear sneakers. I couldn't wear jeans. I had to wear pants. I could not wear pants to school, only dresses. (8-13, p. 28)

Neda describes her early childhood experiences in the household of her great aunt as not providing much opportunity for individual expression. The restrictions her great aunt placed on what she could wear appeared to be characteristic of the oppressive environment that her great aunt created in the home for Neda. Neda expressed feeling trapped during the time she stayed with her great aunt which constituted most of her childhood. She was unhappy with the many restrictions that were placed on her but she chose not to rebel. Neda states; " My family left me there. I had no place to go. So what could I do? I just did like she said (43-47, p.36). For Neda being passive and compliant was an issue of survival.

Nancy, also perceived her early childhood experiences as being restricting. Nancy explains,

My mother never let me go any place, you know. It was always like you have to be in the house at this time, and she was like you can't do this and you can't do that. (11-14, p.5)

It appeared to Nancy that her mother had no confidence in her ability to make the right decision because her mother allowed her few opportunities to do so. Her mother maintained strict supervision over her activities. She sent Nancy to dance classes when she was younger, not because Nancy expressed a desire to go but rather because her mother wanted her to go. Nancy admits that she enjoyed the classes but, was sure to mention that it was her mother's idea. The same held true in terms of Nancy getting a job. It was her mother who decided that it was time for Nancy to begin work. Her mother went to the extent of securing a job for Nancy. Nancy complied. She attended dance as she was told. She showed up for work on time just as was expected.

There was not much need for the young women who did not enroll in college to rely on their common sense regarding the household rules and expectations. The rules of the house were explicit and rigidly enforced during their early childhood years. Nancy could not recall one time when her mother lifted a punishment early. Her mother went through great lengths to make sure a punishment was followed through on. Nancy spoke of being on punishment primarily because she failed to come in on time for curfew, which she explains was because her friends had a later curfew and encouraged her to stay out with them. Thus, what initially appeared to this researcher as a demonstration of self

direction on Nancy's part, with closer examination turned out to be a matter of with whom she was going to comply, her mother or her friends.

Neda left the restrictive environment of her great aunt's home when she was 12. She stayed with her mother for a short time and then went to live with her maternal aunt. Although Neda was removed from her previously oppressive environment to one of more freedom Neda's passive and compliant way of being, which was previously an adaptive method of survival, had somewhere along the way become a part of who she was any how she interacted with the world. As Neda spoke of her childhood experiences she described herself as kind of just going along with others. Neda talked about a time during her high school years when she was cutting classes and not doing her homework resulting in her failing her classes. Neda explained her behavior in terms of hanging out with the "wrong crowd". This wrong crowd of people were her boyfriend's friends and she was going along with him. When her boyfriend got transferred to another high school, she stopped hanging out with those people, which she explain allowed her to get back on the right track.

It is interesting how in the telling of their stories both Nancy and Neda emphasized complying and not their own individual decisions, although both are clearly involved. It appears to be matter of perspective. Neither of the young women seemed to recognize their role in the situations they described. They described themselves as merely going along with the demands of others.

Summary

The young women who enrolled in college described childhood experiences where they had opportunities to engage in independent problem solving and decision making which appear to support their perceptions of the need and their ability to be self directed. They appear to be capable of acting on their desires and following up on their dreams and enroll in college with little encouragement from outside sources. Yet as the young women who did not enroll in college discussed their life stories a consistent theme of compliance appeared to emerge. These young women appeared to respond to external forces which placed much of the control over their behavior outside of themselves, thus giving the impression that they were in a constant state of reacting as opposed to merely acting.

PERCEPTIONS OF SELF RELIANCE vs. DEPENDENCY

The young women who enrolled in college reported experiences during their childhood which reinforced for them the notion of being self reliant. These young women expressed feeling that their families and social environments demanded that they become progressively more responsible for themselves as they got older. In contrast, the young women who did not enroll in college reported experiences during their childhood which supported the notion of being dependent. The not college bound young women expressed feeling that their families and social environments did not support them in their ability to

take care of themselves. Instead, they encouraged them to rely on others to take care of them.

The College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Self Reliance

As the young women who enrolled in college spoke of their childhood experiences, they recalled receiving consistent messages communicated in a variety of ways which highlighted the importance of being self reliant. They interpreted from their experiences the need to be emotionally independent. They reported experiences during their childhood that supported a belief that they could and should take care of themselves.

The young women who enrolled in college interpreted a message from their childhood experiences that spoke of the need to be emotionally independent. Their perception of emotional independence denoted an attitude of "toughness" that involved a suppression of emotions such as sadness, disappointment, and fear; a denial of the need for emotional support and tenderness; and the perception that one can disconnect oneself from the emotional context of events in one's life.

These young women described childhood experiences in which the open expression of emotions such as sadness, disappointment, and fear were discouraged and presented as signs of weakness. They spoke of receiving a negative response from members of their social network when they expressed what was perceived as vulnerable emotions, when and if they were recognized at all. For example, Candy recalls the response she received from her mother and others when she expressed feelings of sadness and fear. At around five years old, she and her brothers were playing outside after a heavy

snow. On the way home, she stepped in a deep pile of snow which came over her waist and then could not move. Her brothers ran home to get their mother. Eventually, the firemen had to come to dig her out. Candy spoke of how frighten and cold she was during the ordeal. She recalls that as she stood in what she thought at the time was to be her icy grave, her mother and siblings stood by laughing while her mother periodically yelled at her to stop crying because there was no reason for her to cry.

Cori shares a more recent example of how she was encourage to be emotionally independent. When Cori made her first attempt to go to college she had very disappointing experience. When she arrived ready to check into her dorm room and register for classes, she was denied entrance and had to return home due to problems with her financial aid. Her attendance to college was delayed a year. When asked about her mother's response to the whole matter, Cori stated that her mother yelled " so what are you going to do now quit". When the interviewer inquired about whether her mother mentioned anything about how disappointed Cori must of felt or if her mother offered her any words of comfort at all, Cori immediately responded " No! My mother and I don't talk like that"(6, p.89).

The stories of Candy and Cori were not isolated experiences in their childhood's nor were they unique to the two of them. The other young women who enrolled in college cited similar experiences from which they all interpreted a message of the importance of emotional independence, as a part of being self reliant. These young women expressed having a limited tolerance for what they referred to as "mushy talk". They gave the impression that their ability to present themselves as being emotionally

tough was an important survival technique which has and would aid them in their efforts towards upward mobility. According to these young women, to a “cry baby” or to be “soft” made one “weak. As far as they were concerned, in order to make something of yourself you had to be emotionally strong and able to overcome the expected challenges of life and move on.

These young women appeared to separate themselves from the emotional context of the events in their lives. They expressed the attitude of “ This and that happened. It was hard, but I got over it and moved on”. During the interview process, these young women shared stories of difficult events in their lives that would be classified by many as tragedies, such as the death of a close family member, circumstances of parental neglect, the substance abuse addiction of their mothers and siblings, in great detail, yet with no more emotion than if they were reading off the contents of a grocery list. As they spoke of the difficulties in life it was clear that they were not looking for sympathy. To them they were just talking about their lives.

The young women who enrolled in college reported receiving a consistent message about self reliance from many of the women in their social networked when they were growing up. The message was not in any particular context or related to any particular thing. The message came in the form of things that they observed others going through in their lives. They spoke of watching their mothers and others struggling to make ends meet with the occasional assistance from others who did not have much to spare. They also recalled their mothers making statements to them like “Honey, you got to take care of yourself in this world. Because you can’t depend on nobody but yourself”. According to

these young women, they were surrounded by constant reminders of the importance of being self reliant.

Their notion of needing to take care of themselves was also supported by their own experiences. Their mothers' sometimes intentional and sometimes unintentional, unavailability forced them to learn how to take care of themselves. Carol states: " My mother would us sometimes for days. I had to learn how to take care of myself and my brothers and sister" (12-15, p.31). Candy's mother would often got to bars the even until late at night when she was younger and then sleep late in the mornings. She would often not be available to make Candy's breakfast in the morning. Candy explains how she learned to handle the situation:

I was like 4 or 5 and I was fixing my own breakfast. My mother would leave the milk and cereal on the shelf so I could reach it and I would get my own breakfast. My older brothers and sister wouldn't help me and I knew not to wake up my mother. So I would get it myself or be hungry. (11-22,p.62).

As the young women spoke of how when they got older, requesting assistance from their mothers was often met with some reluctance on their mother's part or a comment such as " You Know I 'm not always going to be here!: In response to their mothers apparent reluctance , they began to limit their requests and instead would do for themselves. These young women went out on their own to find employment. They decided that they did not want to have to ask their mothers or other adults for money, which they described as being most often an unpleasant experience characterized by angry comments and the impression that their requests were unreasonable and unnecessary.

These young women picked up the not so subtle message of not asking for anything if they could at all help it.

The Not College-Bound Participants' Perceptions of Dependency

The young women who did not enroll in college described experiences in their childhood's which appeared to highlight their perceptions of insecurity about being able to take care of themselves. They did not interpret message of self reliance or emotional independence. These young women interpreted a message of socialization which supported the notion that, as women, they needed to be taken care of by their families, when they were young, and by a man as they got older.

Nancy and Neda did not express the notion that they needed to be 'tough' emotionally. In fact, they describe experiences where they found the expression of vulnerable emotions to be beneficial to them in many ways including as a way of controlling others. Nancy describes herself as being a very emotional person. She goes on to tell how being way that has worked for her:

I don't like to see my mother in bad situations you know that makes me upset and my mother knows that's why she tries to make everything go smooth you know because she knows that I will be upset. So, instead of her worrying about having to go without she worries about me a lot. (13-21,p.23).

In this statement Nancy is referring to her concerns about her mother and her mother's relationships with men. Nancy has apparently found the expression of emotions to be a useful source of control in some cases based on the positive response she receives from her mother. Neda also talks about the positive benefits of expressing vulnerable emotions.

Neda spoke of how when she is sad and wants to talk, she walks around in front of her aunt with a sad expression on her face her aunt will ask her what's troubling her. By acting in this way it prevents her from having to actually reach out for assistance when she needs to. Thus, these young women are encourage not to be emotionally independent.

These young women described a seemingly abrupt transitions from an environment of restrictions to one of more freedom as creating for them a sort of crisis for which they were ill prepared. Although while they were in their restricted environments they came to resent the boundaries that were placed on them, without them, they quickly came to miss the feeling of security those boundaries provided. For Nancy, the sudden and unexpected change occurred when she started to go to high school. She was not forewarned that when she became a certain age the previous restrictions on her behavior would be lifted. Although Nancy expressed feeling pleased about her newly granted freedom, it was quite frightening to her. She expressed personal doubts as to whether she was prepared. Nancy had this to say about her transition from middle school to high school and her newly granted freedom:

I didn't want to go. I mean I'm just entering the world.
I'm going by myself to school now. I'm going on the train
and stuff like that, so it was a big step for me, because my
mother never let me do anything. (6-10, p.5)

This abrupt change, as Nancy perceived it, appears to bring to bear some insecurities as she is "entering the into the world". Neda shared a similar feeling in regards to what she perceived as an abrupt change. When she was around 12, her mother unexpectedly took her from her great aunt's home. During the time she spent with her mother, they were constantly on the move, going from one homeless shelter to another or one friend's house

to another. Her mother continued to use drugs. In one day, Neda went from living in an environment where she felt trapped and restricted, where her behavior was constantly monitored and she had a routine, to an environment with no structured supervision and no routine.

As the young women spoke, they described nothing in their childhood experiences prior to their abrupt transitions that demonstrated to them that they were in fact capable of taking care of themselves. Being so unprepared, the abrupt transition they described appear to have set them up for failure which served to reinforce these women's self doubts. These young women came to rely on the sense of security and the perception of being taken care that was provided by those restrictive boundaries. Neda explains; "If I would have stayed with my mother , I would have been having kids and everything" (10-11, p. 29). Neda expresses the belief in this statement that left for an extended period of time to her own devices, without someone to restrict her behavior, she would be unable to ward off the negative influences of her environment. If she remained with her mother, she would be responsible for taking care of herself and in such a case the results would not be positive. Nancy expressed a similar sentiment.

These young women expressed receiving messages from others in their social network which appeared to support their doubts about their abilities to be self reliant. For example, Nancy did not allow herself the time to resolve her concerns and fears about entering the world and how to managing her newly found freedom. Instead, she established a connection with a young man and placed herself in the position of having him

be responsible for her. It was an arrangement that her mother encouraged. Nancy explains:

She [mother was like he's responsible for you now so when, I say oh mom I'm going out. And she would be like who you going with [boyfriend]? and I would say yeah and she would be like okay. I could come home anytime I want than as long as I'm with him. (9-17, p.17)

The message from her mother is that you need a man to take care of you because you can not take care of yourself.

Neda and Nancy both cited patterns of different restrictions and expectations placed on them than were placed on their brothers. Their brothers were provided with noticeably more freedom. Nancy states, "My mother lets my brother get away with anything and I tell her and she is like no I don't. But that's a lie" (38-40, p.6). The actions of their brothers were not as closely monitored. The indirect message here is that young women need to be protected and watched over while young men are expected to take care of themselves. These young women appear to have been encouraged not to be self reliant.

Summary

The young women who enrolled in college described childhood experiences of increased responsibility, emotional independence, and experiences of the unintentional and intentional unavailability of their caregivers as supporting the message of the importance of being self reliant. The young women who did not enroll in college, described childhood experiences of restrictions, and then an abrupt removal of the restrictions which they were

not progressively prepared for reinforcing their self doubts about their capability to take care of themselves and need to be dependent.

PERCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE vs. INCOMPETENCE

A sense of competence is developed through the accumulation of competent action in areas which are culturally defined as important (Ogbu, 1981). All the young women in this study identified being able to take care of oneself and others as important adult task for African American young women, with emphasis placed on taking care of others. All the young women identified women whom they perceived as taking care of other people as being women the ones they admired and viewed as strong. These young women associated strength and competence with a women's ability to take care of others. Neda described her maternal aunt as being a "strong Black women" because she is the one in the extended family and social network that everyone goes to for help. The other young women used a similar label to describe women in their social networks who held a similar position within their social networks as Neda's aunt.

Based on what was expressed during their interviews, the perceptions of these young women regarding their sense of competence appears to be strongly connected to their perceived ability to take care of themselves and others. The sense of competence derived from their perceptions of being able to take care of themselves and others appears to support their perceptions of being able to take risks, such as taking action to enroll in college. The young women who enrolled in college saw themselves as being capable of taking care of others and had accumulated experiences doing so which appear to translate

for them into a sense of competence. The young women who did not enroll in college did not see themselves as being able to take care of others nor do they perceive themselves as having experiences in their lives doing so which appears to translate for them into a sense of incompetence.

CONCLUSION

This chapter focused on the childhood experiences of the study participants and their interpretation of messages of socialization which appeared significant in regards to their ability to take action toward enrollment. Emerging from their discussions were two patterns of perceptions considered significant in the development of adult tasks. Among the college-bound young women there was a pattern of perceptions which emerged from their childhood experiences which supported their view of themselves as being self directed, self reliant, and competent. The way in which they spoke of their childhood experiences denoted a sense of personal control over their life outcomes and perception of themselves as being actors. They described a socialization process the emphasized and provided ample opportunities for them to engage in independent problem solving and decision making as well as experiences that supported their perceptions of being able to take care of themselves. Among the not college-bound women there was a pattern of perceptions which emerged from their childhood experiences which supported their view of themselves as being passive, dependent, and lacking competence. The way they spoke of their childhood experiences denoted a sense of personal powerlessness in terms of

determining their life outcomes and a perception of themselves as reacting to as oppose to acting in response to the various circumstances of their lives.

CHAPTER FIVE

MOTHERING AND MOTIVATION

INTRODUCTION

Motivation refers to a state of mind whereby an individual is moved to take action. The study of motivation has been an exploration toward understanding why individuals take particular action, it is an attempt to understand the underlying force behind human behavior (Heckhausen, Schmalt, and Schneider, 1985).

Theories of motivation in human behavior have moved away from the discussion of innate drives to that of cognitive processes. Cognitive processes are proposed to be the primary antecedent influencing human behavior. Several theoretical constructs have emerged from this perspective such as locus of control, casual attributions, and self efficacy, to name just a few. Theoretical constructs such as those mentioned, tend to have a strong individualistic orientation and tend to view motivation as a stagnate unitary characteristic of the individual (Hunt, 1978; Rueda & Moll, 1994). For example, the locus of control construct refers to the individual's generalized belief about personal responsibility for outcomes in their attempt to understand human motivation (Findley & Cooper, 1983). In the case of casual attribution the focus is on the individual's perceived cause of success and failure in achievement related situations, such as whether it was due to ability or effort. Subjects are then attributed with a particular attributional style which is said to have distinct behavioral consequences (Graham, 1989; Weiner, 1986). Regarding the self efficacy construct attention is focused on the individual's perceptions

of self in relation to personal ability (Bandura, 1982). These and other theories of motivation as stated by Rueda and Moll (1994);

are limited in that they conceptualize motivation as an individual “in-the-head” phenomenon, with little or, no attention paid to the sociocultural context and the interpersonal processes within which individual activity occurs (p.117).

There is call by some motivation theorist, for a more complex conceptualization of motivation that moves beyond the single variable, cause and effect, one motive paradigm to a more communal perspective. It is proposed that the unit of analysis should be the person-in-relation instead of being just the person. In the person-in- relation construct the unit of analysis becomes the person in relation with others (deCharms, 1978; Hunt, 1978; Rueda & Moll,1994)).

Rueda and Moll (1994) introduce a conceptualization of motivation that recognizes the interconnectedness of social and cognitive activity. They propose a sociocultural perspective to the study of motivation. Rueda and Moll (1994), suggest in their sociocultural perspective that motivation is,

accomplished, it is created, it is socially and culturally relative, and it is context specific. It is not a unitary phenomenon, a general, invariant mind, of an abstract property of individuals; it is manifested in activities, involving most prominently, the mediation of other human beings (p.132).

This perspective suggest that motivation is something that evolves out of human interaction, as oppose to being something that is innate or characteristic of an individual. In addition, it makes the point that motivation is culturally relative and context specific.

Therefore stating that individual motivation can vary based on the task and that any task is subject to the influence of the cultural orientation of the person and the other people in their social network. The sociocultural perspective also suggest that variations in the interactive patterns and social context can account for variations in motivation (Rueda & Moll, 1994).

Although the sociocultural perspective recognizes motivation as being a by product of the complex interaction process between individuals and their social environment, discussion regarding the details of this interactive process are limited. In this chapter, the discussion of the mother-daughter relationship and the interactive patterns which takes place within that context may provide content for the continued conversation among those who adhere to the sociocultural perspective.

The mother-daughter relationship is considered to be an important connection in the process of self development for young women (Surrey, 1991). Although there are several dimensions of the mother-daughter relationship, this chapter focuses on the interactive processes within the context of the mother-daughter relationship which appear to facilitate in some cases, and not facilitate in others, a sense of motivation in the daughters.

The mother-daughter relationship has emerged during the course of this study as a significant source of motivation in terms of college enrollment for the study participants. An examination of the interactive process which occurs between the college bound young women and their mothers reveals a cognitive-interactive process which results in a sense of motivation in these young women, that was noticeably absent among the not-college

bound young women. This cognitive-interactive process is referred to by this researcher as a “vacillating emotional tension”. The vacillating emotional tension describes a state of mind which appears to evolve out of the young women’s interactions with their social environment, more specifically in this case with their mothers. This particular cognitive-interactive process appears to facilitate the transformation of traditionally negative influences and role models (i.e. a drug addicted mother) into powerful sources of motivation. These young women appear to be supported into action, not by their lofty aspirations for the future but, by their intense fears of ending up like their mothers and others they observe in their low income communities. These young women are not aspiring to be rich and successful, they are aspiring not to be poor

The vacillating emotional tension appears to evolve out of the daughter’s perceptions of empathy directed toward the mother and the interpretation by the daughter of a consistent message from the mother demanding that the daughter be different from her. The conscious or unconscious vacillating emotional tension signifies an emotional response to the daughter’s perceptions of herself as being like her mother, while simultaneously struggling with desires to want to be different. However, in order for the vacillating emotional tension to evolve, the daughter must have the capacity to empathize with her mother. Jordan (1991) describe the process of empathizing:

Empathy begins with the basic capacity and motivation for human relatedness that allows perception of the other’s affective cues, verbal and nonverbal. This followed by a surrender to affective arousal in oneself- as if the perceived affective cues were one’s own- thus providing a temporary identification with the other’s emotional state (p. 28).

In order to empathize with another person, the individual must be able to both identify with and differentiate oneself from the other person. Thus, a perception of a strong sense of self and ego boundary flexibility is important in terms of one's ability to empathize (Jordan, 1991).

The college-bound young women appeared to find a sense of motivation which evolves from the mother-daughter relationship. These young women demonstrated a capacity to empathize with their mothers which was evident in the way they talked about them. They appeared to be able to both identify with their mothers and differentiate themselves from her. The existence of the vacillating emotional tension was identified in their discussions of their future aspirations. The not college-bound young women did not appear to find a sense of motivation from the mother-daughter relationship. Neither of the young women appeared to demonstrate the ability to empathize with their mothers, thus there was no opportunity for the vacillating emotional tension to evolve, which appears to fuel the sense of motivation. Interestingly, they depict different dynamics relating to their inability to empathize. Nancy's sense of self appears to become entangled in the confusing and contradictory perceptions of herself in relationship with her mother. She appears to fluctuate between becoming overly identified with her to the point where her ego boundaries became blurred and then differentiating herself to the extent that she is unable to relate. Nancy appears unable to simultaneously identify with and differentiate from her mother, which blocks her ability to empathize. Neda, on the other hand, expresses an inability to identify with her mother and appears to demonstrate an exaggerated sense of differentiation which prevents her from empathizing with her mother.

This chapter shares the perceptions of the study participants' relationships with their mothers and describes the process by which the young women who enrolled in college appear to find a sense of motivation from their mothers and how the young women who did not enroll in college appear not to be motivated by their mothers.

THE COLLEGE-BOUND PARTICIPANTS

All of the young women who enrolled in college had a relationship with their mothers which developed during the time they lived with her. Their mothers represented a central figure in their lives. Cori and Carla lived with their mothers since birth and continue to do so. Charity stayed with her mother consistently until around age 13, with the exception of the third and fourth grade when she stayed with her godmother during the school year. Charity was removed from her mother's care due to her mother's substance abuse and placed, through foster care, in the home of her godmother. Although Charity has not lived with her mother for several years, she does maintain infrequent contact with her. Candy lived with her mother consistently until she was around nine years old at which time she moved back and forth between her mother's home and the home of her mother's best friend for weeks and sometimes months at a time. Candy stated that she continue to go back and forth between her mother's home and her mother's best friend's home until age 12. She stated that she did it in order to take a break from her mother's unpredictable periods of incessant arguing. Candy remained with her mother until she was placed in a group home for two years at the age of 14 because of the escalating violence between her mother and herself. Candy returned home after the two years in the group

home and lived to stay with the mother until she left home to go away to college. Carol lived with her mother until around the age of 11, when she and her siblings were removed and placed in foster care due to their mother's substance abuse problems. After she entered foster care, the visits with her mother became increasingly infrequent until they stopped completely five years ago, some two years prior to her mother's death. Although the time periods for which these young women stayed with their mothers varies, as the young women described the nature of their relationship with their mothers, a number of common themes emerged: the mother-daughter relationships were hierarchical, emotionally distant, accepting and understanding.

The dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship were clearly hierarchical among all the young women. They described their mothers as being the unquestioned authority figure in their lives. There existed between these young women and their mothers a clear separation of roles and identification of status; the children were subordinates and their mothers were in charge. Their mothers' position as that of an authority figure remained constant irrespective of their mothers' ability to function as head of the household. Their mothers' authoritative role was something that they viewed as unvarying and, therefore, accepted as being inherent in the role as their mother. For instance, Charity took on some adult responsibilities of the household in response to her mother's shortcomings, yet, according to Charity, the fluctuation of their duties did not make them equals. According to Charity, her mother's authoritative position remains constant, even now, although she is no longer under her mother's care and supervision. Charity states:

I would never disrespect her in any kind of way, even though, you know, she is on drugs and whatever. (45-47, p. 4)

Respect was an important dynamic in the relationship with their mothers. To these young women, respect meant not talking back, not making judgments about their mothers' behavior, and placing significance on the fact that they are their mothers. The clarity of the roles in the mother-daughter relationship, coupled with what could be described as emotional distance, appears to assist these young women in being able to view themselves as individuals separate from their mothers.

The perception of emotional distance was a conclusion drawn by this researcher based on the young women's descriptions of the affective dynamics and communication patterns of the mother-daughter relationship. As the young women discussed their relationships with their mothers, none of the young women described a period in their relationship where there was a liberal exchange of affections or a sense of strong attachment such that they became nervous or upset when their mothers left them. Cori stated:

I was never the type to cry for my mother. When she left to go somewhere, I would just say 'bye!
(2-3, p. 47)

Cori expresses a common sentiment held by all the young women. It appears as if, from the time of their first memories, the process of separation from their mothers had begun to evolve.

These young women did not describe circumstances whereby their mothers appeared to cater to their emotional needs or concerns. Carla mentioned that during much of her childhood her mother's attention was directed toward her older brother and sister, who are 10 and 11 years Carla's senior, because they were struggling with drug addiction.

Carla expressed having a number of concerns and fears about what was going on, yet she and her mother never talked about them. Instead of addressing their emotional concerns, the study participants perceived their mothers focusing attention on maintaining their physical subsistence: food, clothing, and shelter. Candy states:

Me and Mother we weren't like kissy kissy or nothing like that but I remember when I was young and we were on welfare my mother use to wait until after we all eat before she did to make sure there was enough food (16-23, p.67).

Yet, irrespective of what they may have experienced with their mothers, and this researcher's perceptions of emotional distance, all of the young women expressed feeling confident that their mothers loved them. Similar to their perceptions of their mother's authority, they saw her feelings of love toward them as inherent in her role as mother.

These young women expressed a sense of loyalty, respect, and love for their mothers. These feelings manifested themselves in their conversations as they appeared to temper what they perceived as their mothers' shortcomings by also identifying her attributes. Given their experiences with their mothers, who objectively appeared cold and unreliable, it was surprising not to hear any anger or resentment in their voices as they described what objectively appeared to be disappointing events in their lives associated with their mothers. For example, there was no anger or resentment when Charity and Carol spoke of how their mothers left them to attend to their drug habits, or when Candy mentioned how her mother never visited her in the group home, or when Cori mentioned that her mother never attended any of her achievement activities. Instead, there was a common phrase that these young women used in response to much of what their mother's said and did : "That's just the way my mother is." This phrase seemed to express a sense

of understanding and acceptance of their mothers which incorporated both their mothers' assets and her shortcomings. These young women expressed the belief that their mothers gave them whatever they had to give, however limited that may have been. They appeared able to separate their mothers' problems from the context of their relationships. Thus, they did not allow themselves to become entangled in feelings of deprivation and anger, and remained open to draw from their mothers some functional lessons about the methods of survival. Furthermore, they could see themselves as separate from their mothers while still identifying with them.

The college bound young women appeared able to identify with their mothers and their mothers' life circumstances. Their ability to identify with their mothers manifested itself in their efforts to consistently place their mothers' behavior in the context of her circumstances. These young women appeared to identify with their mothers' struggles to try to make a way for themselves and their children under difficult circumstances. These young women describe these circumstances using the terms of "we went through" to refer to themselves and their mothers, indicating a connection, a sense of togetherness and understanding. Their sense of identification also manifested itself in their attempts to explain their mothers' behavior such as, when Dana explained her mother's unavailability to her by identifying how difficult a time it was for her mother because two of her children were addicted to drugs at the same time; when Cori explains her mother's lack of attendance at her events by highlighting the fact that her mother had to work to support Cori and herself; or when Charity who attributes her mother's drug addiction to her

mother's hard and difficult childhood that involved Charity's grandmother being on drugs also. These young women appeared to feel for their mothers and their mothers situations.

These young women demonstrated a capacity to empathize with their mothers.

Carla express a common sentiment held by the college bound women when she states:

I feel for my mother. I mean she raised all of us by herself
and that's not easy. My mother had it hard (47-54,p.4)

There was a clear relational bond shared between the two of them. Their relationships with their mothers could be characterized by a common knowledge of who each other was as an individual separate from one another, yet connected to each other. Cori expresses the sentiment of all the young women when she states "I know how my mother is and she knows how I am" (17-18, p.103). Such a statement communicates a sense of understanding that was shared between the two of them. Thus, if she and the other young women believed they understood their mothers, to a certain extent they must be able to empathize with them.

Beyond identifying with their mothers, the young women who enrolled in college interpreted a consistent message from their mothers that they should and could live their lives differently from their mothers. Such a message was communicated both verbally and non-verbally. The verbal messages were comments made by their mothers such as "You better get an education so you don't have to struggle like me;" or "You'd better wait to have kids. Can't you see how hard it is?" and "Don't be like me." It was expressed nonverbal in the various ways their mothers encouraged them, intentionally and unintentionally, to be self-directed and self-reliant and provided opportunities for them to develop a sense of competence.

In their conversations about their aspirations for the future, their mothers emerged as role models, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, of how not to live their lives. Because they could empathize with their mothers, seeing themselves as separate from but also identifying with their mothers, there appeared to be an unconscious vacillating emotional tension that emerge around their perceptions of their mothers, themselves, and how they would like to be. They seemed to struggle with the notion that in many ways they were like their mothers and could see themselves in their mother's, actions, her personality, values and beliefs. Their perceptions of the common attributes that they shared with their mothers appeared to create a sense of fear in them that if they were not careful their lives could turn out like their mothers' lives. Their sense of separateness, however, allowed them to plan for different life outcomes. Sometimes the young women expressed their desires to be different from their mother indirectly such as is demonstrated in this statement by Cori:

I don't want to be living with my mother until I'm like 30 or 26 or whatever. I want to be out there on my own. I don't want to be like that. (1-4, p. 87)

In this statement, Cori is indirectly referring to her mother. Cori and her mother moved in with Cori's maternal grandmother when she was around four or five years old. She and her mother lived with her grandmother until Cori was around 14 years old when her grandmother died. Some of the young women expressed their desires to be different more openly, as in the case of Carol:

I'm getting the determination that I have from my mother, the way she was, and knowing that I want to be as far away from that as I can. (21-24, p. 40)

Whether directly or indirectly, the desire to live a different kind of life from their mothers was felt by all the young women who enrolled in college.

The vacillating emotional tension -wanting to be different from and fearing the possibility of becoming like their mothers-becomes apparent through the young women's statements. For example, Cori stated:

I most definitely don't want no children. Being like my mother had me when she was 19, you know. I'm like, will that happen to me because I'm only 18. (4-7, p. 87)

and Charity explained:

It was like a cycle 'cause my mother was living with her mother [Charity's godmother's mother] because my grandmother wasn't doing good. I'm living with my godmother because my mother isn't doing well. It's like a cycle. It's like I would be the one who takes one smoke or sip and I would be the one hooked. (12-14, p. 24)

Inherent in these statements by Cori and Charity is a sense of fear and doubt. They expressed a concern about being like their mothers as if it were a force which operated independent of their control. These young women have a heightened sense of awareness of these conditions which they attribute to their mothers' current status and adopt an exaggerated position in their attempts to avoid it. For example, Cori remains celibate and has not yet had a young man whom she would refer to as her boyfriend. Carol and Charity stay completely away from drugs and alcohol. Carla engages in numerous activities so as not to become stagnant and uninvolved as she observes her mother become entangled in a monotonous routine of home and work, with no real friends or activities outside the family network. Candy began working at an early age so not to have to be

dependent on welfare or a man. These young women stand witness to their mothers escaping into the isolation of their bedrooms, sitting in front of the public housing projects as life seemingly passes them by, or escaping into a life of drugs. The vacillating emotional tension that evolves from the mother-daughter relationship appears to empower these young women to do something different with their lives.

THE NOT COLLEGE -BOUND PARTICIPANTS

The not college- bound young women did not appear to find a sense of motivation from their mothers as did the college- bound young women. Neither Nancy nor Neda appeared able to empathize with their mothers. Nancy appeared to over identify with her mother, often blurring the ego boundaries that separate them. As a result, she became what this researcher refers to as “entangled.” Neda, on the other hand, appeared to have cut herself off so severely from her mother that she was unable to identify with her mother at all and became what this researcher refers to as “isolated.” Nancy and Neda demonstrate differing dynamic conditions in the mother-daughter relationship, that of entanglement and isolation, yet appear to manifest a similar condition of disempowerment. This section discusses both dynamic conditions and explores their impact on the young women’s ability to take action toward enrollment.

The Entangled Mother-Daughter Relationship

Nancy has always lived with her mother. Their relationship appears non-hierarchical emotionally close, and accepting, Nancy describes her relationship with her mother as being good and the two of them as being very close. Nancy states:

My mother never went any place without me because I was her only child. I was her first born for six years. Even when my brother was born, it was like still me and my mother.
(48-54, p. 22)

In this statement, Nancy speaks to her perception of the strong bond between her mother and herself, a bond which could not be disturbed even by her brother's entrance into the family. Several times during the interview she made reference to the strong connection which existed between her mother and herself. Also interesting is the fact that throughout several hours of interviewing in which she discusses her experience of growing up, she only mentions her brother twice which appears to communicate a perception of his marginal position in the family system from her perspective. The extreme closeness of the mother and daughter is reflected in the apparent exclusion of other family members, such closeness appears to make differentiating and empathizing difficult for Nancy to achieve.

As Nancy describes her relationship with her mother, she reveals to this researcher a series of contradictory messages that appear to plague the mother-daughter relationship. Although, Nancy appeared to be enmeshed in the contradictions which were communicated, she does not appear to be consciously aware of them. Yet, the contradictory messages are quite apparent in the content of her discussion during the

interview process. For example, Nancy stated, “my mother is a very independent woman” (51, p. 1). Yet, as Nancy describes her experiences growing up with her mother, she revealed her mother as a questionable provider. Nancy talked about an incident when she and her mother did not have enough money for food and the two of them shared a slice of pizza as their meal. Nancy describes how they were evicted because her mother could not pay the rent or how they were constantly moving for the same reason. There were times, according to Nancy, when she did not receive presents on Christmas. Nancy said that her mother is able to take care of herself and her children, yet during the interview process, Nancy appeared preoccupied and concerned about her mother’s financial security she made repeated references regarding her concern about her mother’s financial problems. Thus, Nancy gave the impression that she is not quite as convinced of her mother’s ability to care for herself and her children as Nancy tends to verbalize

As Nancy describes the dynamics of their mother-daughter relationship, a theme of confusing messages is once again revealed. Nancy appeared to interpret two clear but different messages from her mother regarding her role and position in the relationship. Nancy appeared to fluctuate between perceptions of herself as being the daughter and herself as being the friend. Nancy described times when her mother appears to be pressuring her about her future plans and making demands that she take some action toward college enrollment, which Nancy interprets as being mothering. At other times, she and her mother exchanged stories about their respective love interests or took a weekend trip together on a double date. The lack of clarity regarding boundaries makes

differentiation and empathy difficult for Nancy to achieve as she becomes entangled in the contradictions.

Nancy speaks of having the type of relationship with her mother where she and her mother can speak openly to one another. Their are feelings of affection that they feel toward each other are openly expressed. Nancy reported telling her mother that she loves her several times, and frequently hearing the same from her. Nancy expresses feeling very comfortable about telling her mother anything. For example, she stated that she was not the least bit reluctant to go to her when she discovered that she was pregnant when she was in eleventh grade. Her mother responded to her in a very warm and supportive way. Nancy stated that her mother was able to verbalize to her about her expectations regarding her future. Nancy states:

She doesn't want me to be pregnant. She don't want me to have a kid. She's always telling me how she don't want me to be like her. She didn't finish college. So you know she wants me to finish so I would be able to have a life and stuff. (40-47, p. 16)

Nancy's mother communicated to her a verbal message that said that she did not want Nancy to be like her, however the nonverbal messages, appeared to be communicating something different. Nancy's mother verbally requested that she be independent while she non-verbally encouraged Nancy to make connections. Nancy's mother appeared to Nancy to have more faith in her boyfriend's ability to take care of her than she did in Nancy's ability to take care of herself. Her mother's lack of confidence was also manifested in what Nancy described as her mother's relentless pressure for her to enroll in college. Nancy perceived her mother as pressuring her and attempting to run her life. Nancy

expressed concern that her mother will not give her the space to make her own decision, which she perceives as her mother's lack of confidence that she would make the right decision. In response to what she perceives as pressure coming from her mother, Nancy does nothing. In response to what Nancy perceives as her mother's lack of confidence Nancy is disempowered.

Nancy seems to be struggling with two messages which she interprets from her mother, the verbal one which says that you need to be able take care of yourself and the nonverbal message that you need to have someone take care of you. The struggle for motivation appears to be exacerbated by the fact that Nancy appears over-identify with her mother who appears disempowered. Several times during the interview process Nancy made reference to herself as being just like her mother. For example, Nancy states:

My mother likes Carl, you know, she was like Carl you're responsible for her. So that's when she let me do things. Carl and me are like her and my father. My mother's grandmother didn't let her do anything either until she met my father and then it was like she could go and he was responsible for her. (10-18, p. 7)

Inherent in her mother's actions is a powerful nonverbal message that she needs to have a man to take care of her, just like her mother did. Nancy believes that her mother's problems are related to the fact that she does not have a man:

Not saying anything bad about my mother, but I don't want to be by myself for the rest of my life. I don't want to be alone. I'm not saying that my mother can't make it on her own because she has, but it was real hard for her (5-12, p. 33).

Nancy appears to be entangled in the web of confusing messages from her mother and her perceptions of herself as being like her mother. Although her mother says she wants Nancy to be different, her actions do not appear to support this notion. Her mother tells her she wants her to have a career and be able to take care of herself. Yet, her mother does not support Nancy in her independence. Her mother does not appear to support her in the development of a sense of competence. And as a role model her mother appears to be telling her that she wants Nancy to be different while trying to protect her own perception that her life is not that bad or that in some ways she may have failed. Nancy appears to be of the opinion that being like her mother is not necessarily a bad thing. Her mother has apparently not been successful in showing her that the way she is living is not so great. This researcher believes that sometimes parents acting out their own desires to shield their children from early exposure to realities of life, indirectly provide for their children a distorted view of what life is all about. I believe such is the case with Nancy and her mother.

The Isolated Mother-Daughter Relationship

Neda described a different dynamic between her mother and herself. First is Neda's perception of a lack of relationship existing between the two of them. There are no feelings of affection shared by Neda and her mother, however, there are no real expressions of anger or resentment either. According to Neda, her mother is an entity far from any connection to her. Neda has insulated herself from her mother. During the interview, the only positive things she had to say about her mother was that her mother

was pretty when she was young and that, during the time she stayed with her, Neda was kept clean and never had to sleep in the streets. Neda did not appear to feel any connection to her mother. Neither did Neda express feelings acceptance or understanding toward her mother.

Neda did not speak in terms of having a relationship with her mother, nor does she want one. She believes that her mother will never get off drugs because she has been on drugs since before Neda was born. Neda lived with her mother for a total of two or three years over the course of her life. She was with her mother for a brief time when she was an infant, but was primarily under the care of her two older brothers because her mother left them alone for weeks at a time. She was with her mother again when she was 12, when her mother removed her from the name of her Great Aunt which Neda believes her mother's motives to come get her were so that her mother could get extra public assistance money. During the time she spent with her mother, they were constantly on the move from one homeless shelter to another or one friend's house to another. She managed to attend school sometimes during that period because she wanted to go so she could see her friends and so she could have something to do rather than because her mother made her go.

Neda believes, "If I would have stayed with my mother, I would have been having kids and everything" (10-11, p. 29). To Neda, her mother had nothing to offer her that was worth having. Neda denies strongly any connection between herself and her mother. She denies that she looks or is anything like her. To Neda, her mother is this kind of entity that exists separate from her.

It is difficult to describe the feelings of separateness that Neda projects and these feelings are equally difficult to overlook. Neda does not appear to have made a strong connection with any of the women in her life. She does not talk of having a mother in her life, nor does she seem to see herself in relation to her mother. She does not speak in terms of comparisons or lessons that she may have learned from her mother. Neda has the attitude that her mother is who she is and that Neda is who she is and that is about it.

It became easier to understand Neda's feeling of separateness as she began to share her experiences growing up. During her childhood, she had more than her share of being shuffled around. From her mother, Neda appeared to learn about feeling insecure, about not being able to trust, that to survive she needed to get along and, most important, how to cut herself off from people. Neda appears to have developed a rigid sense of separateness in response to her mother's abandonment. Neda reminds this researcher of a kind of rubber ball with no bounce, just rolling with the punches, offering no resistance, moving from one situation to another, neither receiving nor leaving any dents.

Because Neda does not identify or empathize with her mother there is not the same kind of tension that the young women who enrolled in college described as evolving out of the mother daughter relationship. The young women who enrolled in college believe that some connection between themselves and their mother existed. Neda did not feel any vacillating emotional tension because she did not believe that there was any possibility that she could be like her mother, so her mother was not a source of motivation for her.

CONCLUSION

For the college- bound young women, their relationship with their mothers could be characterized as empathic in which these young women demonstrated the ability to place themselves in the position of their mothers and thus look upon their mothers' behavior in the context of her situation. As a result, they became more aware of the decisions and actions their mothers took and the consequences of those actions. In addition, they were able to consider what about themselves was like their mother, which appeared to create a fear in them that it was possible for them to end up in life like their mothers. The empathic relationship between these young women and their mothers facilitated the emergence of what this researcher calls a vacillating emotional tension. The vacillating emotional tension sets up a situation of heightened awareness and increased fear of leading lives that parallel their mother's lives which appears to motivate these young women in the opposite direction of their mothers' life course. It is this vacillating emotional tension that aided in motivating these young women to enroll in college.

In contrast, the not college- bound did not describe the existence of an empathic relationship between themselves and their mothers. Nancy described a very close nurturing mother-daughter relationship, that did not allow for separateness so was not motivating, but limiting, for Nancy. Nancy, in feeling close to her mother, became entangled in a series of confusing and contradictory messages. Her mother told her verbally that she wanted Nancy to be different from her, be able to take care of herself, and go to college, yet the nonverbal messages communicated the exact opposite. In the confusion, Nancy tends toward being like her mother and is unable to find a clear sense of

herself and the source of her own power. Neda, on the other hand, described herself as having no relationship with her mother. Neda's experiences with her mother seemed to magnify Neda's feelings of insecurity. In response, Neda has insulated herself from her mother and is, therefore, unable to see through the insulation to the lessons she could possibly learn from her mother's shortcomings. Neda's rigid boundaries did not allow her to identify with her mother, resulting in Neda being disempowered.

The college bound young women were empowered from the mother-daughter relationship, whereas the non-college bound young women were not. Although, the mother-daughter relationship is not the only opportunity for motivation for a young woman, it is no less an important one if the proper dynamics exist.

CHAPTER SIX

IN THE ABSENCE OF MY FATHER

INTRODUCTION

There are only a few men within the boundaries of the social networks of all the young women of this study, which appears to magnify the significance of their relationships with their fathers in shaping their perceptions of men and constructing their ideas about their role as women in relationships with men. As the young women spoke of their fathers, there were striking parallel between how they perceived their fathers and their perceptions of men in general, though it is not clear if such parallels are conscious ones. Their perceptions of themselves in relationship with their fathers appears to serve as a model for how they relate to men as partners. The level of significance they place on the establishment of male partnerships appears related to their perceptions of the quality of their relationship with their fathers. In addition, their expectations of what men can or will contribute to their lives does not seem to extend beyond their perceptions of what their fathers provided for them.

Although the fathers of the study participants were primarily absent from their households, they emerged as a factor in determining whether these young women enrolled in college or not. For the young women who enrolled in college their experiences with their fathers as not being a viable source of financial support and a questionable source of emotional support appears to confirm their view of the necessity to be self reliant. For the young women who enrolled in college, the notion of depending on a man to lift them out of poverty was not considered as a viable or a desired option. Instead, these young women were of the belief that if they are to change their economic status it will be because of their own doing. In contrast, the young women who did not enroll in college expressed a different reaction to their experiences with their fathers. The marginal participation of

their fathers did not spark feelings of self reliance in these young women but supported feelings of dependency. Their experiences with their fathers appears to have left these young women wanting, concerned about the something that was missing in their lives due to their fathers' unavailability. In response, these young women appear to take an approach to their father-daughter relationship whereby they adjusted their expectations based on what they believe their fathers can and will provide, with the focus on maintaining the connection rather than on the quality of the relationship. The young women who did not enroll in college appear to recreate a similar dynamic with the men in their lives placing a great deal of significance and investing a great deal of energy on maintaining the relationship.

This chapter will share the perceptions of the study participants regarding the nature of the father daughter relationship, their perceptions of men in general, and their role as women in relationship with men, all of which appear to have an impact on the ability of these young women to take action toward college enrollment.

THE FATHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

During the interview process, none of the women had any difficulty expressing themselves. The words seemed to just flow except when it came to the discussion of their fathers. For most of them, this was the first time they shared openly their feelings and perceptions of their fathers. In their discussions they often struggled for words, stopped in mid-sentence, and at times switched the topic. There was an obvious lack of content in their discussions which exemplifies their limited experiences with their fathers. For these young women, perhaps knowing that their father was not there for them in many ways is one thing but, speaking of it out loud is another. It appeared difficult for them to hear themselves speak of this.

The fathers of the study participants were not consistent sources of financial support. They did not represent images of stability or discipline which are traditional roles

for the father. For all but Charity, the fathers of these young women did not maintain a consistent presence in their lives. For the most part their fathers were strangers.

For Carol, her father is nothing more than a name and a vague image of a man sitting on the living room sofa. She describes her first and only encounter with her father,

When I was nine, as a matter of fact on my ninth birthday, I met this man. I came home from school and he was sitting there and my mother said that that's your father and I'm like Wow! She was like this is your father and whatever so he says that he's going to take me to his mother's house right-- - So my mother is like no wait until the weekend. So I never saw him again. I never saw him again in my life. That was the first and last time. His name is [father's Name] (15-26, p. 1).

Carol dismisses his absence from her life by stating that, as far as she is concerned, she has no father.

Cori does not have much of a relationship with her father now, nor did she while growing up. He left when she was around three years old and moved down South. She has seen him only four times since he moved. There were a number of years in between the first three contacts and the calls were infrequent. She saw her father once when she was five, again when she was twelve, and again when he came up for her graduation from high school. The last contact took place when she was 19. She went down to visit him during the Thanksgiving day weekend. However, he left the morning after she arrived to accompany some friends on a trip to Virginia. During her encounters with her father, she spent very little time with him. Based on her description she and her father were strangers; she doesn't know very much about him and he doesn't know very much about her. Cori does not know how old he is or when he was born or any other details of his life such as, like if he works and if so what he does for a living. During one of her infrequent telephone conversations with her father when she was around 15 years old, she asked her father if he knew when she was born. He apparently knew the correct month but got the

day wrong. His inability to identify the correct date did not come as a surprise to Cori since she had never received a call or card from him on her birthday. Cori also attempts to dismiss her father's behavior by claiming that her father's lack of involvement in her life doesn't matter. She explains in a rather defensive tone of voice " My mother is my father"(18, p. 113). Yet the way in which she was able to recall the dialogue of every conversation that they had and the detailed descriptions of the few contacts including when and where they were, leads one to suspect that his lack of involvement in her life bothered her a lot more than she would care to admit.

Carla's father left and moved out of the state when she was about three years old. She initially stated that he maintained contact with them even though he had left them as if she was ashamed to admit it. However, as the interview process continued she revealed the truth. She described a situation where there were a number of years during her childhood where she had no contact with her father. It was only through her father's relatives that she knew that he was in fact still alive and doing okay. Her father re-entered her life only in the last two years. Yet, she quickly tried to explain his lack of contact by mentioning that he could not contact them because they did not have a phone. It seemed to soothe her to think in those terms. I saw no reason to challenge her logic, but from the way in which she spoke and the ambivalence she expressed in her voice around her perceptions of their relationship, I could tell that her explanation was not all that solid to her either.

Candy's father was murdered when she was a year old. Her father was apparently involved in a range of criminal activities: drug dealing, numbers running, and prostitution. He had a reputation of being a tough guy, which Candy comments on with pride. Candy expressed, in passing, her disapproval of her father's involvement in what she called the exploitation of women through prostitution but seemed to dismiss his other criminal activities as if it were no big deal. Candy has no personal memory of her father. What she knows of him is based on occasional passing comments by family members and on

letters written by him to her mother which she read without permission. There is very little conversation among family members and friends about her father which creates something of mystery for Candy. Based on her limited information about her father, Candy has constructed an idealized image of her father. She strongly believes that if he had not been killed he would have been an attentive protective father who would have spoiled her because she was her father's only daughter. Candy appears to focus her attention on the father he would have been as opposed to the man he was.

Charity is the only young woman of this study who had consistent contact with her father. Charity had this to say about her father,

My father was the best father in the world to me. Like when my godmother use to complain to him about me like if I stayed outside she would tell my father and he never yelled at me. He use to look at me while he was there but he never yelled at me. When we would leave he would be like well you got to stop doing that you got to do right and that would be it and then we would start talking about something else. He would always take my side (50-54, p. 7, 1-12, p. 8)

Her father was not much of a disciplinarian or a financial supporter. The women in her life, her mother and her godmother, gave her the material things that she needed. But according to her he gave her unconditional love and support which made her feel special. There was no shame when she responded to the question of what her father did for a living. To her knowledge her father never had a job. He was supported by his son's rather large drug empire. She made no connection between her mother's drug problem and the fact that her father made a living from illegal drug sales. She only lived with her father for a few weeks here and there when her mother was in between evictions and they needed a place to stay. Her father was her hero. The fact that he has not been much of a financial supporter to her is of little consequences to Charity. To Charity, the important thing was that he was there for her emotionally.

Nancy attempts to play down those things about her father that could be conceived as unflattering. She describes her father as being a street wise person which seems to be an attempt on her part to avoid calling him a substance abuser and a hustler. Her father has spent most of her life in jail. She claims to have no hard feelings about the fact that he was not there for her. Nancy explains,

That's my dad. I love him to death even though he hasn't been there with me through all my childhood you know growing up whatever. That's still my father. I don't like nobody to talk bad about my father not even my mother (51-54, p. 23, -1-3, p. 24)

Nancy doesn't attempt to fool herself regarding his involvement with her. To Nancy it just doesn't matter. She is just glad that she knows who her father is. Nancy goes on to say:

He wasn't around but it just made me stronger. I don't down my father because of anything he did you know. That's life. Everybody goes through something you know. I love him even if he's always saying well I can't send you money. He doesn't have to send me anything as long as I'm talking to him. Then I'm fine.(33-41, p. 27)

Nancy seems to accept or maybe excuse much of her father's behavior even as it relates to her. For example, Nancy spoke of really wishing that her father had attended her graduation ceremony. She had spoken to her father about attending, and provided all the necessary information. She only had a limited number of tickets but was sure to save one for him. However, he did not show. When Nancy was asked if she knew why he did not show up, she could not answer because she had never questioned him about it. Nancy sadly responded by saying that it would have been nice if he had come but that it was all right that he did not. Nancy appeared determined to maintain the relational image with her father, the distortion of facts seem a small price to pay in order to do that.

Neda's father was also involved with drugs. He spent the majority of Neda's life in jail. Yet, as Neda spoke of those facts they appear inconsequential to her. Neda's relationship with her father appeared to be one of her most significant human connections. She described the two of them as having a very close relationship. Her father made her feel special because of the way he treated her. During his long periods in jail he maintained contact with her through letters and cards. He drew pictures and cartoons for her and mailed them to her. Neda collected them and placed them in a safe place. She expressed feeling that if he had not been in jail, he would have taken care of her. In fact there was a brief period between jail terms, her father moved to Florida and invited Neda to live with him and his girlfriend. Neda stated that she was reluctant because she didn't know his girlfriend but she did want to go to visit. But, before she could get the money together to pay for the trip he was locked up again only to be released just a few weeks prior to this interview process. After she had received a call from her father that he would be in town in a few days she waited until she thought he had arrived and took herself and her two younger brothers to see him. It was one of the few times during the interview process that Neda described herself as taking action. To Neda her father was a good father. Neda's definition of a good father is as follows;

"When the children know who their father is and the father goes and picks them up and spends time with them when he can" (21-23, p.7).

Though her father did not maintain a physical presence in her life, Neda believed that she had a good relationship with him and that he was a good father.

Summary

The young women of this study appeared to perceive and rationalizes their father's marginal participation in their lives in a variety of ways. Some of the young women expressed feelings of indifference or embarrassment while others chose to focus their

attention on what they did receive , however limited it may have been. Carol and Cori attempted to deny they had any feelings about their fathers absence claiming that it did not matter to them. Yet, there were indications that it did matter to them. Carla attempted to cover up her fathers absence by initially misrepresenting his involvement in her life and by making excuses. The other young women, Charity, Candy, Nancy and Neda, responded to their fathers' behavior by creating a censored reality regarding the type of father he was and the role he played in their lives. These young women choice to focus on their father's positive attributes and minimized the rest.

Interesting to note is the distinctively different reaction to the unavailability of their fathers as compared to the unavailability of their mothers. Carla, Cori, and Carol appeared to be less understanding and tolerant toward their fathers than they were of their mothers; whereas, Nancy and Neda appeared to be more understanding and tolerant of their fathers than their mothers. Charity and Candy appeared to be understanding of their fathers as well as their mothers. The implications of this observation is not quit clear however it is none the less interesting.

Although, the perceptions of the young women's relationships with their fathers do not provide a clear distinction between the young women who enrolled in college and the young women who did not, the way they appear to interpret their experiences in terms of informing their perceptions of men in general and their role in relationship with men does appear to point to a distinction between those young women who enrolled in college and those young women who did not, as will be revealed in the following discussion.

PERCEPTIONS OF MEN IN GENERAL

This section presents the perceptions of the young women of this study in regards to how they view men in general. The reader will begin to note the parallels which appear to exist between the perceptions of these young women regarding what their fathers provided to their lives and their perceptions of what men in general can or will contribute.

For example, Cori perceived her father as providing her with little to no financial or emotional support. She saw her father as being irresponsible and unreliable. In her discussion of the men in her social world she shares similar perceptions. Cori approaches the whole notion of male partnership with a great deal of caution. She is convinced that men are untrustworthy and has devalued their significance in her life. Cori has not yet begun dating. She expresses feeling puzzled by the preoccupation with men demonstrated by the women in her network. She perceives partnerships with men as being of little benefit. Based on her observations and experience, the only thing that men are good for is making babies that they do not take care of. Cori has not given up on the notion of establishing a male partnership, but it is clearly something low on her list of priorities. Carol and Carla who shared similar perceptions of their fathers as Cori also expressed similar perceptions about men.

Candy's lack of information about her father has allowed her to develop an idealized conception of the kind of provider her father would have been if he lived: attentive, protective, and supportive of her. Because she feels that she missed out, she attempts to recreate her missed relationship with her father through her relationships with men. Candy is very much aware that she is drawn to men that remind her of her father:

I have a fetish for criminals. I love criminals. I'm attracted to tall dark skinned men . My father was a tall dark skinned man (16-20, p.28).

Candy seems to feel in many respects, men need to be saved from themselves. She finds herself engaged in relationships with young men on the pretense of saving them from themselves-something that no one was able to do for her father. Candy also recognizes that these men are unreliable because they often go to jail and even die, but just as her connection with her father holds a great deal of significance for her, so does her connection to this type of men regardless of how problematic those connections tend to be.

To Charity, her father was the best father in the world because he provided her with consistent emotional support. The fact that he was not a consistent provider of financial support was of little consequence regarding her belief that he was a good father. In her discussions of her relationships with men the commonalities emerge in her definition of a good male partner. According to Charity, a good male partner is supportive of her yet does not attempt to tell her what to do. However, unlike her relationship with her father, her perceptions of the significance of male partnerships is not high. Charity is of the attitude that male companions are nice to have but they are not a necessity for her.

Nancy and Neda describe their fathers as being irresponsible and unreliable. Both men have long term histories of substance abuse. These men have spent a large portion of their lives in jail making them unavailable to their daughters. Yet, the unavailability of their fathers appears to be irrelevant in the eyes of Nancy and Neda. Their focus is on the connection rather than the quality or intensity of the connection. For Nancy and Neda, what is of utmost importance is that their fathers identify them as their daughters. They seem to place more emphasis on knowing their fathers than on what kind of relationship they have with them and what kind of men they are. Nancy and Neda recognized their strong relational needs in regards to having a father and therefore were willing to accept what they could get. The same appears to hold true in their relationships with men. The emphasis is on having a man and maintaining that connection. The expectations placed upon what the men in their lives must provide is low. The standards that they both expressed was a strong disinterest in men who are engaged in criminal activities. Perhaps, that is because they are both very much aware that connecting to men who engage in criminal activities will eventually lead to a break in the connection due to incarceration or death.

Nancy and Neda, the emphasis is on maintaining their connections; therefore, they are more likely to overlook or minimize behavior on the part of their partners that may not be pleasing to them. For example, Nancy spoke of always wanting to go to her senior

prom and of how important it was to her. Yet, when she approached her boyfriend about going he refused. Even after she offered to foot the bill for all the expenses and expressed how important it was to her, he still refused to go. As a result, she went without a date with a few of her girlfriends. Even though she talked about how important it was to her, she seemed to accept without consequences his not going. This same young man got another girl pregnant while he was dating Nancy. In response, she broke up with him and took him back within a week. The two of them have been dating for close to four years and are now living together. Nancy says that she would like to get engaged, although not necessarily set a wedding date. She explains she just wants to get engaged as a symbol of his commitment to her. Yet he refuses, and that seems to be acceptable too. To Nancy, being with a man is of utmost importance; therefore, she seems willing to accept behavior that is disappointment to her in order to keep him.

Summary

The image of the irresponsible, unreliable African American man who should not be perceived as a consistent source of financial support and who is a questionable source of emotional support seemed to resonate in what these young women were saying about their fathers and men in general. As the young women spoke, it was both interesting and painful to hear the old stereotypes of African American men being reborn in yet another generation. The negative stereotypes of African American men seemed to support for some of these young women, their feelings of indifference regarding their relationships with men in their social networks and, for others, their minimal expectations of them. For those who demonstrated indifference the old stereotypes, perpetuated by their fathers, gave them comfort and in some ways confirmation that they needed to be self reliant. According to them if African American men are so unreliable why then should the African American men in their lives be any different. For the others, based on the same understanding, it makes sense to lower expectations when one believes that the subjects of those expectations have so little to offer. Either way the negative stereotypes of the

African American man continues to haunt us. And continues to be used as a context from within which African American men are judged by their daughters.

THEIR ROLE AS WOMEN

These young women appear pragmatic in regard to their approach to male partnership in that they are only looking for what they believe they can find. Their expectations of African American men and what they can offer are low. Their criteria for a partner has nothing to do with his ability to provide for these young women financially. These young women expressed having no experience with African American men who are motivated, responsible, and willing to work hard for what they want, men who take care of the financial and emotional needs of their families. Men of that kind do not seem any more real to these young women than the prince charming described in fairy tales. For these young women their expectations of what can be found in terms of male partnership is based on their experiences and observations of African American men in their social networks beginning with their fathers.

The men of their social networks, fathers, uncles, brothers, boyfriends, appear to exist in the shadows of their social networks. The primary contribution of these African American men is that of companionship. The significance of their contribution varies among the young women of this study. The young women who enrolled in college were able to perceive themselves as women separate from men. They viewed the issue of male companionship as secondary to their achieving success. Although they all expressed the desire to get married some day it was not a necessity. In order for them to get married, the man they married had to be the "right" man for them. Among the young women who did not enroll in college their perception of themselves as women appeared to be intertwined with that of their role as girlfriend and eventually wife. For these young women, their need for male companionship was primary and parallel in significance to their connections to other women. The young women who enrolled in college held the

belief that their survival is more dependent upon what lies at the core of their social networks, the sisters' circle, rather than what exists in the shadows, African American men. It is from themselves and through their connections with other women, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and friends, that they find the sources of support necessary for their survival.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, the role of the father in the family has been that of provider and protector. He is expected to represent strength and, along with the mother, stability within the family. In his absence, the roles of the father are said to be assumed by the other men in the family such as, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and boyfriends and, to some extent the mother. Yet, is it merely a matter of finding a replacement to fulfill the father's assigned task or is there more to it than that. The young women of this study projected the feeling that, at some conscious or unconscious level, there was something missing in their lives as a result of their fathers' marginal participation in their lives. This void could not be filled by their mothers or the other male figures in their lives. The marginal participation of their fathers had an impact on how they view their role as women in relationship to men and how they viewed men in general.

The young women who enrolled in college appeared to interpret from their experiences with their fathers, that men in general were not reliable and therefore find support in their belief in the need to be self reliant. The young women who enrolled in college appeared to view their enrollment in college as a necessary step towards being able to take care of themselves. In contrast, the young women who did not enroll in college appeared to interpret from their experiences with their fathers, that in general men are an important aspect of their self definition and therefore viewed their connection to the men in their lives as important. These young women appeared to place more emphasis on

maintaining their connections to their boyfriends than they did on issues of career development, thus they were less motivated to take action toward college enrollment.

For all these young women, their relationships with African American men appear to have the potential of providing them with one of the significant challenges in their lives. They seemed to be struggling between their desires and expectations and their negative perceptions of who the African American man really is in their eyes. All the young women expressed desires to get married in the future, but particularly for the college bound young women, the question who they will marry remains a mystery. The college bound young women with the exception of Candy, were quit admit about maintaining their standards in regards to finding a partner. Yet, at the same time they have the perception that African American men will not be able to meet up to their standards. So they find themselves entangled in what to this researcher believes is a false dichotomy between being alone or lower their standards because the believe they have no other choice. The psychological impact of such an impact.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WE ARE OUR BROTHER'S KEEPER

INTRODUCTION

Theorists hypothesize that a woman's sense of self is developed, in large part, through her relationships with others. She tends to construct her sense of self and how she is to be in the world in the context of the various roles she plays in her relationships with others (Miller, 1991; Gilligan, 1990; Kaplan, Klein, & Gleason, 1991; Oyserman et al., 1995; Surrey, 1991). This chapter examines the study participants' perceptions of self in relationships with others in their social world. The way in which they characterize their role in relationships with others makes up a significant part of their self definition and has emerged as a major theme in understanding their ability to take action toward college enrollment.

The "other" refers to the different people who make up the social networks of the study participants, their family members, peers, and others in their communities. Among the young women of this study, there appear to be two general themes which characterize their perceptions of self in relationship with others, that of being empowered and being disempowered. For the empowered, their relationships served as important sources of power and support for their feelings of competence. Power is defined as the ability to act (Miller, 1991). In their relationships they find power through nurturing and taking care of others. For the disempowered, their relationships reinforce their feelings of dependency and prevents the development of autonomy and self confidence. In their relationships with others, the focus is primarily on themselves. They do not perceive their role in relationships as being to take care of others. The young women who enrolled in college expressed perceptions of themselves in relationship with others as being empowered,

whereas those who did not enroll in college described circumstances of being disempowered by their relationships.

THE COLLEGE-BOUND PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BEING EMPOWERED

The young women who enrolled in college perceived themselves in relationship with others as being a caretaker. The term "caretaker" designates an attitude, a style of approaching relationships, in which people feel intensely that they are responsible for the well being of others. As caretakers, the needs of others often take precedence over their own individual needs and desires. Caretakers believe that their primary role in relationships is to be of service to others. For example, the young women who enrolled in college served as advisors, supportive listeners, and in some cases, providers of material support in their relationships. Through their perceptions of themselves as caretakers, these young women were able to place their actions in a larger context and apply to them a sense of purpose and superior sense of legitimacy. For these young women, as is the case with many African American women, to be of service to others is paramount (Collin, 1990). These young women are empowered through their relationships as they function in the role as caretaker for they are inspired into action by their desires to be of assistance. They view their ability and their actions in the provision of assistance as important achievements which support their perceptions of competence.

For these young women, their role as caretaker appears to represent a defining element in their perception of themselves. For example, when Carla was asked how she would describe her herself, she stated:

I would tell a person that I'm smart intelligent, that I'm easy to get along with, and that if you [you meaning in the general sense] have a problem I would try to help. I'm not going to say that that's not my issue. I'm going to try to help. (22-33, p. 46)

Carla expresses in this statement a sense of confidence, connectedness to others, and a sense of obligation to be of assistance to those with whom she comes in contact. The way Carla chooses to describe herself provides insight into the elements of her self definition which she believes are important, thus, confirming in this statement the notion that her perception of herself as a caretaker is an important part of her self definition. The other young women who enrolled in college echoed Carla's self description.

Carol illustrates the centrality of their roles as caretaker in their construction of their self definition as she told the story of her experience entering foster care with her younger siblings. When Carol and her younger siblings entered foster care they were separated for the first time. Carol was deeply worried that she was not there to take care of them and spoke of that period of separation as being very difficult for her. Ever since they were born Carol viewed herself in relationship with her siblings as being a caretaker. When her mother would leave for days at a time Carol looked after them and made sure their needs were met. Carol expressed how important being a caretaker in relationship with her siblings was to her. After about a month, they were all reunited and lived with two sisters who shared a two family home. Carol was relieved and attempted to resume her role as caretaker. However, the foster parents resisted, for they took on the appropriate role as caretaker for Carol and her siblings, providing Carol and her siblings with a loving, supportive environment of security, and structure. Subsequently, Carol felt displaced from her role as caretaker. Carol describes herself during that period of displacement as being lost. She stated that she no longer had a sense of purpose and focus in her life. After a few years of this displacement, Carol began to have serious adjustment problems. She began staying out late, not going to school, and breaking house rules, until she eventually run away. Carol stated that, at the time, her behavior even surprised her. When she lived with her mother she never considered doing such things, even though she had ample opportunity, because she felt that she needed to take care of her younger

siblings. When that was no longer the case, she seemed to lose an important part of herself. It was not until she was able to recreate her role as caretaker in another relationship did she once again find her sense of direction.

For these young women, what is of significance in their relationships with others is their ability to act out their caretaking role. The people of their social worlds often appeared in their discussions as these vague detached images which served as a kind of back drop to their life stories. As I reviewed my notes, I realized that many of the people had no names and, in many cases, lacked any individual identity. They were often referred to in terms of general categories such as; brother, sister, aunt, uncle, friend. In their discussions, the members of their social world presented as either objects of their caregiving or as role models of what not to become. For example, Carol speaks often and in great detail of her feelings of responsibility for taking care of her younger siblings and the things she had done to fulfill those responsibilities but, never once during the interviewing process mentioned them by name. The vague way in which they were presented made them appear as replaceable objects rather than individual people. Carol supports this notion of replacability in her relationships with her siblings in that as Carol's role as caretaker in the lives of her younger siblings diminished so did her perceived value of the relationship. These same younger siblings about whom she went into a panic when they were first separated are the same siblings whose foster home she ran away from and whom she now rarely visits. Carol's explanation of the change is their relationship in that they don't need her anymore.

The subjects of their caregiving were not limited to particular people but was generally the way they perceived themselves in their relationships with others. These young women recreated their caretaking role in their relationships with others. They expressed strong feelings of responsibility towards a variety of people within their social worlds. Charity spoke of feeling responsible for her brother:

I always took care of him [her brother]. Nothing is wrong with him; it's just that he doesn't have nobody to help him, you know, and it makes me sad, and I want to be there for somebody who doesn't have anybody to help them. I feel responsible for him. (38-44, p. 15)

Cori has no siblings with whom to enact her caretaking role, therefore she focuses her caregiving on her friends. Cori explains why she befriended this one young lady with whom she appears to have nothing in common. This friend was a victim of sexual abuse, dropped out of high school, and has a bad reputation in the neighborhood. Cori stated:

I mean, what she's going through I have to be her friend you know what I saying? (4-6, p. 17)

For Carla much of her caretaker role was acted out in her relationships with her friends and her community:

I think that every child's dream is to get out of the projects. But, my thing is that when I do decide to leave the projects, I will come back and help my community. (36-39, p. 17)

And for Candy, it was troubled young African American men who were caught up in a life of crime. She states:

See my purpose is to try to get young black males out of that situation.(46-48, p. 87).

Basically, the young women who enrolled in college believe that they have something to offer and feel a strong sense of obligation to provide it to whomever they feel a sense of commitment towards. They express a sense of commitment to African American people, the members of their communities, their friends, and family members. All of these young women demonstrated a strong sense of connection to others which seemed to place their actions in a larger context extending beyond their individual needs to a desire to serve people as a whole.

Whether, these young women established their connections through their role as caretakers or asserted themselves as caretakers once engaged in the relationship, this caretaker role represented a major theme in their relationships. There was a tendency on the part of these young women to take individuals under their wing. These young women appear to be attracted to individuals who need assistance so that they can act out their role as caretaker. For example, it comes as no surprise as one examines the peer networks of these young women to find individuals who do not appear to share the same aspirations and sense of determination. Additionally, among their peers, they are one of a very few, if not the only one, to enroll in college.

Their relationships often seemed somewhat hierarchical with them presiding over others in a maternal way. Such is the case with, for example, Charity. She spoke of a close friend who dropped out of high school to have a baby. Charity mentioned how, over the years, she often encouraged her friend to return to school and enroll in a vocational program to develop a skill. Her friend recently completed a vocational program, found employment, and obtained her own apartment outside of the projects where they grew up. In mentioning her friend's accomplishments, Charity spoke of how proud she was of her friend. Charity's body language and the tone of her voice impressed this researcher as being maternal and hierarchical. Charity sounded like a proud mother bragging of the accomplishments of her children. The other young women projected a similar impression as they described their relationships with siblings, friends, and even boyfriends. These young women often used phrase such as "I try to tell them," "I try to show them," "I wish they would listen to me" in their discussions with others.

They perceived themselves as being different from their friends but not better. They presented themselves as being somewhat set apart from others in their social world. This feeling of separateness was created by their one-directional caregiving; these young women gave generously of themselves but appeared reluctant to be on the receiving end. Individuals readily sought out these young women for assistance and came to depend on

them. They appeared to view depending on others as exposing their vulnerabilities which would require trusting others. These young women were very conservative about whom they trusted and rarely placed their trust in anyone. Carla expresses the sentiment of the young women when she states:

I don't have a best friend. A best friend is someone who would always be there for me you know like to talk to and stuff. My friends, we talk but I don't tell them my business. I don't tell my secrets to them because I don't think I could trust anyone. (3-17,p.37).

Although some of the young women such as Candy and Cori reported having best friends, their definition of a best friend differed from Carla's definition. Carla based her definition more on the frequency of contact. Candy and Cori's relationships appeared to be like the other young women who enrolled in college in that the caregiving was not generally reciprocal.

These young women appeared most often to be the initiators in terms of establishing connections and the dictators of the nature of those connections. They presented as exerting a great deal of control over their relationships, particularly with their peers. They seemed to be at the center of their peer networks. A number of their friends did not know each other. These young women seemed to organize their peer relationships in terms of sets of friends based on the activities they engage in and the social setting. They have their neighborhood friends, school friends, friends that they engage in some activities with and other friends for other activities. Yet, an interesting observation worth mentioning is that it appears that the friend with whom they have the most contact and appear to be closest to is the friend who appears to be the most needy.

Through their role as caretaker they found support for their feelings of competence by framing their caregiving activities in the form of accomplishments. Cori mentioned a sixteen year old friend who was considering having a baby. Cori invited her friend to help her baby-sit an infant cousin. During that time, Cori highlighted for her friend the

difficulties of caring for a child. Cori wanted to assist her friend in not making what Cori perceived as a big mistake. After the experience with Cori, her friend seemed to change her mind. Cori felt very good about the experience and named it as one of her important accomplishments. As these young women shared their accomplishment it became apparent that those accomplishments which involved nurturing are perceived as being most significant. Although they expressed a great deal of pride over completing high school and enrolling in college, their conversations about those accomplishments did not appear to inspire the same level of passion as their accomplishments made in their role as caretaker. The importance of their caregiving activities was also evident in the amount of detailed discussion during the interviews that centered around helping others. All the young women spoke of the different people they have been able to assist. They mentioned repeatedly how it made them feel good that people called on them when they had problems. It appeared that as these young women gave of themselves to others, they received in return confirmation of their own ability to effect change in their own lives. According to these young women, by assisting in solving other people's problems, by changing other people's lives, they appear to feel more able to change their own lives.

These young women found a sense of power, the ability to act, in their relationships. Their actions regarding college enrollment appeared to be motivated, in large part, by their desires to take care of others. They believed that their enrollment in college and the obtaining of a college degree would put them in a better position to take care of others. As the young women talked about their aspirations for the future, there was a reluctance in their voices to frame such desires in terms of personal needs or benefits. According to them, to place the emphasis on themselves and to explain their actions in terms of their own needs or personal development would be, in their definition, selfish. Thus, they framed their actions in terms of being of service to others which seemed to give their actions a higher more legitimate purpose.

The career choices of the young women who enrolled in college were in professions where they would be of service to others. Charity and Candy wanted to be social workers, Cori wanted to be a nurse, Carol a public defender, and although Carla was not sure what she wanted to do, she did know that she wanted to work with troubled children or in troubled communities helping those in need to better themselves.

The origins of their perception of themselves as caretakers seems to be unclear to these young women and this researcher. These young women seem to look upon their role as caretakers as who they are and the way they are supposed to be as African American women. However, they were not able to explain how their perception of themselves as caretakers developed. Carol's mother and older brother and sister left her alone with her younger siblings. The option was there for Carol to leave also. When Carol was asked why was it that she felt that she had to care for her younger siblings, and what was it that made her stay while the others left? She couldn't explain it. She responded with "I don't know. I just did. I mean there was no one else." A similar question was presented to the other young women who gave a similar response. They were not able to explain how their perception of themselves as caretakers developed. They could not make any connections between what they may have observed growing up or may have been told as children. These young women seemed to look upon their role as caretakers as who they are and the way they are supposed to be as African American woman. The historical image of the African American women as being the strong self sacrificing caretaker of family and community was reborn in them, and appears to serve as an important source of motivation for these young women.

THE NOT COLLEGE-BOUND PARTICIPANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BEING DISEMPOWERED

The young women who did not enroll in college did not express a perception of themselves as a caretaker in their relationships with others. They did not perceive of

themselves as being self sacrificing individuals who put the needs of others before their own. Nor did they feel it was necessary to be that way. They did not express similar feelings of obligation to take care of others in their social networks. They perceived themselves as kind, considerate people who would assist people when they could. Their sense of obligation regarding caregiving did not extend beyond their families or friends. Their caregiving obligation did not include more general commitments such as to their communities or race. Being a caretaker was not a defining element of their self perception.

These young women did not perceive of themselves as being in the position to be caretakers in their relationships. They could recall no incidents where they saw themselves as truly being responsible for another person. Even though Neda frequently baby-sat for her two younger brothers, ages 12 and 13, at the request of her Aunt, Neda does not perceive of her baby-sitting as taking care of them. According to Neda, it is her Aunt who is responsible for her younger brothers. She viewed herself as merely watching them until her Aunt returned. The notion of caretaking appears to be as much about perspective as it is about actual circumstances. From Neda's perspective, she was not the initiator of the caregiving but was merely responding to a request whereas, the empowered young women perceived themselves as being the initiators of the caregiving. Being the initiators gives them have control in terms of when and how to provide care. Neda did not even view baby-sitting her siblings as caregiving activity. The empowered young women took responsibility for the caregiving activity and credit for the outcomes. It appears as if being able to view themselves as a caretaker parallels the individual's ability to perceive of themselves in a position of control.

The young women who did not enroll in college did not appear to perceive of themselves as being in control in their relationships. Instead, these young women appeared to relinquish control in their relationships to others. They often placed themselves in the position of subordinate, reacting to the cues and desires of how others

felt they should be. For example, Neda viewed her role with her Great Aunt as being that of the silent visitor, so during her time with her Great Aunt she said very little, offered no resistance, and seemed to make herself almost invisible to her Great Aunt.

Their appeared to be a consistent theme of passivity that emerged in their relationships with others. An illustration of their passivity can be found in their relationships with their boyfriends. In their relationships with their boyfriends, these young women rarely asserted themselves or demonstrated a sense of autonomy. They seemed to suppress their concerns and alter their expectations based on what their partners were willing to provide. For example, Neda and Nancy were both in long term relationships that began when they were approximately fourteen. Both are deeply committed to these young men and desire a monogamous relationship. However, both of their boyfriends have engaged in sexual relationships with other women while they have been dating Neda and Nancy. Both women expressed strong feelings of disappointment over their boyfriends unfaithful behavior, but they did not discontinue the relationship. It appeared that their need for being in a relationship with a young man was more important to them at this stage in their lives, than being with a young man who is faithful to them. After discovering her boyfriend was unfaithful, Nancy stated that she altered her expectations: though she would prefer it if he did not cheat on her, she believes that he may again. Nancy states:

I tell him all the time that if he cheats on me he better use a condom because, you know, it's dangerous out there.(34-36, p. 31)

In this statement Nancy appears to have modified her original expectations of fidelity to an expectation of infidelity within certain guidelines. However, one must wonder about her commitment to this new expectation when earlier in their relationship he got a young women pregnant. Neda was not quite as verbal as Nancy about her concerns to her boyfriend. It appears that these young women place few demands on their boyfriends.

Their boyfriends appear to assert a great deal of influence over them. During a follow up conversation with Nancy, she credited her boyfriend her completion of high school. According to Nancy, it was her boyfriend who was able to motivate her to finish high school because he often told her that he did not want to be with a “dummy”. It was the threat of losing her connection to him, not the consistent encouragement from her mother or her own desires, which Nancy claims motivated her to complete high school. Nancy went on to say how she owes him a lot because he is responsible for her being able to achieve what she has thus far. Nancy's statement surrendering responsibility for her achievement to her boyfriend demonstrates the significance of this relationship to her along with her perception of his influence. Yet, such a perspective regarding her own achievements takes away from her role in her accomplishments. She is unable to gain a feeling of competence from these achievements because she can not take the credit if she does not take responsibility.

Neda described a similar dynamic of surrendering responsibility to her boyfriend. Neda describes herself as existing in her boyfriend's shadow. She goes where he wants to go and does what he wants to do. She rarely makes any decisions in the relationship, not even where they should eat when they go out. With the exception of her best friend whom she met before her boyfriend, her girlfriends are really the friends of her boyfriend who was very popular in school. Neda believes that the young women engaged her, not because of her personal attributes, but because of her connection to her boyfriend. She seems to overlook the notion that she is a person who has something to bring to a friendship. These young women appear to submerge themselves into their relationships with their boyfriends; thereby entangling their perceptions of themselves in the connection. According to these young women, these relationships are central to their self definition. However, in these relationships they appear powerless and unable to see themselves apart from this relationship. Their desires and aspirations appear to focus on maintaining this relationship.

These young women believe strongly in the importance of having relationships but are reluctant to reach out and to engage others. They either are born into their relationships or are chosen by others who wish to be in relationship with them. These young women appear to look upon engaging others as a risk they are reluctant to take. Yet, they seemed to find some support for their self confidence in the notion of being chosen. Their boyfriends chose them. As they spoke of the way they became connected to their current friends, again it was the friend who engaged them. Just as for Neda, her boyfriend was the link to her current group of friends, Nancy was became connected to her present group of friends through one of the young women from the group. Nancy was going to school and the young woman approached her. Nancy had seen the young woman several times before but never said anything until the young woman approached her. This young woman introduced Nancy to her other friends, and now Nancy is connected to all of them.

The peer groups of these young women are small; everyone in the group knows everyone else. They perceive themselves as being a part of the peer group through their connections with a central person rather than themselves being the focal point with all the connections among group members occurring through an association with them as was the case with the empowered women. The young women have one set of friends with whom they engage in all their social activities regardless of the setting. They had the same friends in school and in the neighborhood. The exception was Neda's best friend who had moved away but with whom Neda maintains contact.

For these young women, their perceptions of themselves in relation to others did not seem to extend beyond their family and friends. They did not express a sense of obligation towards the people in their communities or their race in general. During the hours that they spent talking about their lives, they did not express empathy towards the individuals in their communities who might be suffering or feeling oppressed. Those individuals in their communities seemed to exist for these young women as distant images.

They perceived themselves as having little in common with and only a tenuous connection to these distant images. It was as if these individuals were not within the boundaries of their self perceptions. Rosenberg (1979) refers to the boundaries of the self as a subjective experience of me and mine, it is when the anything becomes my anything. For these young women, people in the communities where they grew up did not make the transition to being the people in their communities. For these young women, those individuals appeared to exist outside the realm of their concern.

The individual accomplishments of these young women who did not enroll in college, such as doing well in school or completing high school, seemed to provide them with limited support for their feelings of competence and their motivation to continue their education. Their sense of limited competence appears entangled in their ability to maintain connections with others. They believed that the best way to maintain connections was to be accommodating and passive which is inherently in opposition to being competent. It is hypothesized that women find power in nurturing others (Miller, 1991). If such is the case perhaps the perceptions of these young women as having limited experiences with nurturing others may explain their reluctance to act and their perceptions of themselves as almost powerless in their relationships with others.

CONCLUSION

For all the young women of this study, their relational connections are important to them. The distinguishing factor is the way in which they perceive themselves and their role in relationships. The college-bound young women appeared empowered through their role as caretakers. The young women who did not enroll in college appeared disempowered by their relationships. Among the college-bound young women, there was a sense that they were connected to something larger than themselves, that their actions served a greater purpose than their individual needs, which seemed to motivate them into action. The young women who did not enroll in college did not feel connected to the

larger community. The college-bound women perceived themselves as having a certain amount of control over their relationships. The notion of establishing new connections beyond the boundaries of their neighborhoods seemed to excite these young women. They were not afraid to move away from their established connections to create new ones. Therefore, the idea of going to college and in the process entering a new social situation without their previous friends did not seem to threaten them because they were confident that they could create new ones while maintaining the old one. The young women who did not enroll in college did not seem to share this perception. They appeared to hold on tightly to their connections. These young women are not the initiators of their relationships. They were not as confident that they would be able to make new connections, likely because they could not be assured that they would be chosen again. They perceive themselves as having to rely on fate or forces beyond their control. Thus, in their eyes going to college represented to them a much greater risk in that they also risk losing already established relationships.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SCHOOLS ARE JUST BUILDINGS

INTRODUCTION

The primary and secondary educational institutions of our society are in the position to serve as important resources for African American youth from low income communities seeking upward mobility. These educational institutions serving low income communities often fall short of maximizing upon this key position as resources for upward mobility for African American Youth (Hale-Benson, 1989; Glasgow, 1981; Watson, 1979).

The elementary and secondary educational institutions which serve low income communities have been criticized for the poor quality of education they provide. Watson (1979) referred to the educational systems of the poor as a “national scandal” (p. 25). The educational systems in these low income communities simply do not meet the needs of their student populations. The student drop out rates for these institutions are appallingly high (Fine, 1991; US General Accounting Official Congressional Report, 1987). For example, the New York City public school system has a drop out rate of 55%, of those 55% who drop out of the New York City public school, system 75% are from families with a low SES background (USGAO, 1987). In addition, the African American students are more likely to struggle with cultural conflicts and social contradictions which make their adjustment to school and academic materials more difficult (Hale-Benson, 1989; Fine, 1991; Glasgow, 1981). The teachers in these institutions are more likely to expect

the students to fail rather than succeed (CMESGO, 1993; Glasgow, 1981; Ogbu, 1978).

Students from these low income communities often enter the school system with high aspirations and dreams of success, but more often than not leave feeling defeated with a low academic self image (Fine, 1991; Glasgow, 1981; Jenkins, 1989; Ogbu, 1978).

Clearly, the perception of educational institutions as being the great social equalizer or resources for upward mobility comes into question under these circumstances. The educational outcome appears to support the notion that educational institutions merely transmit inequalities among African American students from one generation to the next (Watson, 1979).

Research studies concerned with academic achievement and educational attainment have identified the school environment as an important factor in determining the scholastic outcomes of African American students. The school environment is said to have a significant impact upon African American students educational experience. These studies have explored various aspects of the school environment such as the composition of the student body (Clark, 1991), nature of the school as an organization, and the tone and efficiency of classroom management techniques (Hale-Benson, 1989; Fine, 1991; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991; Ogbu, 1990).

Research findings indicate that school environments that are perceived as uncaring and that do not encourage student involvement in a number of ways- recreational, artistic, organizational (Nettles, 1991)- and that have teachers and school officials that are viewed as not supportive and not helpful (Clark, 1991; Hale-Benson, 1989; Lee, Winfield, &

Wilson, 1991; Obgu, 1990; Zimmerman & Arankumar, 1994) tend to have a negative influence on scholastic outcomes of African American students.

The young women of this study viewed their school environment as being hostile and not supportive, their teachers and school officials as being questionably committed, and themselves in relationship with their schools as being disconnected. However, all the young women of this study were able to complete high school and some of the young women enrolled in college. The young women appear to have taken defensive action to protect themselves from the perceived hostile school environment, rather than become passive agents vulnerable to the negative influences. These young women appeared to insulate themselves from their school environment by de-emphasizing the significance of school as a whole. Insulating themselves, they tended not to invest a lot of energy in attempting to gain acceptance by the school system, which primarily manifested itself in their marginal academic performance. It also manifested itself in their limited involvement in school organization and activities. Because they behave as if they were insulating, and not invested, their academic performance -good or bad- became less significant in terms of their self perceptions of intelligence and competence, as well as less significant in determining their post secondary school plans.

Overall, the perceptions of their school experiences appeared inconsequential in distinguishing between those who enrolled in college and those who did not. With the exception of one of the participants who transferred to an alternative school for troubled teens, all the young women viewed their educational institutions and their experiences within those institutions as having no significant impact on their ability to enroll in college.

This chapter presents the study participants' perceptions of their school experiences for the purpose of examining the perceived role their school played in their ability to take action toward enrollment. The young women discussed their perceptions of their classroom environments, teachers and themselves in relationship with their schools. The chapter will provide some insight into how these young women view the educational institutions in their communities.

CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

The young women of this study did not have much to say about their early school experiences. Nancy stated:

There isn't much to say about elementary school. I did well in elementary school. I don't really remember much about it. I guess the teachers were okay. I don't really remember.
(33-41, p. 8)

Their entrance into school, for many children, symbolized for them that they were growing up which was an exciting prospect for them. Much of their limited discussion about their early school experience focused on the challenges around their school relationships with peers rather than the events of the classroom and the notion of learning. They all described themselves as being good students. Charity, who had some difficulties during her early school years which centered around behavior problems, such as fights and talking in class, interestingly did not allow it to negatively affect her perception of herself as a good student. Charity explained away her difficulties by relating them to the fact that she and her brother were the only African Americans students in the predominately Latino school. The fights that she got into were because the other children picked on her and her

brother; the trouble in the classroom was because she felt that she was often singled out by the teacher. Her mother eventually removed her from the school and placed her in a school in Charity's godmother's community. Following the transfer to a new school, there was nothing else in her early school experiences that was very memorable.

For the most part their early school experiences of the young women of this study were uneventful and seemed not to spark much more than a few vague recollections. There was no talk of favorite teachers who seemed to show a special interest in them. In fact, they could not remember the names of their teachers. Their early school experiences were presented as pretty much of a blur in their memories. Yet, they all seemed to move on from their early school experiences still feeling good about themselves and confident in their abilities. Interestingly, their positive self-concept did not appear to be as a result of their school experiences.

The young women shared a common sentiment about their secondary school experiences. They all stated definitively that they "hated school". These young women perceived their school environment as hostile territory, not so much because of potential violence related to peers, but because of what they experienced in the classrooms. They described their behavior in the classroom around academic activities as being apprehensive and guarded. Even the young women who enrolled in college who presented themselves as risk takers were somewhat timid and reserved in the classroom. For example, Cori described:

One thing I didn't do in school, was I did not ask a lot of questions. I never did. If I didn't know anything I would just sit there...In the classroom I'm always in the corner like this [Cori looks down towards the table as if to avoid eye contact]. (12-17, p. 97)

Eve described similar behavior:

I don't like talking in the class even though some of them [classmates] are my friends. I guess I'm thinking I going to answer the wrong answer. A lot of times I have questions but I try to see if somebody else asks them and then I'll get the answer. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. If they don't, then I just don't know. (22-31, p. 19)

The other young women described similar behavior. Based on how they described their behavior, these young women did not appear to feel safe and comfortable in their classrooms.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHERS

The young women of this study were convinced that the teachers and school officials were not invested in their success. Charity stated;

They [teachers] just trying to hurry up and get you out of high school. They just want to push you out. You know.(7-9, p. 23)

For the most part, the teachers offered them no encouragement or guidance. The young women described the teachers as making general statements about their futures and mentioning to them the notion of going to college, but the information they gave was vague. The teachers were not successful in presenting college as a realistic option for them. Neda stated:

Sometimes they do be telling you about college things and stuff like that but, not really. They don't like to ask a person like one by one like go take them to the office and stuff like that. I think they should. (5-14, p. 36)

The exception of Candy, the young women did not perceive the teachers as reaching out to them. Although they believed that teachers ideally should demonstrate some interest in the students they teach, these young women did not recall having an experience where their teachers actually reached out to them to offer assistance with class materials or in planning for their futures.

However, there were some exceptions to being overlooked by the teachers described by the young women. Candy explained:

In my other school [the mainstream school that she attended before enrolling in the alternative school], they would pick a few Black kids, you know like the ministers' children and stuff, not the kids that lived where I lived, and they would help them get into college and stuff. And leave the rest to do whatever. If you're not an athlete or something you can forget it. They don't tell you nothing. They take the White kids and top Black kids and leave the rest. It's a shame what they do. (21-43, p. 102)

Candy presented a disturbing profile of the teachers' attitudes towards the students they serve, one that the other young women would not dispute. The perception appears to be that only particular kinds of students spark the attention of the teachers. Nancy and Carla's experiences appear to confirm this notion. Nancy speaks of receiving pressure from her guidance counselor regarding her post secondary school plans. Nancy stated:

I got a lot of pressure from everybody, even like my guidance counselor. She was like oh Nancy you're doing so good. You can like get into any college you want. (1-3, p. 10)

Nancy because of her good grades- alleged concrete evidence of her potential - fit among those top African American students that Candy referred to and thus did receive attention

from her teachers and school officials. Carla apparently was operating out of a similar perception as presented by Candy when she approached her teachers for extra help. Carla appeared to feel that to merely request help was not enough in order to get a positive response. Instead, Carla believed that she had to present herself as being worthy of the teachers' investment in her. Carla stated:

She helped me with certain things that I needed to know... she felt that if I was willing and if I was working hard she would help me and she was willing to work with me.(1-7, p. 55)

Gaining assistance from officials in the schools appeared to be conditional and nothing that one could assume as a given.

PERCEPTIONS OF CONNECTEDNESS TO SCHOOL

The young women did not express a perception of feeling connected to their educational institutions beyond their feelings of connectedness towards their peers in school. The school, as an educational institution, in the minds of these young women did not undergo the process of transition from being: "the school " to being "their school". There were no expressions of shame or pride connected to their schools. Their educational institutions appeared to exist as a sort of isolated entity positioned on the margins of their social world. Even the young women who enrolled in college who had previously expressed strong feelings of commitment towards their communities, and desires to want to work within their communities to make things better, their schools were not included as part of their communities or subjects of their attention. Those young women who engaged in helping behavior, such as volunteering in social action projects,

did so outside the boundaries of their educational institutions. These young women did not engage in activities or organizations which are traditionally viewed as being of service to the school, such as student government. Instead, they participated in activities which they felt they were the primary beneficiary and if the school benefited at all it was a secondary result. Those who participated in school activities directed their attention toward more social activities such as cheerleading and the band. To these young women school was a place you went to for nine months out of the year, five days of the week, where you met friends, completed tasks and attempted to get through.

CONCLUSION

The young women of this study expressed the belief that an “education” was an important factor in their pursuit of upward mobility. However, to these young women the notion of education referred to the issues of credentials as oppose to the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge. To them, it was all about getting a diploma.

Therefore, they perceived their educational institutions as merely a means to an important end. Their educational institutions did not hold a significant position within their social networks. All of the young women of this study expressed the opinion that school was something you went through and generally had no significant impact on their ability to enroll in college.

CHAPTER NINE

WE SEE NO BARRIERS AROUND US

INTRODUCTION

The young women of this study grew up in poverty under circumstances where social and economic resources are scarce; substance abuse, crime, and violence are common place; and opportunities for upward mobility are limited. In addition, as African American women, they are subjected to multiple systems of oppression. These social contextual factors, poverty and oppression, are purported to interact with each other to form a complex system of social, economic, and psychological barriers to upward mobility (Harrison et al., 1990; Ogbu, 1990; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). However, the young women of this study challenge the notion that these social contextual factors form barriers for them. To them, barriers mean things that block you from getting where you want to go. They recognized that being poor and African American meant that they would be confronted with certain obstacles, yet the obstacles were nothing they could not overcome or endure. The young women of this study, those who enrolled in college and those who did not, do not view the fact that they are African American women living in low income communities as forming a barrier to their efforts toward college enrollment. They hold strongly to their belief that being born poor African American women does not mean they are destined to remain poor.

The findings of this study indicate that, although all the young women remained optimistic about their futures and denied being deterred by the social realities that

surrounded them, the young women who enrolled in college demonstrated the ability to transform the social realities of their environments into sources of motivation. The young women who enrolled in college expressed strong feelings of connectedness toward their communities and ethnic group. The college-bound young women viewed themselves as being a part of, giving to and receiving from, their communities and ethnic group. The connectedness perceived by the young women who enrolled in college appears to be related to their ability to transform the social realities of their social environment into a powerful motivational force which seems to propel them to take action toward college enrollment. The young women who did not enroll in college did not express a similar sense of connectedness toward their communities and ethnic group. The young women who did not enroll in college expressed the notion that their communities were merely the place where they lived and their ethnic group membership, as African Americans, was an adjective which described who they were. These young women did not appear to be in denial regarding the fact they were African American women living in low income communities, they merely did not view those factors as defining elements in their lives. As these young women shared their life stories, they never referred to the conditions of their communities or their status as African American women. For the young women who did not enroll in college, the social realities of their social environment may not have been perceived as barriers to college enrollment but neither were they viewed as sources of motivation.

This chapter presents the perceptions of the young women of this study regarding the impact of their communities and ethnic group membership on their ability to take

action toward enrollment. However, the content in regards to the young women who did not enroll in college will be sparse, which is reflective of their limited discussion of these issues during the interviewing process. Efforts on the part of the researcher to encourage discussion with the not college bound young women wielded minimal results. It became apparent during this process that such issues held limited significance for these young women.

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY: We Are Not Disillusioned

The communities in which these young women grew up have been referred to as underclass communities, characterized as “permanently entrapped populations of poor people, unused, and unwanted, accumulated in various parts of the country” (Glasgow, 1981, p. 3). They are identified by several common characteristics that include racial exclusion, dysfunctional institutions, family deterioration, substandard housing, a concentration of welfare recipients, drug use and abuse, crime, violence, frequent illness and early death. Low income communities, such as the ones where these young women grew up, have experienced a breakdown in their institutional structures created by economic restructuring, reduction in public funds, and social isolation (Gephart & Pearson, 1988; Glasgow, 1981; Karsarda, 1989; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Wilson, 1996).

Since the 1970's, the urban economy experienced a decrease in employment opportunities for unskilled labor. For example, cities like New York, have functionally changed from center of goods processing to centers of information processing. The inner city neighborhoods across the country, which previously relied heavily on the unskilled

jobs of the manufacturing industry, have had to shoulder a disproportional share of the cost of de-industrialization. The under-educated and unskilled workers were ill prepared to meet the needs of the changing job market. The unemployment rates within the low income communities far exceeded the national average. The jobs suitable for unskilled labor typically offered low wages and part time or temporary work. This has left a growing percentage of these communities' residents cut off from or tenuously attached to the labor market. The changes in the economic structure within the inner city contributed to the shrinkage in economic opportunities (Karsarda, 1989; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Wilson, 1996).

In addition, to decreasing employment opportunities, these communities have had to deal with significant reductions in public funds (Gephart & Pearson, 1988; Piven, 1972). During the past decades, we have observed the rise of the neo-conservative philosophy emphasizing individual responsibility. This philosophy fuels a political climate that has proven to be unsympathetic towards the needs of low income communities (Piven, 1972). The inner cities have had to sustain cuts in urban community development, income transfer programs, and health and educational programs. The reduction of public funding has aided in the dismantling of the fragile network of social institutions that assisted in the stabilization of these low income communities (Gephart & Pearson, 1988; Glasgow, 1981; Piven, 1972; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989).

Structural theorists such as Wilson (1996) have hypothesized that the mass exodus of jobs and working families, which traditionally served as a bridge linking the low income community with the larger society, created a condition of social isolation. He purported that in a situation of social isolation the community has limited contact with groups of different class and racial backgrounds. As a result, the effects of living in a highly concentrated poverty area are enhanced. In response to their restrictive environments, residents of these isolated communities develop alternative patterns of behavior, norms, and social opportunities. They develop alternative guidelines for measuring success and

the means by which success is obtained. For example, as a source of income, alternative occupational pursuits are sometimes taken such as; drug trafficking, theft, and hustling. The young residents are oriented to how to make a good living by observing the visible operators of the street economy with few contrasting images. The young residents are said to have limited exposure to legal and acceptable methods of behaving. As a result, these young people grow up unaware of the many possibilities that life has to offer, and become trapped by the limitations of their social environment (Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Wilson, 1996).

One of the implications of Wilson's (1988) thesis of social isolation is that, in lieu of positive changes in the social structures of these communities, the alternative for obtaining upward mobility for the young people of these communities is to gain exposure to the larger society, its culture, and the way it functions. This would occur through the creation of linkages with members of the larger society. Yet, the young women of this study had only tenuous connections to the social world that exists outside of their communities. They tended not to socialize with individuals outside their social world. The people of those communities were nothing more than images on the train or in the stores, people they passed by on the streets or saw on television. To these young women, those people were outsiders and no real linkages between them existed. Thus, these young women formulated their notions of how to live based on the socialization process that occurred within the confines of their social environment. However, the conclusions that they developed based on what they learned appears to be different from what Wilson (1988) might predict. The young women of this study expressed having values similar to that of the dominant culture around work and the definition of success, thereby alluding to the fact that traditional mainstream values do exist within these communities. The issues of the effects of social isolation come into question as one examines the perceptions of these young women.

The young women of this study recognized that there are differences between the realities of their social world and that of the larger society. They believed that most individuals living outside their communities do not witness the violence, crime, and hardships that they have seen early and throughout their lives. They see the material wealth and opportunities that others have in comparison to themselves, yet it does not make them feel deprived. Instead, they seem to have a more defensive stand about it. These young women believe that the benefits and opportunities that the young people living outside of their communities receive are given to them and as a result they have little appreciation for them and how they were obtained. These young women expressed the notion that their circumstances, the things that they have seen and experienced in their lives only made them stronger. They expressed feeling that their experiences have better prepared them to handle the ups and downs that are guaranteed in life. These young women were of the attitude that they may not have lived in nice houses, or traveled extensively, or been members of some fancy clubs, but they did learn how to survive which is more important. To these young women, in some ways they believe they have been more fortunate to have grown up in their communities than their wealthier counterparts.

None of the young women of this study expressed feelings of disillusionment as it related to their social environments. They did not express the belief that the social realities of their environments in any way served as barriers to their ability to obtain social mobility. Carla expressed the sentiment of all the young women of this study when she stated:

I always said that no matter where you live at, like in the projects or whatever, you can make it. So there is no difference between it. I'm not going to say just because I live in the projects that I'm going to let that get me down. That's like saying I'm not going to make it 'cause I live in the projects or whatever. As long as you have it up here [pointing to her head and her heart] as long as you have it,

you shouldn't worry about where you living at or how you living. (2-35, p. 45)

The young women of this study believed that there was more to life than what they happened to see everyday in their communities. Although not all of the young women of this study fully pursued an alternative lifestyle, there was no doubt that they were aware one existed. And as Carla stated, the fact that they lived in low-income communities was not reason enough for them not to make their dreams of upward mobility a reality.

Wilson (1988, 1996) presents a very plausible explanation as to why these low-income community residents remain locked out of mainstream society. Although, Wilson's proposal speaks to the life experiences of the majority of low-income community residents, his explanation is limited in terms of providing insight into how some individuals from these communities are able to enter mainstream society and experience upward mobility. In his discussion of the plight of the low-income community resident, Wilson recognized the reciprocal relationship between the individual and her social environment. He believes that individuals respond, adapt, and develop based on the social context in which they are placed. Yet, in his explanation, he appears not to focus much attention on the role of human agency. He does not appear to take into account the variations in perceptions of individuals regarding the structural components of their social environment (Mickelson & Smith, 1989). The young women of this study challenge the notion of the negative impact of social isolation and the idea of disillusionment. These young women direct our attention to the fact that objective social conditions such as high unemployment, substance abuse, crime, and violence, give rise to subjective meanings and a variety of responses.

Although the young women of this study shared similar perceptions about the characteristics of their communities, there appears to be a distinction among the young women who enrolled in college and the young women who did not enroll in college regarding perceptions of connectedness to their communities, awareness of and feelings of vulnerability to the hazards in their communities and ability to empathize with community members. The college bound young women saw themselves as being like the other members of their community and because they were able to identify with them they feared that there was a chance, if they were not careful, that they would end up like them. Thus, a state of vacillating emotional tension was created among the college bound women as they interacted with the members of their community. The negative influences of their social worlds appear to be transformed into a powerful motivational force for the college bound young women. The young women who did not enroll in college did not appear to be able to identify with the members of their community, their feelings of disconnectedness appear to prevent them from being able to transform the negative influences of their communities into a powerful motivational force as was the case among the college bound young women. Yet, their feelings of disconnectedness did appear to protect them from the negative influences.

The young women who enrolled in college appeared more connected to their communities and its residents than did the young women who did not enroll. Among the young women who enrolled in college, there appears to be a similar dynamic between them and their communities as was discovered between them and their mothers. The young women who enrolled in college view themselves as products of their communities

and, therefore, see themselves as being like the residents of their communities with the potential of having a similar life outcome. Such a perception appears to create in these young women a constructive vacillating emotional tension in that they believe that, if they are not careful, they might fall victim to the negative social conditions of their social environments as did so many of their family members and fellow residents. Thus, the prospect of such an outcome stays ever present in their minds, with the resultant tension assisting these young women in using the negative social conditions of their social environments as a powerful motivational force propelling them to be different and do such things as enroll in college.

Among the young women who did not enroll in college, a similar tension did not appear to exist. These young women did not express a similar perception of connectedness to their communities. In fact, the hazards created by the negative social conditions did not enter into their discussions of themselves during the interview process. When asked about them, the not college-bound women acknowledged their existence, but denied perceiving the hazards as potential threats to themselves. Crime, drugs, welfare, unwanted pregnancy, etc. were things that other people got involved in, not them.

The college-bound young women expressed strong feelings of connectedness to their communities. They reported a sense of obligation to their community and its residents. They viewed themselves as part of their communities and their communities as a part of themselves. Although they spoke of feelings of displeasure over the social conditions that exist in their communities and mentioned desires to move away, they also felt compelled to defend its image when it came under attack by outsiders. This is the case

with Carla who found herself defending her community against her friends who live in another area of town. Carla recalled a conversation about her neighborhood that she had with her school mate from another side of town:

They were like, isn't that the bad neighborhood? And I have to explain to them sometimes that you may hear about bad things that happen in the neighborhood but that doesn't mean it's bad you know. If so, I guess that makes me a bad person because I live there. (27-39, p. 23)

To the college-bound young women, their communities are incorporated into their sense of identity, whereas with the young women who did not enroll in college, such is not the case. The young women who did not enroll in college perceive their communities as where they live, rather than as a reflection of who they are.

The young women who enrolled in college were consciously aware of the hazards that exist in their communities in regard to their attempts to gain upward mobility. As the young women spoke of their communities, they appeared to focus most of their discussion on the hazards that they perceived existing in their communities. They spoke of young women getting pregnant and later being abandoned by their boyfriends. They mentioned individuals getting on welfare and apparently becoming stagnant. They talked about the numerous people who dropped out of high school. They discussed the frequency of individuals engaging in criminal activities and going in and out of jail. And they talked about people seemingly locked into dead end jobs which offered few benefits and limited pay. These young women expressed general concern about the social problems that plagued their communities as it affected the residents. They were concerned about the

community as a whole, not just about those community members with whom they had personal relationships.

The young women who did not enroll in college, hardly engaged in any discussions of the hazards of their communities. They did not give the impression that the social problems which existed in their communities were potential hazards to them. They were of the notion that those things happen to other people, not to them. Thus, the intensity of concern was not present.

The young women who enrolled in college appeared to empathize with those individuals who engaged in unproductive behavior. They saw themselves as being able to relate to them because they believed that they shared a number of similarities with them. They saw themselves as living under similar conditions, sharing similar life experiences and similar personal characteristics in terms of intelligence, race, and social status. Although they recognized and owned the similarities they shared with their fellow residents, these young women made conscious efforts to identify ways in which they are different. It appears that identifying the differences helped them struggle against the possibility that they would end up like their fellow residents with whom they have so much in common.

As the young women who enrolled in college spoke of their communities, they made constant references to "the streets" and "the street life and mentality." The use of the term "streets" by these young women denoted a negative element that existed within their communities with its own culture that supported a lifestyle that involved substance abuse, crime, and violence and that encouraged the under productivity of those who were involved with it. The streets represented a major force in their communities, which they

believed they were vulnerable to because of its prominence and the mere numbers of people who adhere to its lifestyle. Many of their family members, friends, and associates, with whom they believed they have a great deal in common, have fallen victim to the streets' seduction. These young women spoke of the streets as if it was a living entity with an inherent power to seduce and draw people into its world. Evidenced in the frequency and way in which these young women spoke of the streets, they appeared to fear its power which kept the hazards of the streets in the forefront of their minds. These young women viewed themselves as maintaining a connection to the streets for purposes of survival while keeping up an intense awareness of its ability to distract them from reaching their goals. They believed, that it is easy to get caught up in the street lifestyle and difficult to break away. The vacillating emotional tension which was discovered to evolve out of the perceptions of themselves in relation to their mothers appears to also be present in their perceptions of themselves in relation to their community. The "street life" and its potential hazards served as a powerful source of motivation.

The young women who enrolled in college found that fellow community members exacerbated their struggles to balance being like and being different from their fellow residents, adding to the motivating tension for these young women. These young women described what appeared to be contradictory messages from the members of their communities. On the one hand, the community residents were pleased that they had taken action toward college enrollment and were on their way to experiencing upward mobility. On the other hand, however, they were told that they should not change. To be a changed person was perceived as a negative thing. In response, the young women expressed an

ambivalence around the issue of change. They appeared compelled to convince the members of their community that they had not changed, nor would they change. These young women pledged to be the same people they always were. Yet, at the same time, they recognized that it would be difficult, as the years progress and they go back and forth to college, to return home and continue doing the same things they did when in high school as the community members they left behind will be doing. This struggle appears to stem from their concerns of maintaining their connection to their communities, something that is very important to these young women, while at the same time trying to break away and live a different kind of life.

With the young women who did not enroll in college, this researcher did not observe the same feelings of connectedness, and level of conscious awareness of the hazards to upward mobility that exist in their communities, or ability to empathize with community members. These young women did not appear to relate to their fellow community members, nor did they appear to incorporate their communities into their self-definition. During the interview process, these young women did not discuss the social problems that seem to plague their communities. The social problems of their communities did not seem to strike a similar sense of fear as was found among the young women who enrolled in college. The negative images that surrounded all the young women of this study appear to serve as a powerful motivational force only for the young women who enrolled in college. The preoccupation of these negative images by the college-bound women was evident in the way they formulated their goals and aspirations in terms of what they did not want as opposed to in terms of what they did want, whereas

the non-college bound women spoke more in terms of what they desired. Overall, the young women of this study who enrolled in college appear more propelled by fear than drawn by desire. Although the young women who did not enroll in college did speak more in terms of their desires, these desires, in the absence of fear, were insufficient to motivate them toward enrollment.

Summary

All the young women of this study denied being disillusioned by the social realities of their low income communities which was evidence in their discussions of their future aspirations. All these young women expressed feelings of hope for their future. They believe that another type of life was indeed possible for them. However, the young women who enrolled in college appeared to experience a vacillating emotional tension which enables them to transform the negative social realities of their communities into a powerful motivational force. The young women who did not enroll in college appear to view themselves as somewhat removed from the negative social realities of their communities. They did not seem to view such realities as a source of motivation.

THE IMPACT OF ETHNIC GROUP MEMBERSHIP: We're Black and We're Proud

The playing fields on which African American women have been forced to compete in order to obtain their portion of the "American Dream" are far from level. African American women experience discrimination and oppression on the basis of both race and gender which operate simultaneously to effect their life options (Beale, 1970; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; James & Busia., 1993; Turner, 1991). As African American

women, the young women of this study are subjected to the effects of this double-bind phenomena. This section explores the reactions of these young women to their social status as African American women and the perceived impact it has on their ability to take action toward college enrollment

Interestingly, the young women of this study did not express perceptions of being subjected to the effects of the double-bind phenomena. They all shared an awareness of the racial oppression that surrounds them, yet they denied feeling oppressed as women. They expressed the attitude that sexism was a “white woman’s” issue. Based on their perceptions of their experiences and observations of the African American women in their communities they held the belief that African American women were in a position of power. They viewed African American women as the leaders of their families and communities. They believed that African American women were strong. Charity expressed the sentiment of all the young women with this statement:

I think we [black women] are the strongest people on this earth. I mean it’s so much we had to do, so much, and we still are surviving. They [dominant society] didn’t get us. There is just so much stuff they tried to do that, you know, we had to deal with it, and it’s like whatever you got for us we’ll deal with it. You know that the way I feel. (9-19, p. 31)

The “stuff” refers to the many hardships of their lives: poverty, abandonment, exploitation, racism. Charity, in this statement expressed the view of all the young women regarding how they view African American women and who they perceive as the enemy. The perception of the oppressor as being exclusively the members of dominant society and not the African American man is a phenomena that has existed in the African American

community for a long time (Beale, 1970; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1990). Therefore, it is no surprise to see it expressed among these young women. The language of sexism has not yet been introduced into their vocabulary, therefore its existence will go unrecognized and not articulated. So instead these young women hold onto their belief in the myth of the African American woman's equality with the African American man.

All the young women of this study viewed their ethnic group membership as a positive part of their identity. They all expressed a sense of pride in regards to being African Americans. Yet, the young women of this study appeared to vary in terms of their connectedness to their ethnic group and their perceptions of their ethnic group membership as being a source of motivation for taking action toward enrollment. The young women who enrolled in college expressed intense feelings of connectedness toward their ethnic group and viewed it as a source of motivation. The young women who did not enroll in college did not express similar feelings in relation to their ethnic group membership.

The college-bound young women's perceptions of connectedness were expressed in their strong sense of commitment to their race, their apparent heightened level of awareness regarding the racism that surrounds them, and the way in which they appeared to place their actions and the reactions of the dominant society in the context of their status as African Americans. For these young women, their perceptions of self as African Americans represented a major theme in their self-definition. It impacted on the way they viewed the world around them. In contrast, the young women who did not enroll in

college rarely discussed the issue of their ethnic group membership. They merely expressed the notion that their identification as African Americans was who they were.

The young women who enrolled in college expressed feelings of responsibility for and to members of their ethnic group. They believed that, as African Americans, they had a duty to work towards the advancement of African American people. They expressed the belief that, as African Americans, they shared a common bond with other African Americans and a common enemy.

The young women who enrolled in college seemed to develop a “we-them” perspective of the world which was manifested in their language. The “we” demonstrating their perceptions of being connected to their ethnic group and the “them” referring to the dominant “white” society. During the interviewing process they frequently spoke in those terms. The young women made statements such as “ You know how they are,” “You have to be careful when you’re dealing with them,” and “They didn’t get us” to cite only a few. According to these young women, there was a clear line which separated “us” from “them”. This is not to say that the young women who did not enroll in college did not perceive of the existence of the line, they merely appeared less preoccupied with it. They did not talk in terms of “we” and “them”. In fact, they hardly referred to individuals of European descent at all. The young women who did not enroll in college appeared less interested in the world that extended beyond the boundaries of their intimate social world.

There was little diversity within the social networks of any of the young women of this study. Those who did interact with members of other cultures, particularly the dominant culture made ethnic and racial differences a central point in how they viewed

these associates referring to them as “my Puerto Rican friend or my White friend”. The dynamics of these relationships, when they did occur, were also different in terms of closeness; none of the young women reported having any close friends who were of another ethnic or racial background.

The young women who enrolled in college appeared to place their actions and the reactions of the dominant society in the context of their ethnic group membership. As they shared their life experiences, they spoke of their differential treatment in school, and funny looks as they entered stores and went to certain other places which they defined as being directed toward them because they were African Americans. In contrast, the young women who did not enroll in college did not discuss their actions in the context of their ethnic group membership

Summary

According to all the young women of this study, their ethnic group membership is not a barrier to their obtaining their goals of upward mobility. Charity expresses the sentiments of all the young women when she states:

I love being Black. I could do anything; I could be anything. I could do whatever I want. I could make how ever much money I want. There are no limitations on what I can achieve in my life just because I'm Black. I feel like I could do the same as White people That's basically it.(44-54, p. 29)

The young women who enrolled in college they seemed to be more conscious of their status as African Americans. They seemed to place their actions in the context of their status as African Americans. A status which in their eyes appeared to give their actions/successes more significance because of what they believed they had to overcome.

For these young women, their ethnic group membership is a source of motivation. These young women viewed their actions towards enrollment as more than an issue of personal achievement but as an opportunity to contribute to the advancement of African American people as a whole.

CONCLUSION

The young women of this study all denied perceptions of disillusionment which was evident in their discussion of their future aspirations that involved desires that extended beyond what was familiar in their low income communities. None of the young women of this study viewed the fact that they were African American women living in low income communities as a barrier to their ability to obtain upward mobility. They appeared conscious of the obstacles and the limited opportunities that they had due to the fact that they were poor African American women, yet they did not believe such obstacles could not be overcome and in some cases endured. The subtle distinction that existed between the young women who enrolled in college and the young women who did not appears to rest in their perceptions of connectedness to their communities and ethnic group. Their communities and ethnic group membership represented major themes in the construction of the college-bound young women's worldviews. They appeared to view their actions in the context of their experiences as poor African Americans, whereas, for the young women who did not enroll in college, this context did not appear to be a major theme in the construction of their worldview. For the young women who did not enroll in college, their communities and ethnic group membership was where they lived and who they were,

and did not appear to be in the forefront of their consciousness. It was presented in the case of the not college-bound women as a given. It appears as if the college-bound young women's view of themselves as connected to their communities and their ethnic group membership allowed them to look upon the negative influences of their social environment and transform them into sources of motivation. Because the not college-bound young women did not share this view of connectedness, they did not derive the motivation from their communities or ethnic group membership.

CHAPTER TEN

THE JOURNEY TO COLLEGE ENROLLMENT: SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will present a summary of the findings from this research study. This discussion will draw upon the themes which were developed in the previous chapters for the purpose of generating a model that encapsulates the factors which emerged as significant in regard to the young women of this study's ability to take action toward college enrollment or not. Based upon the content of this discussion, the implications of the findings of this study for future research and program intervention will be explored.

SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS

The findings of this study are based on a comparative analysis of the young women who enrolled in college and the young women who did not. Through the examination of their life history interviews themes were identified which appeared to distinguish one group of young women from the other. It was based on those distinctions that conclusions regarding significance were developed.

The analysis of the interview data directs our attention to the pattern of perceptions expressed by the young women of this study regarding how they view themselves, how they view themselves in relationships with others, and how they view themselves in the context of their social environment. It was their pattern of perceptions in those areas that were found to be the distinguishing factor which separated the young

women who enrolled in college from the young women who did not. This study found five key perceptions which appear to influence the African American young women of this study to take action toward college enrollment.

1. The young women who enrolled in college reflected the key components of their self concepts as perceptions of themselves as being self directed, self reliant, and competent whereas the young women who did not enroll in college reflected the key components of their self concept as being perceptions of themselves as being passive, dependent, and incompetent.
2. The college-bound young women interpreted socialization goals from their life experiences that identified the necessity for them to be self directed and self reliant, and that supported their perceptions of competence. The not college-bound young women interpreted socialization goals from their life experiences that identified the necessity for them to be compliant, and dependent, and they found support for their feelings of incompetence.
3. The college-bound young women view themselves in relationship with others as being a caretaker; whereas the not college bound young women saw themselves as needing to be taken care of. In addition, the perception of themselves as caretakers serve as a source of motivation for the college-bound young women.
4. The college-bound young women were able to empathize with their mothers and others in their social network as a result, they developed what this researcher refers to as a "vacillating emotional tension". It was this vacillating emotional tension that allowed them to transform the negative elements of their social environment into a powerful source of motivation. The not college-bound young women did not demonstrate the capacity to empathize with their mothers or others in their social network and were therefore unable to transform the negative influence of their social environment into a motivational force.
5. All the young women of the study denied having perceptions of disillusionment as it related to growing up as African American young women living in low income communities, and expressed pride as it related to their perception of themselves as African American women. The college-bound young women expressed strong feelings of connectedness to their communities and ethnic group. They were able to place their actions in the context of their status as economically poor African American young women which according to them gave their actions a greater sense of significance. The not college bound young women did not express a

similar sense of connectedness toward their communities and ethnic group. According to these young women their communities were merely a place where they lived and their status as African Americans was an adjective which spoke to who they were. Their status as economical poor African American young women did not represent a major theme in their construction of their worldview and did not appear to be a source of motivation for the not college-bound young women.

THE JOURNEY TO COLLEGE ENROLLMENT

This researcher has developed a model which depicts the factors which appear to be significant in regards to these young women's ability to take action toward enrollment. The model is called the African American Women's Journey to Enrollment (AAWJE). This section will discuss the model and what it depicts about these young women's journey to enrollment.

The journey to college enrollment begins with all the young women of this study in a similar position at the beginning of the road toward enrollment. All the young women expressed feeling good about themselves. They all appeared to have a positive self concept. All the young women of this study have been able to overcome adversity in their lives. According to the literature these young women would be considered resilient (Garmezy, 1991). They have demonstrated the ability to meet the many challenges that they have been confronted by during the course of lives such as; homelessness, hunger, parental neglect, and parental addiction. They all managed to avoid the potential pitfalls that seem to cause many of their peers to drop out of high school such as, early parenting, drugs, and the general lure of the "streets". They were able to get through what they

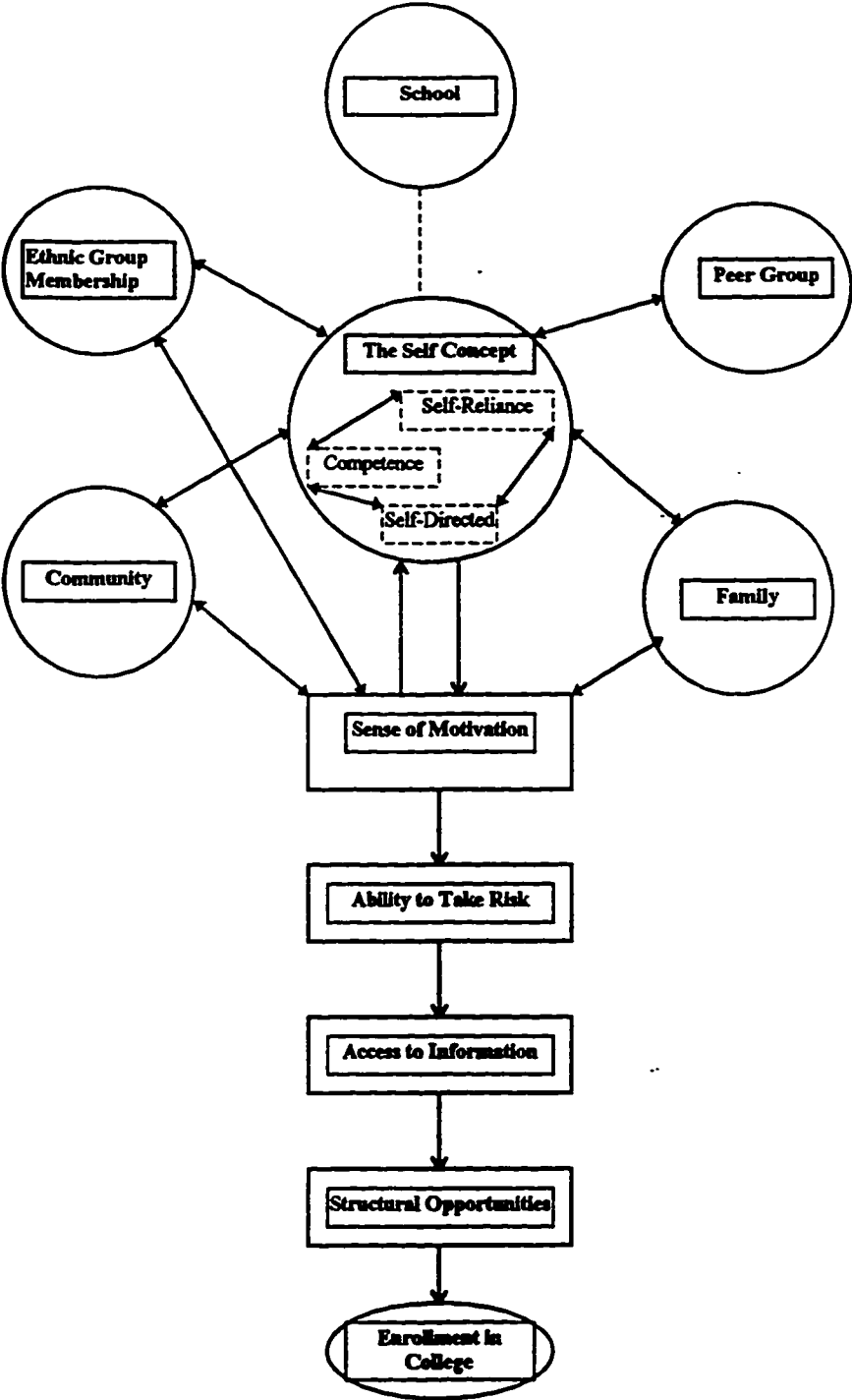


Figure 10.1 African American Women's Journey to Enrollment

perceived as an inadequate educational system and achieve the difficult task of completing high school. All the young women of this study were able to beat the odds. All the young women of this study have demonstrated some resilience. Yet, the demonstration of resilience during one period in one area of their lives does not necessarily translate into other stages of their lives and other areas.

The objective circumstances of their lives such as family background and childhood experiences does not appear to explain the differences in their actions regarding college enrollment. All the young women grew up in single parent female headed households where economic resources were scarce. During their childhood's their nuclear families appeared to be embedded in supportive extended family networks where the limited resources and social support were openly share among the members. They all described childhood experiences where they were exposed to a variety of social problems; homelessness, overcrowding, parental addiction, child neglect, and hunger. Yet, neither the college-bound or the not college-bound young women appeared to have a monopoly on exposure. All of the young women of this study appeared to have more than their share of hard times. For example, Charity Carol, and Neda, all had mothers with severe problems with addiction which resulted in their foster care placement. Nancy and Carol both had vivid memories of experiences of being hungry, and with the exception of Carla, all of the young women had stories of being evicted and having to live in overcrowded conditions. Thus, if one were to merely look to the objective circumstances of their lives in an attempt to explain the differences in their actions regarding college enrollment there does not appear to be much insight to be found.

As with most journeys they all begin first with the desire to go, and the journey to college enrollment is no different. All the young women of study expressed a desire for upward mobility. All these young women shared a common feeling that they did not wish to remain in poverty for the rest of their lives, they all wanted something different than what they saw around them. They spoke out in a common chorus about their aspirations for the future:

Cori states: I don't want to be like that (13, p.92)

Carol states: I want to make something of my life (44, p. 39)

Candy states: I knew I was going to do something, I have friends in jail and all that but, I'm not trying to take that route in life (44-49, p.57)

Nancy states: in regards to early parenting: that's not going to be me. That's not me, (40-42, p. 9).

Carla states: My thing is that I want to get away. I want to find a job that I'm interested in. I want to get away (6-8, p17).

Charity states: I want a career not just a job (31-32, p.15).

Neda states: I would like to have a good job and my own house and stuff like that(26-27p.35).

All the young women of this study envision themselves as having some kind of career in their future. They were all equally vague as to what that career would be. For example,

Carol states:

I want to be lawyer. I always thought it was cool. It seems like a cool thing to be. I don't know anything about being a lawyer but I was like wow! Lawyers are cool. (21-26,p.17).

and there is Neda :

There are two main things I want to do. Go to beauty school or work with kids that's the two mains things that I want to do (36-40,p. 33)

Thus, it is difficult to point to the notion of the clarity of their plan to explain the differences in their behavior regarding college enrollment.

All these young women shared common experiences during their childhood's. They all expressed the desire not to continue to live their lives in poverty. It was clear that they did not want to live their lives struggling to make ends meet while on welfare or trying to stretch the meager earnings of an unfulfilling dead end job. They did not wish to continue to live the rest of their lives in their low income communities adding yet another link to the generational chain of families that were seemingly stuck there. And all seem to be vague in regards to a plan of how to reach their desired goals. These young women shared a number of things in common yet, the fact remains that some of these young women enrolled in college and some of them did not. The question becomes: what are the factors involved that appear to allow some of these young women to move from aspirations to action?

Aspirations for upward mobility alone do not appear to be enough to move these young women from high school to college. As depicted in the model, the crucial step in the journey begins with the configuration of their self concept. The self concept plays a central orchestrating and regulating role in the development of an individual's life course. It serves as a pivotal referent point for processing information relevant to the individual. An individual has numerous self perceptions which she uses to understand herself and how to act in various situations (Powell, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979; Ross, 1992; Spears & Deese, 1973). The young women who enrolled in college identified a configuration of the key components of their self concept relevant to their college enrollment as being their

perceptions of themselves as being self directed, self reliant, and competent. It was their sense of being responsible for themselves and their life outcomes coupled with their feelings of needing to be able to take care of themselves along with feeling competent to do so, that operate in concert to assist these young women in seeing themselves as actors as they interacted with their social environment. It is in the context of their perceptions of themselves as being self directed, self reliant, and competent , that they are able to transform their social environment into a powerful sources of motivation.

There were multiple sources of motivation reported by these young women which combine to assist them in being able to take action toward college enrollment. As they interacted with their social environment they found sources of motivation in their relationships with others, their communities, and their status as African Americans. In their relationships with others their perceptions of themselves as caretakers appears to be a source of power-with power being defined as the ability to act (Miller, 1991)- and motivation for them. Their roles as caretaker constitutes a big part of their sense of purpose in life. They have constructed their goals in relations to this role. For them, their desire to make it is very much connected to their desire to be in a position to take care of others. In addition, these young women develop a sense of a “ vacillating emotional tension,” the origins of which is found in the mother-daughter relationship but extends to their larger social network. This vacillating emotional tension denotes a cognitive interactive process between these young women and their social environments which allows them to transform the negative influences of their social environment into a force that propels them away from becoming a victim of those negative forces. The vacillating

emotional tension appears to evolve out of their capacity to empathize with those in their social network. Through the process of empathizing with those in their social network these young women find themselves both identifying with members of their social network and recognizing similarities between themselves and the others, while at the same time feeling intensely the desire to be different. Thus, the tension is created as the young women struggle with the fear that they, due to their similarities, could somehow end up like other members of their social network. It is in the context of their reciprocal relationship with their social environment that this tension is created resulting in powerful sense of motivation which prepares them to move beyond what they see to acting on what they want. Their status as African Americans, as members of an oppressed group, also served as a source of motivation for them. These young women expressed strong feelings of connectedness to their ethnic group. They viewed themselves as agents in the fight for equality for African Americans and viewed their efforts in the context of that cause giving their actions both a perception of greater significance and providing them with a sense of motivation.

Among the young women who enrolled in college an interaction of the key components of their self concept (e.g. their perceptions of themselves as self directed, self reliant, and competent) coupled with the motivation that they received through their reciprocal relationship with their social environment, which function to assist these young women in reaching a state of readiness in regards to being able and willing to take risk. For example, for them enrolling in college presents a risk in that it requires that they enter into a situation that is not familiar. It is when they are at this risk taking stage that they

become ready to entertain the thought of going to college. It is at this stage that they the notion of college to begin move from being that of a vague dream or hopeful desire to becoming a concrete goal. It is at this stage that they are able to visualize the possibility.

Once they reach the risk taking stage information about college enrollment becomes useful and efforts at encouragement effective. Information and encouragement prior to reaching this stage appears to be of limited impact in regards to influencing college enrollment. The actions of Carol and Neda speak directly to this issue. During the interviewing process Carol expressed a similar pattern of self perceptions as the young women who enrolled in college. Yet, she was initially among those who had not enrolled in college. During the interviews she was given information about the process and about the benefits of enrolling in a four year college. By the end of the interview process she informed this interviewer that she had taken action to enroll in college. Functioning independently, she used the information she received during the interview process to enroll in college. At the time of the interview Carol was apparently at the risk taking stage where she was able and willing to use the information that she received. In contrast, Neda, who demonstrated a different pattern of self perceptions , was not at the risk taking stage. She expressed the desire to go to college during the interview process. In Neda's case, the interviewer provided her with information, encouragement, and extended assistance. Concretely, there was nothing for Neda to do but mail the forms in. Neda did not mail in the college application. She explained that she just wasn't sure she was ready. Neda demonstrates that information and encouragement alone is not enough to assist these young women in getting them from aspirations to action.

The only role models that the college bound young women spoke of were their mothers who represented for them an example of what not to do. However, they denied having anyone in their lives, fictional or nonfictional, that they aspired to be like, which is not necessarily surprising given the fact that their aspirations for the future appear to be structured more in terms of what they did not want than by what they did want. Yet, this researcher suspects that a similar dynamic exists in regards to their ability to make use of information as would hold true in regard to their ability to benefit from a role model. These young women would have to be at the risk taking stage in order for the role model to have an impact.

The young women of this study did not perceive of themselves as being connected to their school, nor did they believe that their educational institutions had an impact on their ability to enroll in college or not. The academic performance of these young women appeared inconsequential to their development of a sense of competence. Their record of academic performance in school was not perceived by them as being reflective of their intelligence or their ability to do well in college. According to these young women, their schools were nothing but buildings. Their educational institutions did serve as a source of information, but as is indicated in the model one has to be motivated to seek out the information provided and willing to take the risk to access it.

In order for them to complete their journey to enrollment structural opportunities such as financial Aid and liberal admission policies of institutions must be in place. Armed with information these young women have knowledge of the existing opportunities and how to access them.

Summary

The journey to college enrollment appears to begin with their perception of the key components of the self concept (self directed, self reliant, competent), and to their ability to find a sense of motivation through a reciprocal relationship with their social environment which moves them to a stage in which they perceive themselves as being able to take risks. Once at the risk taking stage they become open to information and encouragement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

The young women of this study have assisted us by providing some additional insight into the factors that support the decision to go to college. The information from this study can be useful in generating hypotheses for future research of larger samples. With the changes in the economy and the increased significance of education and professional certification, our continued discussion and exploration of this topic becomes critical to the economic and psychological viability of African American women in their endeavor to escape poverty.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM INTERVENTION

The young women of this study, both those who enrolled in college and those who did not direct our attention to a population of young African American women who are often overlooked by those interested in enrolling students in college. Through the telling of their stories they have suggested to us alternative places to find potential students, techniques to use in recruitment, and intervention strategies for college transition programs.

The young women of this study have taught us of the importance of being at a state of readiness, a point in which the individual feels able to take risk. College prep programs interested in having an impact must incorporate into their programs opportunities for African American students to develop a sense of competence, self direction, and self reliance in a way that is culturally sensitive. These young women have shown us that we must look beyond academic activities as an arena where competence can be developed to other less traditional arenas. In addition, they taught us of the importance of being able to view themselves as actors. College prep programs could be helpful in assisting young African American women in the development of such a self perception. College prep programs that merely provide students with exposure to the college experience by going on college tours and that give students information about the process and benefits of college may not be doing enough to address the needs of young women from these low income communities based on what was learned from this study

. The common perception shared among the young women was that high school was not a dominant institution in the construction of their self concept and that their academic performance in school was not reflective of their capabilities. Thus, they suggest that academic records may not be an effective screening tool for potential candidates. In addition, it indicates that the high school itself should not be the only place that recruitment takes places. Recruiters should expand their target areas to include other institutions and organizations within the community such as churches, community centers, and even the streets.

The young women of this study who enrolled in college expressed strong feelings of connectedness to their families and communities. For these young women an emphasis on individual achievement opportunities and the prospect of escaping their communities would offer limited appeal. Recruiters who are attempting to encourage them to enroll in college should not ignore these feelings of connectedness and should instead frame the notion of attending college in the context of service to their families and communities. They should discuss methods of transportation from their institutions back to the communities of these young women to assist in supporting their connection. These young women appear to find strength and purpose in their role as caretakers. Therefore, in designing college programs to facilitate student transition these young women may be encouraged by constructive opportunities to be caretakers such as serving as assistants to dorm advisors or early externships in the community.

The young women of this study also remind us of the importance of maintaining an open door to college opportunities. The young women of this study demonstrate the developmental nature of the journey to enrollment. The crucial element in going through the various stages is the development of a self concept that incorporates a sense of self direction, self reliance, and competence, all which are perceptions that can evolve over time, for some it is soon and others it could develop later. Therefore, so not to miss out on the wealth of talent which is sure to exist among those late bloomers, it becomes imperative that policies regarding funding , enrollment requirements, and recruitment practices keep them in mind.

APPENDIX**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

I have been asked to participate in a study being conducted by Eunice Matthews as part of her doctoral research in the Sociology Department at City University of New York: Graduate Center. I understand that Ms. Matthews will be interviewing for the purpose of gather life history information. I understand that Ms. Matthews's study is concerned with African American females from low income communities that enroll in a four year college.

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time. If I decide to withdraw, Ms. Matthews will not use the information I have provided in her study.

I also understand that Ms. Matthews will be audio taping my interviews. I understand that my confidentiality will be protected by changing my name and any identifying information. Ms. Matthews has given me an unsigned copy for my records and has answered my questions about the study.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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