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**African American women speak: A sociological study of working  
class women who achieved through higher education**

**Andujar, Martha Felton, Ph.D.**

**City University of New York, 1994**

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**AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SPEAK:  
A Sociological Study Of Working Class Women Who Achieved  
Through Higher Education**

by

**Martha Felton Andujar**

**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**

**1994**

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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.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN SPEAK: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF WORKING CLASS WOMEN WHO ACHIEVED THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

**MARTHA FELTON ANDUJAR**

Adviser: Professor Stephen Steinberg

The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of eleven African American females that moved from the working class to the middle class through the process of acquiring higher education. The study was designed to answer the question of what factors account for the achievement of these working class African Americans who were from economically impoverished families, residing in New York City. Life history interviews were used, and the findings from this data revealed that four factors were needed in order to make the transition, namely: (1) a significant other-investor, (2) moral or religious values (3) a positive early school experience, and (4) a structural opportunity. The findings revealed that without the structural opportunity, the respondents would have been unable to acquire higher education.

Two levels of policy changes are recommended. The first level recommends the creation of a Federal Agency called the Department of Family Entitlement, which would assist families having difficulty meeting the physical and emotional needs of their families. This department must be a cabinet level position in order to accomplish the necessary goals. Such a program would require the assistance of sociologists, social workers, and other related disciplines to implement the program. In terms of the delivery of services, the social work profession has the necessary training for working with families, and advocating for them.

The second level of recommendation is presented in the event that the government does not utilize the first level approach. This recommendation is for placing additional social workers in the public school system to work with the children and families, when they initially enter the system.

In addition, the researcher recommends that the Black community actively and aggressively pursue the goal of organizing their people in order to engage more effectively in the struggle for justice and equality. Historically and presently, the Black Church has remained the strongest institution in Black America, and because of this fact, the researcher suggests utilizing the Black Church and its leadership to pursue an agenda that works toward economic equality and justice.

**In loving memory of Ernest, Ellen and Joseph Felton.**

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Thank you is inadequate to express my gratitude to the strong, Black women who willingly shared their wonderful stories with me. They demonstrate the true meaning of sisterhood among African American women.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	vii
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xiii
Chapter	
1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Objectives of the Study .....	3
Hypotheses of the Study .....	4
Theoretical Framework .....	6
Key Terms.....	10
Relevance and Significant of the Study.....	10
2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	12
First Theme: The Black Family/Problem Solving .....	12
Second Theme: Black Women/Double Jeopardy: Racism and Sexism .....	13
Third Theme: Black Women/Triple Jeopardy: Race/Gender/Class .....	17
Conclusion.....	22
3. RESEARCH DESIGN .....	23
Research Questions.....	23
Research Method .....	23
Sample Selection.....	24
Sample Population.....	25

Criteria for Selection .....	25
Profile of the Respondents .....	25
Data Collection Methodology .....	26
Data Analysis.....	29
<b>4. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Social and Historical Background of the African American in the United States .....	30
Migration to the Cities .....	33
Roads Leading to the Inner City.....	36
Strengths of Black Families .....	39
Struggles of African American Women .....	40
Conclusion.....	43
<b>5. PRIMARY SOCIALIZATION: FAMILY OF ORIGIN, MORAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Socialization Theory .....	45
Development of the Self Concept .....	47
Family of Origin.....	48
Significant Other-Investor.....	49
Family Typology of Sample .....	51
Attenuated Extended Augmented Family .....	53
Attenuated Extended Family.....	54
Attenuated Nuclear Family .....	55
Simple Nuclear Family .....	59

	Moral and Religious Values.....	65
	Conclusion.....	68
6.	<b>SECONDARY SOCIALIZATION: EDUCATION, PEER RELATIONS AND COMMUNITY .....</b>	<b>70</b>
	Education .....	70
	Early Education Experience.....	74
	Respondents' Peer Relationships .....	79
	Community and Community Agencies .....	82
	Community Agency Involvement.....	84
	Conclusion.....	85
7.	<b>STRUCTURAL OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS .....</b>	<b>87</b>
	Structural Opportunities .....	88
	Barriers to Achievement .....	97
	Structural Barriers.....	98
	Social Barriers .....	99
	Psychological Barriers.....	103
	Conclusion .....	104
8.	<b>TRAVELING THE ACHIEVEMENT ROAD: COLLEGE EXPERIENCES .....</b>	<b>105</b>
	Passage Into the College Environment .....	105
	Social Supports.....	112
	Conclusion.....	116

9.	<b>SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES/RACISM/ ADVICE TO OTHERS</b> .....	118
	<b>Significant Life Experiences</b> .....	118
	<b>Racism in the United States</b> .....	125
	<b>Advice to Other African American Females</b> .....	128
	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	129
10.	<b>CONCLUSION AND SOCIAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	130
	<b>Summary of the Analysis</b> .....	130
	<b>Model for Success</b> .....	132
	<b>Social Policy Recommendations</b> .....	137
	<b>Intervention Plan I</b> .....	138
	<b>Intervention Plan II</b> .....	141
	<b>Implications for Further Research</b> .....	145
	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	146
	<b>APPENDIX</b> .....	147
	<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	154

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

### **Figure**

1. Influences on the African American Female ..... 7
2. Family Typology of Sample ..... 51
3. African American Female's Socialization for Success ..... 133
4. Department of Family Entitlement ..... 139

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

There are many studies about the impact the ghetto has on the lives of its inhabitants (Clark, 1965; Valentine, 1969; Schultz, 1969). Most of these focus on the negative impact: poverty, joblessness, drugs and crime. In addition, these studies are male-focused. Few studies examine the subjective experience of working class African American females who survived the ghetto through academic achievement and currently enjoy a degree of life success. When women are discussed, it is within a victimization context. While the ghetto experience is a wrenching one--many do survive. The story of their survival is one that needs to be told. Women are extremely important in holding together the community. What were some of the factors of their survival? This study aims to answer this question. The study will examine African American females' movement through the life cycle from early childhood until middle age. It will focus on the life histories of middle-aged African American women from the working class, who had an interruption in their educational path due to family circumstances and/or poverty. These women were able to achieve higher education in spite of these interruptions. This study will document and analyze the process by which they were able to achieve upward mobility.

My family migrated to New York City during the late forties. Like most Black migrants from the South, they came for greater economic opportunities. They were poor, uneducated, and unskilled. Like most of the people around them, they were barely able to support themselves and their two children. We survived. I graduated

from high school, got a job, married, had a child, and then went to college. While in college, I became aware that many of the people with whom I attended elementary and junior high school had not survived the ghetto experience. Many were lost to jail, drugs, alcohol, crime, and many were dead. But, some survived and managed to achieve economically, socially and educationally. Survival, itself, for African Americans is a task in America.

Africans were brought to this country in the year 1619, initially as indentured servants and soon thereafter, as slaves. They were emancipated in 1865; although legally freed, they continued to be economically, socially, and psychologically oppressed by the dominant white society. The majority of the African American population resided in the South for many years despite the overwhelming poverty and race hatred that they faced. However, during the industrialization of the North, African Americans were encouraged to migrate to the North for better economic and social conditions. They migrated in large numbers to the cities, which promised great opportunities, but rarely delivered. Due to racism and discrimination, the African Americans were forced to live in ghettos within the cities where the housing was inadequate. Along with the poor housing, there were low paying jobs or no jobs at all. Alcohol, crime and other illegal activities began to thrive in the ghettos. Still, many poor African Americans from the South continued to migrate North due to the even poorer economic conditions in the South (Drake & Clayton, 1962; Fusfeld, 1984).

Among the group that survived were some African American women. Several researchers have pointed out that African American women, historically, faced multiple oppressions. They have been traumatized, brutalized, raped, and have faced the multiple oppressions of racism, sexism and classism. Despite this history and the continuation of these atrocities, some African American women have pushed forward,

and have been able to encourage and nurture their families. Indeed, one can say that Black Women are survivors (Hooks, 1981; Giddings; 1984; Jones, 1985). As a result, I am interested in examining the life experiences of working class African American females who were able to survive the ghetto experience and to achieve some degree of success, primarily through the educational process.

Education can be seen as a survival and coping mechanism. It can enable one to cope better with the burdens of racism, sexism and classism. In this study, I will examine the process by which some African American females selected education and were pushed or encouraged to achieve.

#### OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The literature on gender originally focused almost exclusively on the experience of white women, though in recent years there has been an increased interest in the lives of African American women. Their stories are important because they serve as encouragement to other African American females from a working class background. They also enable those from other groups and classes to see and understand another view of life. Indeed, as Patricia Hill Collins states, Black women, because of their insider/outsider stance, have a unique point of view (Collins, 1991). Black women have been locked out of the mainstream of white society. Nevertheless, they have had a close and often intimate view of that society. This has occurred due to the structure of the labor market, whereby African American women were first enslaved, and forced to work caring for white families. Still later, due to economic enslavement, they were forced to accept jobs such as domestics and nannies. These positions gave Black women a unique view of these white families and their functioning.

I am interested in examining the life journey of these women, from their point of view and in identifying the similarities and patterns in their lives. Racism, sexism and classism continue to impact on the lives of African American women in the United States, reducing their life chances. As Deborah King states in her article, "Multiple Jeopardies," Black women must deal with the compounding effects of racism, sexism and classism (King, 1988). Given all of these factors, it is indeed, important to understand how some African American working class females were able to achieve despite the conditions facing them.

### HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

My hypotheses are that the achievements of these women were shaped to varying degrees by the following influences:

1. Early in their lives, there was a significant other-investor who interacted positively with them.
2. Early in their lives, moral or religious orientation was provided giving them a framework for viewing their lives and coping with difficulties.
3. Early in their school careers, they had positive experiences within the school setting with regard to the teachers and the academic work.
4. Later, they encountered a structural opportunity that enabled them to move toward an academic pathway.

Let us examine each of these hypotheses briefly:

#### Importance of the Significant Other-Investor

The significant other-investor is important because he or she will give the child their first sense of self. If the interaction is positive, then the individual will feel loved, secure and capable of achieving. The significant other-investor will also give the child a vision of the possible role that they can have in later life. This significant other-investor does not have to be a role model in the traditional sense of the word,

but rather someone who is able to envision a greater role in society for the child. The significant other-investor is the person who is emotionally invested in the child, and who encourages, nurtures, enables and strokes the child at frequent intervals. The significant other-investor is not necessarily a parent, although frequently, it is. It can be any person who takes a real interest in the child, and the child identifies with that individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Elkins and Handel, 1984).

#### Importance of Moral or Religious Training

Moral or religious training gives an individual a framework for viewing and dealing with the circumstances that one faces in life. They are able to be persistent and determined in the face of obstacles, and are able to cope with many situations. They are able to develop a moral perspective which helps in making important life decisions.

#### Importance of Early School Success

Success in school means that as soon as the child enters the school environment, whether it is Head Start, kindergarten or first grade, the child must have positive experiences and successes. The child must be able to successfully accomplish the tasks and assignments given to them, and positive acknowledgment of these accomplishments must be given in the school setting, as well as at home. There must be a feeling of positive regard from the teacher to the child, as well as the significant other-investor taking an active interest in the events occurring in school.

#### Importance of Structural Opportunity

Although, the other three factors are very important, the fourth factor may be the most important, for if there are no structural opportunities made possible by institutional policy changes when this individual is a young adult, then it is virtually

impossible for him or her to acquire higher education. If a structural opportunity does materialize, these individuals often take advantage of them quickly because they have been socialized for this role.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The proposed study will utilize a Black feminist theoretical framework, which is in the tradition of works by such Black feminist sociologists as Rose Brewer (1989), Patricia Hill Collins (1989, 1990), Bonnie Dill (1983), and Deborah King (1988). Other Black feminist intellectuals have contributed to this growing literature such as Bell Hooks (1981, 1984, 1989, 1990), Kesho Scott (1991) Elizabeth Higginbotham (1988), and Angela Davis (1981). This body of scholarship represents a revision of feminist sociology, feminist theory, and also a corrective perspective of the race relations literature, which did not include gender (Brewer, 1989). Black feminists became aware during the seventies that African American women's experiences were never the focus of the feminist writings. The studies regarding race focused primarily on men while the studies regarding women focused primarily on white women; consequently, in 1982, Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, edited a work entitled, But Some of Us Are Brave (Hull et al., 1982), which focused on African American women. The book presents essays, bibliographies, and curriculum guides, regarding the experiences of African American women. Since that time, Black feminists have developed a theoretical framework for examining the experiences of African American women. The following model depicts the influences on the African American female.

## Influences on the African American Female

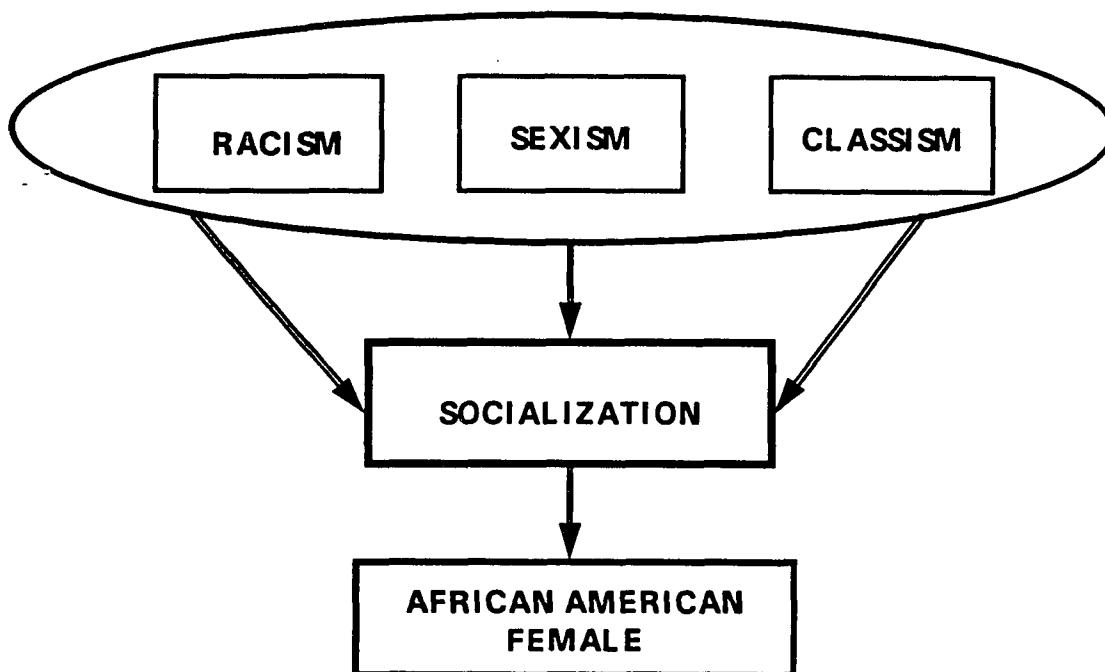


Figure 1

The major propositions in the Black feminist theoretical framework are:

1. Race, class and gender are interacting and interlocking social forces that impact upon the lives of African American women and affect their life chances.
2. Race, class and gender must be studied and examined together due to the fact that they are interdependent.
3. Racism, sexism, and classism may vary in their intensity according to the particular socio-historical period; however there is no hierarchical dualism between the categories (Brewer, 1989).

Deborah King uses the term "multiple jeopardy" to explain the impact of racism, sexism, and classism on Black women. She states that the term "multiple" refers to multiplicative relations; consequently, to understand the impact of racism,

sexism and classism, one must say racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism, rather than racism plus sexism plus classism. Given these overwhelming circumstances for Black women, King states, "A black woman's survival depends on her ability to use all the economic, social and cultural resources available to her from both the larger society and within her community" (King, 1989, p. 51).

The Black feminist theorists are concerned with placing the Black woman at the center of the analysis and making her visible. According to Patricia Hill Collins, Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their oppression, which differs from the rest of society because of their unique experiences in this country with regard to work, community and family. As a result, they have developed a Black women's consciousness. She states, "A subordinate group not only experiences a different reality than a group that rules, but a subordinate group may interpret that reality differently than a dominant group" (Collins, 1990, p.15).

Collins points out that although the oppressed group may have a unique perspective or their own standpoint, the dominant group is able to suppress their knowledge because the oppressed group lacks the access to media, newspapers, books, educational institutions that would enable them to articulate their standpoint. Collins states that Black women have been economically, politically and socially oppressed, thus suppressing their ideas.

Feminist theory has also suppressed Black women's ideas and writings. Collins states, "At the core of Black feminist thought lie theories created by African American women which clarify a Black women's standpoint--in essence, an interpretation of Black women's experiences and ideas by those who participate in them" (Collins, 1990, p.15). Black feminist theorists are interested in taking the

everyday experiences of Black women and presenting them as their specialized knowledge base. Their aim is to present the standpoint of Black women and to articulate their consciousness.

In conducting some of my preliminary interviews, my respondents revealed the theme of triple jeopardy being played out. Racism was always present even when they were not consciously thinking about it. One respondent called it a "given," a "fact of life." She recalled growing up in Harlem and was largely unaware of racism until she entered high school. She pointed out that her elementary and junior high schools were in Harlem and that this was really a protective environment. But to attend high school, it was necessary to travel downtown. In high school, although her grades were excellent, she was not encouraged to apply for college. Moreover, she was not informed that the City University System was free to all who had high grade point averages. In addition, she was not informed that there were other colleges that offered scholarships.

This respondent's race and class origins determined her lack of access to information. Furthermore, the society did not really encourage women to pursue higher education, especially African American women. This respondent faced racism, classism and sexism in regard to her educational goals; however, if we look even closer at her life, we find that these multiple oppressions had an effect on each aspect of her life.

Some of the other respondents had similar stories, and the study will look at how these women were able to achieve despite the multiple oppressions they faced as African American women in the United States.

## **KEY TERMS**

Below are several of the key terms that will be used in this study. They are:

1. The term "African American" shall refer to the descendants of the Africans who were involuntarily brought to the United States beginning in 1619 and were designated as slaves, shortly thereafter.
2. The term "Black" will be used interchangeably with the term, African American.
3. Working class shall refer to those individuals whose parents were uneducated, worked at menial and unskilled jobs such as domestics, porters, bathroom attendant, cleaning person.
4. Higher education refers to the achievement of a college degree.
5. Success is defined as the individual who has survived many of the negative influences of the ghetto, and has been able to acquire higher education, secure a professional position, and exert a greater control over their daily lives.
6. Significant Other-Investor is an individual who invests positive thoughts, feelings and aspirations into another person who internalizes them. It is a reciprocal relationship with mutual feelings of love and care.

## **RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study will contribute to the sociological literature in the areas of socialization and Black feminist theory by presenting new insight into how some working class African American females who grew up in the ghetto, achieved success in higher education. These educated middle aged African American females are willing to share their ideas and opinions about themselves, at a point in their lives when they are intellectually able to look back at changes in their mode of thinking and to examine their life choices.

This study may stimulate other studies that deal with the African American females' varied experiences in this country. In addition, this study may encourage

**African American women to share more about their reality and encourage a greater number of African Americans to acquire higher education. Last but not least, this study will conclude with policy recommendations intended to help African American women to pursue higher education.**

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The study is grounded in the Black Feminist sociological literature, a new and emerging field which integrates discussions of race, class, and gender in the analysis of the experiences of African American women. The earlier works of the sixties and seventies did not link these oppressions.

In reviewing the literature, three major themes emerge. They are:

1. The Black Family/Problem Solving Framework
2. Black Women/Double Jeopardy: Racism and Sexism
3. Black Women/Triple Oppression: Racism, Sexism and Classism

#### **FIRST THEME: THE BLACK FAMILY/PROBLEM SOLVING**

The problem solving framework consists of studies that examine the structure of the Black family to determine the reasons for their problems. Some of these early studies were E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (1966); Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (1944); Andrew Billingsley, Black Families in White America (1966); Daniel Patrick Moynihan, The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (1965). These studies attempt to analyze the problems that Black families face and to recommend social policies that would solve these problems.

Black women were not the focus of these studies; however, the studies recognized that the central person in the African American families was the mother, who had the primary responsibility for rearing and socialization of the children.

Although Black women were clearly not the focal point, still, Daniel Patrick Moynihan diagnosed the problems experienced by the Black family as due to the matriarchy structure (1967).

This generated controversy, which lasted for many years regarding the question of whether or not the Black family was a matriarchy. Robert Staples challenged the Moynihan thesis in his article, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy." He points out that African American women do not possess the social and economic power which the term "matriarch" implies. Therefore, it is inaccurate to use the term with regard to Black women. Staples further states that the problems faced by Black families are not caused by Black women (Staples, 1970).

Robert Hill, in his work, The Strengths of Black Families (1972), focuses on the strengths that are inherent in the Black family which include Black women. Still, although the work is very important and presents another perspective of the Black American experience, Black women and their experiences were not at the center of the analysis. Race, again, is the major issue that is dealt with in regard to the Black experiences of all, including Black women.

## SECOND THEME: BLACK WOMEN/DOUBLE JEOPARDY: RACISM AND SEXISM

The second theme consists of literature that examines the double jeopardy that African American women face with regard to racism and sexism. Toni Cade's book, The Black Woman (1970), consists of a collection of writings by Black women about their experiences. The major strength of the work is that it gives Black women an opportunity to express their thoughts and ideas about their lives. One of its weaknesses is that the articles are of uneven quality. The article by Frances Beal, "Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female" is an attempt to re-define the role of the Black female in the liberation struggle (1970). Beal identifies capitalism and racism as the major oppressive forces in this society. This article is one of the early writings that

begins to examine the issue of racism, sexism, and how these forces impact upon Black women. One of the weaknesses of the article is that she does not give an in depth analysis of the forces that are oppressing Black women. Also, she seems to ask permission from the Black man for Black women to be involved in the struggle on an equal basis. She recognizes that it will take the working together of Black males and Black females to move toward liberation (Beal, 1970).

During the seventies, some scholars became interested in studying the Black Woman (Harley, 1973); (Ladner, 1971); (Lerner, 1973); (Staples, 1973). These studies made an attempt to offer more information about Black women. Ladner's work entitled, Tomorrow's Tomorrow (1971), gives us an understanding of the effects of institutional racism on the lives of poor Black adolescent females growing up in an urban ghetto. Ladner observes the socialization experience, and she states her bias, namely, that she is a Black woman and interested in acquiring additional knowledge about Black females. She also acknowledges that she is probing for their strengths because past social scientists have focused on the negative aspects of the Black female. Ladner was a participant observer, and also used life history interviews to obtain her data. Ladner states that she "...is attempting to depict what the Black woman's life has been like in the past, and what barriers she has had to overcome in order to survive, and how she is coping today under strenuous circumstances" (Ladner, 1971, p.10).

In Ladner's study, she briefly discusses the type of African American females on which this study will focus, specifically, those who planned to use education to achieve a middle class status. Ladner states that the home was the most frequent source of the origin of these aspirations. This study differs from Ladner's because it will focus on the entire life cycle of these woman from their perspective. A major strength of Ladner's study is that it is a participant observation study and that we are able to understand the perceptions and attitudes of these adolescent girls. The study's

limitation is that it focuses only on adolescent females, growing up in a housing project rather than having a comparative group to study (Ladner, 1971).

In 1973, Robert Staples wrote, The Black Woman in America, in which he attempted to look at the lives of Black women, in regard to courtship, sex, and marriage (Staples, 1973). The work, although focused on Black women does not really address the issues related to the oppression faced by Black women in a hostile society. Gerda Lerner's book entitled, Black Women in White America, presents documents related to the experiences of Black women from 1811-1971 (Lerner, 1973). The book is excellent as source material, but its major weakness is that it does not offer an analysis of the material.

Inez Reid's study entitled, Together Black Women, probes the thinking of Black women who were initially seen as militant, but later viewed as being politically active and concerned about African American people (Reid, 1972). Although these women share their thoughts regarding feminism, liberation, and political action, the study does not give us a sense of who these women are, and how they acquired their particular outlook.

Michele Wallace's work, Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman, focuses on the sexism of Black men toward Black women (Wallace, 1978). One of the major limitations of the work is the narrow perspective. Although Wallace highlights a few of the problems between Black men and Black women, she leaves out of the discussion the larger societal forces of racism, sexism and their impact upon the lives of Black women and Black men.

In 1977, Black Feminists published a statement called "A Black Feminist Statement," whereby they discuss their beliefs and their issues (Hull, Scott and Smith, 1982). They deal with the implications of race, class and sex in the Black woman's experiences. This statement represents a turning point in the manner in which Black women issues are discussed. After this, the literature that follows began to place

women at the center of the analysis and made attempts to understand their perspective. Some of these works were the following: Ain't I A Woman (Hooks, 1981); But Some of Us Are Brave (Hull, et al., 1982); Black Women: Do They Cope Better (Myers, 1980); The Black Woman (Rodgers, 1980); Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow (Jones, 1985).

Hook's work, Ain't I A Woman, examines the experience of the African American woman from slavery to contemporary times with a focus on sexism and racism. She describes the historic racial structure which shaped the sociological realities of African American women. She points out that Black women from the early 19th century were involved in the struggle for the equal rights of women, as well as equal rights for the Black race. The strength of the work is in the presentation of the African American women's experience with regard to sexism and racism.

Hook's book, entitled, Talking Back, is a collection of autobiographical essays, where she presents her feelings and perceptions as she move from a country town to an Ivy League college campus (Hook, 1989). The essays provide valuable insight into the world of the working class African American female. The strength of the work is that the voice is authentic, and she makes an attempt to communicate with various classes of women. The limitation of this book is that the essays are not based on a developmental framework. This research study will focus on giving an in depth view of the experiences of working class African American women growing up in the urban area.

Lena Meyers' study, Black Women: Do They Cope Better? examines the lives of 400 Black women, in which she concludes that Black women have high self esteem. In addition, their coping mechanisms function well despite the devastating conditions existing in their communities (Myers, 1980). One of the weaknesses in this study is the research method. In my opinion, a qualitative method would have yielded greater information.

Another work by Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis, Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminists Perspectives (1981) adds to the discussion by presenting the viewpoints of Black feminists and white feminists in an effort to reconcile and understand their differences. Both of the authors write from their particular vantage point, as Ms. Joseph is a Black woman and Ms. Lewis is a white woman. The book shows us the various effects of racism and sexism on both Black and white women. In my opinion, the study should have included an in depth analysis of the class factor, and the interaction between racism and sexism.

In general, these books represent early attempts to look at the idea that the experiences of African American women are shaped by issues of racism and sexism. They provide additional information regarding African American women, and suggest new ways of thinking about their experiences.

### THIRD THEME: BLACK WOMEN/TRIPLE JEOPARDY: RACE/GENDER/CLASS

The third theme in the literature is the examination of the African American female experience utilizing the concepts of race, class and gender. Some of the literature consists of the followings: Black Feminists (Collins, 1990); Habits of Surviving (Scott, 1991); "The On-Going Struggle: Education and Mobility For Black Women" (Higginbotham, 1988); and "Rethinking Mobility: Towards A Race and Gender Inclusive Theory" (Higginbotham and Cannon, 1987). These are works that incorporate the concepts of race, class and gender in their analysis of the African American women's experiences.

Collins' work is a theoretical book on Black feminist thoughts (Collins, 1990). Her objective is to start a different dialogue about knowledge, information, and validity. She greatly underscores the invisibility of Black women's thoughts and ideas.

Personalizing the study, she declares that as an academic woman she had lost her voice. Audre Lorde's poem, "Litany for Survival," expresses the feelings of Collins and many Black women.

and when we speak we are afraid  
 our words will not be heard  
 nor welcomed  
 but when we are silent  
 we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
 remembering  
 we were never meant to survive  
 (Lorde, 1984, p.41)

Collins wants Black women to reclaim their voices, and feels that any analysis on Black women must have them at the center of the discussion. Her book aims to deal with the issues that are major in the lives of Black women. She also uses the literature written by Black women. This is particularly important to her because she feels that the ideas and writings of Black women intellectuals are overlooked frequently.

Michele Wallace's, Invisibility Blues, is a collection of essays about the African American culture (Wallace, 1990). Within this collection, Part One contains autobiographical material about being a Black feminist from the middle class. She uses her life experiences to elucidate some of the issues that African American women must face. A weakness of this work is that Wallace fails to include some of the theoretical principles that would have placed the autobiographical information within a frame of reference.

Another interesting study, The On-Going Struggle: Education and Mobility for Black Women, examines how Black women's social class origins and the racial structure of their schools shape their educational experiences (Higginbotham, 1987). The study shows Black females' strengths and conflicts as they develop in segregated, although supposedly, integrated schools that are predominately white. The study

documents the racism faced by the Black females, as they attempt to acquire an education. Differences were found between the middle class Black student and the working class Black student, as the working class student needed to prove that she belonged in the school or college. The study documents the high cost of acquiring an education, both emotionally and financially. Many of the strategies used by African American women to deal with the racism and sexism are highlighted. As Higginbotham states:

Although collective political actions are the most visible to the public, Black people do not limit their actions to the political sphere. Battling racism is a protracted struggle which requires daily attention...People also struggle in private and personal ways (Higginbotham, 1987, p.26).

In the study, Rethinking Mobility, Higginbotham and Cannon examine the subjective experience of upward mobility with regard to white women and People of Color. This research attempts to explain how race and gender affect the structural barriers to mobility. They conclude that theories of upward mobility must be gender and race specific. According to the researchers, racism and sexism limit the opportunities for mobility among white women and Blacks, while mobility opportunities for white males continue to increase. As Higginbotham and Cannon state, "the nature of privilege is such that it is taken for granted in the lives of the privileged. It is only in comparison with those for whom advantage is absent that the full meaning of privilege is revealed" (Higginbotham and Cannon, 1988, p.14). The researchers also found that white women and People of Color who are upwardly mobile, experience conflict while crossing gender, color and class barriers (Higginbotham and Cannon, 1988).

Scott's book, Habits of Surviving, is the work that is the most similar to my research. Scott contends that Black women survived in this country using certain strategies, which she calls "habits of surviving." She defines "habits of surviving...as

the external adjustments and internal adaptations that people make to economic exploitation and to racial and gender-related oppression" (Scott, 1991, p.7). Scott feels that these habits have become ritualized, and that Black women continue to use them even though they are no longer useful to them. She documents how Black women use "habits of surviving" in all areas of their lives, such as in places of employment, in schools, in family settings and in the community. These habits are passed from one generation to the next. Many of the habits are no longer beneficial to Black women because the society has changed and the nature of the oppression is different; consequently, new strategies for coping must be found by Black women.

One of these "habits" is called the "warrior mode." She defines it as a way of approaching life, whereby, the individual is prepared to face a battle. According to Scott, using this way of relating does not permit the Black woman to relax and to just be herself.

Scott uses the methodology of life history interviews to prove her thesis regarding "habits of surviving." She interviews four African American females, who are willing to share the conditions of their lives and their method of survival. In addition Scott and her two daughters also share some of their life history information. In examining the life histories, Scott uses the theoretical model of gender, race, and class.

Although Scott's work is informative, there are some weaknesses in her study. For example, a clear portrait of these women does not emerge from the data, and the reader is unable to understand the underlying motivation or behavior of the women. According to Becker, the life history interview should permit us to understand how and why particular decisions were made by the individuals (Becker, 1977). It is possible that Scott's middle class values were affecting her interpretation of the material. At

times, she seemed to forget that many Black women, and in particular working class Black women, continue to function in environments that require the maintenance of the "old habits of surviving."

She further states that Black women in the workplace often abandon feminism, and they hold back because they have been socialized to be restrained. During my preliminary interviews for this research, I found that Black women approach the issue of feminism in different ways, depending upon their class identification. In addition, their behavior at the workplace is determined by their class affiliations. Studies by Jones and Myers challenge Scott's contention that Black women have internalized limitations and doubt their femininity (Myers, 1980; Jones, 1983; Giddings, 1984).

Reviewing the history of African American women reveals their struggle and determination to push ahead despite the numerous obstacles in their path. African American women have had to be clearer than other women regarding their identity and defining who they are. They have always been and continue to remain in the forefront of the struggle for the race and for themselves. The fact that society has often tried to limit their progress does not suggest that African American women internalize the limitations. Black women struggle to push aside some of the limitations placed on them and the rest of the race (Lerner, 1973; Giddings, 1984; Jones, 1985). In my opinion, it is unlikely that the majority of Black women are socialized to be restrained in the workplace; however, I believe that this may be true for the behavior of middle class Black females. In addition, Black women and Black people recognize they have many battles to fight and that they will not be able to fight all of them, so they must be selective. In general, I feel that more studies like this should be done before we can begin to generalize about the rest of the Black female population.

Scott's research provides a good beginning but her conclusions do not accurately describe the vast majority of Black women. Scott's work illustrates the dangers of using selective life history interviews to generalize about all Black women.

Although Scott's study is in some ways similar to this one, this study departs from hers in that it explores how a select group of African American women from poor families were able to attain higher education. The study will also examine the functioning of the self in a hostile environment. I will utilize Scott's model of race, class, and gender in studying these women. This research will investigate Black women's sense of self identity and their maintenance of a positive self image.

### CONCLUSION

The literature on African American women has moved from discussions about the Black family to research focused directly on Black women. The Black feminists' literature has fully recognized that any discussion about Black women must include the concepts of racism, sexism and classism. Now, more studies are using the conceptual framework of race, gender, and class. Black feminists called attention to the fact that African American women were rarely the focus of studies or were totally omitted. They are encouraging Black women to articulate their experiences for there must be more studies from the perspective of African American women. The best research method for gathering this type of information is the qualitative research method.

In sum, this study will advance the literature on a select group of working class African American women who climb the educational mobility ladder despite all the odds. It will trace the development of their self concepts and document their experiences as they make the arduous journey from the Black working class to the Black middle class in a segregated society.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This study addresses the question of how some working class females grew up in the ghetto, managed to survive and achieved a degree of success. In addition, the study focuses on understanding the process involved in this movement from the women's standpoint. The following research questions listed below were explored:

#### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are the factors that enabled these women to achieve and move in the direction of higher education?
2. What can be learned about the development of their self identity and their relationship with significant other-investors?
3. What was the impact of their family of origin and their significant other-investors on their ability to achieve?
4. Given the fact that racism, sexism and classism exist in the society and have a negative impact on these women, how were they able to move in a positive direction?
5. Given the negative images of African American women in this society, how do they handle this?

#### **RESEARCH METHOD**

The life history approach is the research method used in this study because it provides rich and detailed accounts that allow the subtle distinctions among Black women to emerge. The individual's personality and particular understanding of life,

also emerges in this type of qualitative research. The numerous areas of the respondent's life are open to close scrutiny. Becker asserts that the sociologist doing a life history "...takes steps to ensure that it covers everything we want to know, that no important fact or event is slighted, that what purports to be factual squares with other available evidence and that the subject's interpretations are honestly given" (Becker, 1977, p.64). He goes on to suggest that the sociologist doing life histories places great emphasis on the subject's perspective of his or her story. As Becker states:

To understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how it looked to him, what he thought he had to contend with, what alternatives he saw open to him; you can understand the effects of opportunity structures, delinquent subcultures, social norms, and other commonly invoked explanations of behavior only by seeing them from the actor's point of view" (Becker, 1977, p.64).

Thus, the life history method enables the sociologist to place himself or herself in the position of another person and to view events from their vantage point. By doing this, the sociologist is able to analyze the data and to arrive at a sociological understanding of the respondent's world.

### SAMPLE SELECTION

The researcher was interested in interviewing women who achieved success and were from the working class. It is important to see what route African American working class females take to achieve upward mobility through higher education.

A snowball sample was used to locate the respondents, whereby each participant was asked to recommend another candidate. In all, eleven respondents were interviewed using the life history approach. This research is not intended to generalize to all working class African American females, but instead to give a description of the process that some working class African Americans used to acquire higher education.

## **SAMPLE POPULATION**

### **Criteria For Selection**

The criteria for selection of the respondents consist of the following:

1. African American women, who are the descendants of the African slaves that were involuntarily brought to the United States.
2. African American women who are between thirty-three and sixty years of age.
3. African American women who grew up in one of the low income areas in New York City, commonly referred to as the ghetto.
4. African American women from a low socio-economic background.
5. African American women whose parents do not have a high school diploma.
6. African American women with at least a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree.

### **Profile of the Respondents**

Nine of the respondents had an interruption in their educational experience between high school and college. Thus, the majority of the respondents started college when they were in their middle to late twenties.

At the time of the respondents' entrance into college, six of them were mothers. Of the six, only one respondent was married at that time or involved in a relationship that resulted in joint parenting. There were four divorced women.

With regard to educational accomplishments, all of the respondents have a B.A. degree, and all but one have earned master's degrees. Two respondents are working on a second master's; two are pursuing a Ph.D, while one has earned a Ph.D. Of the sample, there are five social workers, four teachers, one librarian and one political activist. One of the social workers is director of a special education program, and another is a social work supervisor. One of the teachers is a coordinator of a special education program.

The majority of the respondents were in their late forties at the time of the interviews.

### DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

The research instrument used was a life history interview guide to ensure that the research did not leave out any crucial topics. This guide can be found in Appendix A. The questions were open-ended, and the interviews were taped. The researcher initially tried to take notes; however, she found that the note taking interfered with the flow of the interviews, and resulted in the researcher being less attentive in listening to the respondents.

The interviews were conducted in the homes of each respondent, except for two of them. Setting is important in conducting the life history interview because the respondent must feel comfortable as they share the many details of their life. The respondents must feel safe and free to respond in a personal way. Privacy and confidentiality were important issues that were discussed, and they were comfortable with the fact that their identities would be preserved. There were few distractions during the interview. Two respondents were interviewed at their place of employment because they were unavailable in the evenings. This arrangement was satisfactory to the researcher because they were able to have privacy on the job.

In conducting the actual interview, it was necessary to establish rapport with the respondents. This was done by the researcher rather easily, since she is a social worker and uses these skills in her daily practice. It is important for the respondents to know that the researcher is non-judgmental and non-evaluative. Once the respondents were able to accept this, they shared freely.

Each respondent was interviewed on three separate occasions for one and a half to two hours. The interviews were limited to two hours because the researcher did not

want to exhaust the respondent. The researcher always tried to leave at a point that was a natural transition until the next interview.

At the initial interview session, the researcher established rapport with the respondents by creating an atmosphere that encouraged sharing and openness. As Bogdan and Taylor state in their book entitled, Introduction to Qualitative Research, "A free and open atmosphere must be created by the researcher" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975 p.112). Since the life history interviews are of such a personal nature, the researcher shared, as needed, information about herself that was similar to the respondents. The aim was to build trust with the respondents so that they would willingly share their stories.

In addition, during the first interview, it was necessary to probe frequently for additional information. The respondents were not accustomed to being interviewed in this manner, and consequently, did not offer enough of the detailed information that the researcher was seeking. However, by the second interview, they were usually clearer about the type of information desired. As Bogdan and Taylor state "...the researcher cannot take for granted commonsense understandings and assumptions that most people use in their daily interaction" (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975, p.114).

The researcher found it was important to prepare the respondents for the feelings they would have after the interview. The researcher's experience in interviewing made her aware of the fact that many of the questions would activate other memories, both painful and pleasant. The respondents accepted this information easily because they were prepared for this occurrence and saw this event as a normal part of the process. This knowledge gave them some degree of control over the situation.

By the second interview, the respondents were usually looking forward to the session. The first interview triggered additional memories that they wished to share with the researcher. In addition, the second session was also a time when respondents talked easily and were not ready to end the session when the time was up.

By the third session, which was the last interview, respondents were very much into the process, and expressed some let down that the sessions were over. For many of them, perhaps, this was the first time they had been invited to tell their life stories in such detail, and had the opportunity to examine their lives.

The sharing of such personal information had an effect on the respondents, and also on the researcher. As the respondents shared happy experiences, the researcher shared in the happiness, and when the experiences were sad, the researcher also shared in the sadness. As a result, when the interviews were over, the researcher and the respondents had bonded. Since the respondents and the researcher were all African American women, it appeared that this gave the researcher an advantage in exploring various topics. The researcher was able to speak the language of the respondents, and was able to probe beneath the surface for clarification of things that she did not understand. Since the researcher was so similar to them, in terms of race, class and gender, the respondents were particularly interested in the process of obtaining a Ph.D. degree.

The major areas focused on were the family, peer group, educational experience, political ideology, religious values, racial ideology, employment, and mentors. Most importantly, the researcher elicited from these women their thoughts and reflections on their lives. Since the respondents were mostly middle aged Black women, they offered a unique perspective on the events of their lives.

One of the possibilities for weaknesses in the study may be attributed to the fact that the researcher has a similar background to the respondents which could have resulted in research bias. However, this researcher was aware of this factor and was constantly on the alert to avoid it.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

After each interview, the researcher noted general impressions immediately. The interviews were tape recorded, and they were transcribed as soon as possible. After transcription, the interviews were coded according to the hypotheses and themes. They were then analyzed in terms of the hypotheses and identifying the similarities and differences in the respondents' lives. The researcher, also, highlights the mobility patterns found in this group of working class African American females. The analysis attempts to depict the particular lives of this population from their unique point of view, while also offering the sociologist's understanding of these lives and their particular socio-historic circumstances.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The environment that the respondents were reared in was problematic, and certainly their parents had not deliberately placed them in surroundings that could be so detrimental to their well being. So, the question is why were these families living in the inner city or the ghetto, as some people have referred to it? What had brought them to this particular place, and at this time? To answer these questions, one must examine the social and historical conditions of African American people.

#### **SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IN THE UNITED STATES**

Africans came to the shores of the New World as early as 1501 with European explorers such as Balboa, Cortes, Pizarro and Columbus. As John Hope Franklin states, "...Negroes were being employed, but the colonists and their Old World sponsors were extremely slow in recognizing them as the best possible labor force for the tasks in the New World" (Franklin, 1980, p.35). They were explorers, servants, and only later were they enslaved. In 1619, a Dutch frigate landed in Jamestown and there were twenty Africans on board. These Africans were initially indentured servants as were the poor Europeans that came over. After a period of three years, they were free to pursue their own destiny. As Franklin states, the Blacks "...were listed as servants in the census counts of 1623 and 1624; and as late as 1651 some Negroes

whose period of service had expired were being assigned land in much the same way that it was being assigned to whites who had completed their indenture" (Franklin, 1980, p.54).

However, the New World needed a large, strong labor force to clear and work the land. The early colonists had difficulty meeting this demand. They tried to use the indentured white servants and then the Indians, unsuccessfully. Then they decided to enslave Africans that were in their midst.

The white settlers felt that this would work because the African was easily identified if he or she ran away. In addition, unlike the Indian, the African did not know the land, and consequently, would not know where to hide. Also, it appeared to the settlers that Africa had an unending source of additional Africans. By 1660's, many of the southern colonies adapted a statutory acceptance of slavery.

The Africans were brought to the New World to work. And the work was primarily agricultural. They were unpaid or compensated in any way. They lived in broken down shacks that were primarily bare of furnishings. Most of the time, they slept on the floors. They were given the scraps of food to eat that the slave master did not want. They worked hard from sun up to sun down. It was a difficult life with no rewards or end in sight (Franklin, 1980).

The years prior to the Civil War were filled with agitation and debate over slavery. The great debate was about slavery and if it should be permitted in the Southwest. Others thought that slavery should be permitted anywhere. Lincoln was elected President of the United States. Shortly thereafter, the Civil War commenced and on January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

...All persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the executive government of the United States, including the military and

naval adhered thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom (Franklin, 1980, p.547).

The African slaves were emancipated, but though they were legally freed, they were still economically and socially enslaved. They faced discrimination and prejudice throughout their lives. Despite this, they continued to work to eke out a living for their families; they survived, primarily in the South where Blacks were employed on farms. They were cash tenants, share tenants, share croppers and wage laborers. Share tenants and share croppers had a similar status, whereby they rented the land to plant crops. In the case of the share tenants, they had equipment, and would pay between one fourth and one half of their earnings for the rent.

With regard to the sharecroppers, they did not have equipment to work the land, and so they offered their labor. The landowner would allow them to buy items for credit in a store selected by the landowner. In addition, the sharecroppers were usually given a house. When the crops were sold, the sharecropper paid the landowner half of the profits made. In addition, they had to pay the money advanced to them for seeds, fertilizer, clothing etc. The people who worked as wage laborers earned the least amount of money as they had only their labor to offer.

Under these conditions, the boll weevil came along and destroyed most of the cotton crops. Soil erosion also occurred. In addition, the mechanization of farm equipment came about and this caused the white farmers to require fewer workers. Added to these factors, segregation and discrimination continued to be a growing and persistent problem facing the African Americans. With all of these factors at work, the African Americans living in the South were quite ready to seek opportunity elsewhere. Certainly, most of them felt they had little to lose (Franklin, 1980).

### MIGRATION TO THE CITIES

Prior to World War I, the North experienced the need for an additional labor supply. Because of this, many of the northern industries began to recruit African Americans living in the South. Prior to this time, most of the African Americans that were seeking opportunities went to the urban southern cities that were nearby.

The northern industries enticed the African Americans to migrate to the northern cities. The Blacks moved to the North expecting greater economic and social freedom. They thought that opportunities awaited them, and that their children would receive some of the benefits that their parents had been unable to give to them, namely a decent education and greater opportunity. In Clark's words:

The Negro came to Harlem, all migrants do, seeking better living conditions and expanded economic opportunities. It was here that most artists and intellectuals lived, drawing their ideas and inspiration from the life of the community. But the Negro in Harlem found himself increasingly isolated culturally, socially and economically by a wall of racial prejudice and discrimination (Clark, 1965, p.26).

Later, World War I began, and the emigration of European immigrants in large numbers was no longer possible; consequently, again, the United States needed additional workers. However, as soon as the war ended, the country no longer needed the surplus labor of the African Americans, as whites returned from the armed services seeking jobs. Due to racism and discrimination, African Americans were terminated and whites were hired.

Blacks first started to emigrate, in large numbers, during the years from 1910 to 1920, and they continued throughout the 1960's. As Florette Henri points out, those Blacks who migrated first wrote home telling about their great freedom and the jobs (Henri, 1975).

Prior to World War I, most of the Blacks that came to the city were employed in service jobs such as domestics and porters. However, during the 1920's, Black men were hired by the factories as manual laborers in stores, laundries, warehouses etc., while most Black women continued to be employed as domestics. The African American population was used as a reserve labor force.

Before the mass migrations, most of the African American population lived in the South; however, by 1970, the reverse had occurred. More Blacks were living in the northern cities than in the South since their arrival in the United States.

Initially when Blacks came to the cities, they were not received with alarm by the white population; however, as their numbers increased, the white population fled from the Black areas. Because so many Blacks were then forced to live in a certain small area, it became overcrowded, and overcrowding brings with it poor health conditions, high mortality rates, drugs, crime, violence and despair (Clark, 1965; Franklin, 1980).

Many of the conditions that the African Americans faced in the North were very different from their previous life experiences in the South. They had to develop other ways of coping because many of their previous values were difficult to live by in the cities. As Clark states, "The problem of the American Negro, once predominantly Southern, has gradually over the past few decades become predominantly a Northern problem" (Clarke, 1965, p.22).

The ghetto consists of dilapidated housing, over crowded conditions, inferior education, crime, inadequate public services, unemployment and few opportunities. The African Americans were not permitted in apprentice programs or unions, and they were hired only for menial jobs. These jobs offered no opportunity for upward mobility. The educational system was permitted to deteriorate, along with the housing.

Still residents had to pay higher amounts for food and shelter despite the fact that they received less for their money.

Fusfeld points out that due to modern technology, cities have been undergoing a change for the last sixty years. Prior to World War I, most industries were situated around railroads and ports; consequently, there were many jobs available. As transportation improved, no longer was it necessary for industries to be located in the cities, and so the process of decentralization began to occur. This happened slowly as industries moved to the suburbs, where large tracts of land were readily available, and inexpensive. In addition, many whites also moved out to the suburbs where they could flee the city and live a better life. It was the higher paying jobs that, also, moved to the suburbs. As a result, public transportation was permitted to deteriorate because there were fewer people using it, and fewer tax dollars to maintain the service (Fusfeld, 1984).

Fusfeld states that the ghetto consists of people, who are systematically discriminated against, and primarily because of their race. As he states, the ghetto has a "... permanent depression and economic underdevelopment" (Fusfeld, 1984, p.6). In his view, the social system has various methods for rejecting individuals from one subsystem or the other. The subsystems have criteria; however, for the Blacks, they are always rejected because of their race. As a result of this rejection, they are constantly denied equal access to the society's benefits and opportunities. In the inner cities, African Americans most often are forced to live in the ghettos. To illustrate how this occurs, this study will present a few of the respondent's families, and how they found themselves living in such adverse circumstances.

### ROADS LEADING TO THE INNER CITY

Connie talks about how her family ended up living in the ghetto, beginning in the late 1940's. "My parents were born and reared in the same small town in the South. They married and had two children." Connie states that she was the youngest child and that she was born in the South, as well.

At that time, her father, Mr. F. was employed as a sharecropper. He was a sharecropper until Connie was about three years old. After a time, her father realized that he was not prospering and decided to seek other employment. The only industries located near the town were the mill and the logging industries. He was unable to secure employment with either of them, so the family moved to New York City in search of job opportunities. They had family already living there. This situation was typical of many African American families at that time. Their goals were to secure employment, to save money, to buy a home in the South and return there to live.

The family came to New York City, and moved into a brownstone, where they rented one room. Mr. F.'s sister, her husband and child lived with her sister-in law and two sons in the same apartment. The two families shared two rooms. On another floor lived Mr. F.'s cousin and his wife. This was also typical of many African American families at that time. They lived either in the same buildings or nearby, and they continued the life style of the South to which they were accustomed. That is, they frequently interacted, and shared their lives with one another.

Upon Mr. F.'s arrival in the city, his sister and her sister-in-law, who were employed as domestics, asked their employers if any of their friends needed a domestic. They did, and shortly after, Mrs. F. was employed as a domestic. Mr. F. was taken to the Silvercup Bakery, where his cousin was employed, and they hired him also. Connie stated that her father often spoke about how taxing the work was as his

job was to move 100 pound flour bags. Fortunately for him, he was accustomed to hard work from working on the farm, and was physically strong.

Although, most of their money was spent on food and shelter. They were able to save a little each week, and five years later, had managed to save enough money to buy an old house in the South. When they returned to the South, Mr. F. looked for employment again. The logging industry had decreased production even more. The mill had closed down completely and there was no other work nearby. Consequently, Mr. F. traveled to a large city nearby, which was about a two hour drive away. His employment did not last very long. There was no work for Mrs. F. and after a while, the family could not make a living there and decided to return to New York City.

Again, they went to their family living in the city. This time, Mr. F. did not get a job that paid as well as his previous one. He worked in a plastic factory. Mrs. F. returned to being a domestic. They were still hopeful that one day they could return home. Connie related sadly, "My parents were never able to return there to live, and I think this fact hastened the death of my father. He died when he was only in his early fifties."

As some authorities state, the economic system rejected Mr. F. and many others similar to him because of their race; consequently, they were left to survive in the ghetto. Fusfeld states, "...Partly by choice, and partly because there was no other place to go, he ended up in the urban ghetto" (Fusfeld, 1984, p.149). Although the ghetto does not have physical bars, many people who have great potential are often trapped there and unable to leave. When people cannot leave the ghetto, and people continue to enter, as well as the birth rates increase, the ghetto expands. This is what occurred in the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's.

Another respondent, Natalie, tells about her family's arrival in New York City.

She states:

My grandmother used to be a sharecropper. She had a husband and he left her in the landowner's house. My grandmother then took over those responsibilities. She had two children, my mother was one, and she had a brother. At one point, my grandmother after the selling of the crops, and giving the landowner what he claimed he was due, she was left with five dollars. The five dollars that was left, she threw in his face. --And then of course, she had to leave the South.

Natalie states that her grandmother left the children with her in-laws, planning to send for them once she got herself straightened out. This was a common practice among Black people for it was extremely difficult to make the move without a job and housing.

Natalie continues:

My grandmother moved to Baltimore, where she did "sleep-in" work. When she went back home to get her children, the in-laws did not permit her to take them because they wanted the children to work on the farm.

Natalie states that when her mother was fourteen, she ran away from the home because she was being taken advantage of sexually. Her mother heard about this, and finally was able to have her daughter move to Baltimore. Later the family moved to New York City. After the move to New York City, Natalie states that her grandmother was again employed as a "sleep in" worker, and occasionally, her mother did "days work". While Natalie's mother was living in Baltimore, Natalie was born. The relationship between her mother and father ended, and because she had a small child to support, Natalie's mother moved to New York City, to live with Natalie's grandmother.

All of the families that moved to New York City had hopes and dreams of a better life. They soon found that this was not the case; however, most did not return to the South for there was little to go back to. Thus, they remained in the urban cities.

### **STRENGTHS OF BLACK FAMILIES**

Despite the negative conditions Black families are faced with, they have many strengths and function in ways that are conducive to the survival of their families.

Robert Hill identifies four strengths in the Black family. They are:

1. strong kinship bonds
2. strong work orientation
3. adaptability of family roles
4. strong, achievement orientation (Hill, 1972, p.4).

Carol Stack in her study of a Black community found that economically, poor Black families are resourceful and adaptable, despite the overwhelming poverty in their lives. She examines the kinship relationships, as well as the extended families and found that in order to survive, these people needed to support one another, both materially and emotionally. As she states, "I became poignantly aware of the alliances of individuals trading and exchanging goods, resources, and the care of the children, the intensity of their acts of domestic cooperation, and the exchange of goods and services among these persons, both kin and non-kin" (Stack, 1974, p.28).

The extended family concept was brought here by the Africans who related in this manner. In Africa, they cooperated with each other and offered mutual support for the collective. Later, when they were forced to come to America, this way of relating to people other than kin, was the familiar way to do things, so they continued that pattern. White points out that this method of relating was responsible for preserving the psychological health of the Africans who were brought here. By forming extended family households, they were able to decrease the feelings of isolation and alienation from the many kin folk left in Africa (Billingsley, 1966; White and Parham, 1990).

White points out that within the Black family and the extended family, ways of coping with life in America are passed on to the younger generation, which he terms Black ethos. Blacks learn to deal with sorrow, joy, pain, and anger in a way that will be productive, and life sustaining (White and Parham, 1990). In addition, Blacks are taught problem solving skills, resourcefulness, and decision making skills (McAdoo, 1992).

### STRUGGLES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Life for African American women in the United States has always been characterized by the struggle to survive for themselves and their families. Collins points out that African American women's lives have been shaped by the fact that they were brought here to be slaves. As a result, one of the core themes of African American women is the legacy of struggle. She states that "All African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent" (Collins, 1990, p.22). Despite this, African American women have struggled to survive in the white and Black world, and strangely enough, it is due to this struggle that Black women have developed into strong, self reliant and independent women "(Collins, 1990).

During slavery, the Black woman performed all the traditional roles of women such as cooking, housekeeping, rearing of the children, as well as engaged in the farm activities that were usually reserved for men. Consequently, one can say that there was no separation between the male and female roles for the Black women. Jones states that "...the drive for cotton profits induced slave owners to squeeze every bit of strength from black women as a group" (Jones, 1985, p.18). Many times pregnant

women were overworked by working long hours in the fields, and walking long distances, which often resulted in the women having decreased childbearing abilities (Jones, 1985).

Sterling points out that despite the African American female's slave status within the African American culture, the women were accorded a higher status in their interactions with their husbands and children than the white women enjoyed within their families. "The wife and the husband made what few decisions that they were permitted together, and most of the time, their relationship was based on mutual affection" (Sterling, 1984, p.x).

After slavery ended, Black women used the knowledge that they acquired during slavery to deal with those in power. They learned to be self dependent. These strengths were important, and enabled these African American women to cope with their newly acquired freedoms. The Black women also found that in order to survive, they had to continue to work alongside their husbands (Sterling, 1984). They were concerned about their children, and had a belief that things would improve for them. These women had a vision of a better world, and they gave this vision to their offspring. Consequently, when things were hard, as they frequently were, they could draw strength from this vision. Jones points out that "...black women helped to fulfill the economic as well as the emotional needs of the families..." (Jones, 1985, p.84).

Collins indicates how African American women have always had a history of struggle against oppression, and that this history has been deliberately overlooked and hidden by the dominant culture. However, there have been many African American women in history such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Anna Cooper, to name a few, who have fought for the rights of African American women and African American people in general (Lerner, 1973). Black women were able to organize clubs and organizations that were focused on improving the lives of the African Americans. These women were powerful role models who provided positive images for African

American women and served to enhance the self esteem of many African American women who followed them (Lerner, 1973; Giddings, 1984). Because of the negative portrayal of African American women in the larger society, Black women had to define themselves and look to each other for affirmation. For this reason, being nurturing, self affirming, and bonding with other African American women are major coping devices for Black women and the Black community.

As the economic and social conditions in the South worsen, many families, and Black women moved to southern cities and then to the northern cities. Jobs were scarce, and many of these women became domestic workers because these were the only positions open to them (Clark, 1965; Clark 1980; Fusfeld, 1984). During the 1930's and 1940's, Black women struggled to earn a living, as they had always done; however, those who moved to the North believed that things would improve for their children. So, they lived in rooming houses, and with other relatives, having little privacy, but with the faith that the next generation would have a better life. During this period, the majority of working class Black people who were primarily from the South had only a few years of elementary education.

The women in the sample were born in the thirties through the fifties. One was born in the 1930's; seven were born in the 1940's, and three in the 1950's. The majority of the respondents' parents were born in the South. The parents worked in low level, unskilled occupations or they received public assistance. Most often, the family had to rely upon a combination of these in order to survive because they were frequently laid off. Some of the jobs they held were as domestics, factory workers, laundry workers, railroad workers, clerks, and if they were extremely lucky as one parent was, they became a bus driver. Of the sample, there was one factory worker,

four domestic workers, two housewives, one bus driver, four welfare recipients, one clerk, one laundry worker, one railroad worker, and one merchant marine.

All of the respondents grew up in tenements or apartment buildings. The majority of the families moved quite frequently around New York City due to the fact that they were unable to pay the rent and were evicted, or they were in need of additional space.

This is the environment that the respondents entered into early in life.

### CONCLUSION

African Americans face a host of social and economic problems, which are directly traced to the racism and discrimination accorded to them in the United States. From their involuntary arrival in the United States as slaves to their present position as so called "full citizens," they have fought to survive in an environment that has never given them their due rights, denied their humanity, and blocked their efforts to make progress.

Despite the problems facing them, they used whatever means they could to seek greater opportunities, resulting in the mass migrations to the northern cities. They did not know that the cities would lead them into situations that would not improve their lives, but would often lead to a tremendous amount of suffering for them and their families. Oftentimes, the city experience caused a weakening of family ties and a loss of self identity for others. Many were traumatized by this experience of moving to the North and attempting to adapt to being an urban people. The stories of some of the respondent's families illustrate this point.

In viewing the African American families, we must always recognize the special and unique situations of the African American female. The African American female is the carrier of the culture for it was through the female's socialization of the children that the culture continued. Without the aid of the African American females, there

would have been no survival of the race. When it was necessary, the female often played the role of mother and father in some of the families, while at the same time facing and dealing with the racism and the sexism in the labor market. How they were able to play the role of wife, mother, nurturer, while at the same time being powerless, and thus victimized is a tribute to the African culture that they came from and their strength as African American women.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PRIMARY SOCIALIZATION: FAMILY OF ORIGIN, MORAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will describe and discuss the respondents in regard to their socialization experiences in: 1) their family of origin, 2) their relationship with a significant other-investor, 3) their moral and religious socialization experiences. The study aims to analyze the meaning of the socialization experiences for the respondents and its impact on aiding and developing their positive sense of self, attitude, and skills that enabled them to move in the direction of acquiring higher education.

This chapter will also include a discussion of socialization theory and the development of the self as it relates to the respondents' life history interviews.

#### **SOCIALIZATION THEORY**

In the sociological literature, socialization is described as the manner by which an individual learns the values, roles and norms of their society (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Elkin and Handel, 1984). This is important because culture is transmitted from generation to generation by the socialization process. Socialization also involves an investigation of the self concept and how environmental and heredity factors combine to produce the type of individual that develops.

Theorists have delineated three parts of the socialization process: primary socialization, secondary socialization, and adult socialization.

Primary socialization is actually childhood socialization, which starts upon the birth of the individual. As Elkin and Handel state, "The direction the person's development takes in later years cannot help but be influenced by the foundations established in childhood" (Elkin and Handel, 1984, p.8). When babies are born, mothers begin the process of helping their children grow, develop, and adapt, and at the same time, help them to fit into society. Most of the child's interaction is done within the family and the extended family.

Secondary socialization occurs when the child starts to attend school and during the adolescent phase. People outside of the family and peers begin to have a greater influence on the child during this period (Clausen, 1968; Elkin and Handel, 1984).

Adult socialization occurs when the individual moves into the adult roles of life, such as being a mother, husband or teacher. The individual must be socialized to learn the values, norms, and expectations of their new roles.

Socialization occurs in all environments, and it is not a one way process. The major agents of socialization are the family, peers, educational institutions, media, religion and the community. Each racial and ethnic group socializes its members in their particular way to fit into the society (Elkin and Handel, 1984).

African Americans, in particular, must not only teach their members the norms, values, and roles of the larger society, but they must also prepare their members to cope in a society that discriminates and oppresses them. They must give them the skills that include fighting back, adapting and coping with what is at most times a deplorable condition. This is one of the most crucial tasks of Black parenting: facilitating the process of Black children's positive development of the self (Jenkins, 1982; White, 1984; Manns, 1988; Peters, 1988).

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF CONCEPT

Sociologists began to examine the concept of the self development in the early part of the century. One of the earliest was Charles Horton Cooley, a sociologist who developed the concept of the "looking-glass self." Cooley first noted that the biological person evolves into a social person as a result of being in society. He then stated that people looked at themselves, as in a mirror and they saw what they believed others saw (Cooley, 1956).

People are constantly reacting to what they think are the perceptions of others. At times, people are able to correctly identify the perceptions of others; however, other times, they may be incorrect. According to W.I. Thomas, a sociologist, "If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas, 1928, p.572).

Another sociologist and philosopher, George Herbert Mead, stated that the self develops in interactions with the society. As he states, through interactions the child learns language and appropriate ways of behaving in the society. Mead found that usually children react to significant others in their lives; however, as they continue to mature, they develop the ability to take on the attitudes of others around them. They are able to assume various roles. Mead called this concept the generalized other. He identified two parts of the self, the "I" and the "me". He describes the "I" as the creative portion which is an active agent and which is also unpredictable. The "me" portion is conventional and predictable (Mead, 1956).

The development of the self was also studied by Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis. He divided the self into three parts, the id, ego and superego. The id is defined as the most primitive, and the source of the instinctive drives. The id is always interested in having its needs and wants gratified immediately. The ego develops from the id, and it is the part that mediates the world for the id and the superego. The superego forms unconsciously, when the individual develops the values,

mores, and norms of the larger society. It is commonly referred to as the conscience. The id and the superego are often at war, while it is the role of ego to mediate between them (Freud, 1957).

All of the above theorists believe that early childhood experiences have a major effect upon the development of a self concept. They believe that these experiences impact and move individuals in a particular direction. As a result, in this study the researcher will examine the respondents' family of origin.

### FAMILY OF ORIGIN

As stated previously, some writers have defined the self as the way an individual perceives himself to be viewed by others. According to Mead, the self develops from the interaction of the individual with members of the environment. The individual's view of himself or herself is based on the attitudes of others toward them (Mead, 1956). From this theory, one could conclude that African American women would have a negative self image due to the devaluation of them in the dominant society. However, studies have shown that African American women do not use the larger society as their measuring yard but tend to use other African American women (Myers, 1980; Collins, 1990).

Myers, in a study using a sample of 400 Black women found that 96% of these women rated their success as mother, wife or provider by comparing themselves with other Black women (Myers, 1980). Although individuals develop their self image from those around them, among this group, there are those whose opinions have greater influence over the individual. These people are called significant others by George H. Mead (1956). These significant others are usually family members such as mother, father, aunts, uncles and other relatives.

### Significant Other-Investor

Drawing upon Mead's concept of significant other in conjunction with the concept of investor, this researcher will use the term of significant other-investor to refer to a special and unique type of relationship that exists between two individuals. Most often, this type of relationship exists between a child and an adult.

A significant other-investor can be any person who invests heavily in another individual in a meaningful and involved manner. The significant other-investor has a special feeling about this child and constantly seeks out ways to increase their happiness. The significant other-investor attempts to play an enormous role in the child's life and often has a visionary view of the child's intelligence and potential. This individual is supporting and nurturing toward the child and, in their view, the child can do little wrong. If the child does err, the significant other-investor is ready to understand and accept the child's explanation. In their view, this child is special and unique.

The significant other-investor gives a great deal of time and emotional support to the child. He or she is constantly looking out for the child's best interests. This individual attempts to protect and prepare the child for their future roles in life. The significant other-investor visualizes a good life for the child and gives them this view early in their life.

The relationship between the child and significant other-investor usually starts when the child is very young and as the years go by, the relationship deepens. The relationship becomes reciprocal because the significant other-investor's positive response causes a similar reaction in the child. These positive feelings generate greater self esteem resulting in the child being happier and more capable of learning.

A significant other-investor can be positive or negative; however, in this study, I will use the term to denote those individuals who are significant other-investors in a

positive way for the child. These significant other-investors are individuals who empower and give strength to the child.

Urie Bronfenbrenner has developed two propositions that describe the kind of environment that children need in order to grow and develop in a normal way. They are:

**Proposition 1** In order to develop normally, a child needs the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care of and joint activity with the child.

**Proposition 2** The involvement of one or more adults in care of and joint activity with the child requires public policies that provide opportunity, status, resources, encouragement and above all, time for parenthood, primarily by parents but also by other adults in the child's environment both within and outside the home (Bronfenbrenner, 1981, p.39).

Bronfenbrenner's description of an adult who has "irrational involvement" with the child fits the concept of the significant other-investor. A child needs at least one person who feels that strongly about them. Bronfenbrenner also acknowledges that it is necessary for the larger society to offer supports to the family so that the child can have the necessary resources to function well in society.

The importance of an individual's early family life has been documented by many social scientists (Bossard and Boll, 1966; Clausen, 1968; Elkin and Handel, 1984). Indeed, they note that the early life experience does not have to be idyllic but it must afford an individual the opportunity to bond with someone, have a sense of belonging and feel secure. Whether one is reared in a single parent household or a two parent household does not seem to be significant. According to White and Parham, "The notion that education is a necessity for survival and advancement of one's people and oneself is a value that must be promoted by significant others in the child's life" (White and Parham, 1990, p.97). So, the value orientation that Parham speaks about is very important for the child to be able to achieve academically. According to White

and Parham, "... values are normative, conceptual standards of desired behavior that influence individuals in choosing among personally perceived alternative behavior" (White and Parham, 1990, p.98).

Values are powerful mechanisms which control and direct the behavior of individuals. As a result, if a child is taught to highly regard education, then they will probably achieve well in school. White and Parham note that when there is high academic achievement, the churches, community, schools, families, and peer groups are all involved in supporting this individual or group. However, when these supports are lacking, the individual must receive a great deal of support from significant others or investors, so that they will internalize that particular value. White and Parham make the point that "...academic achievement is stifled when motivation to achieve is nonexistent and the desire to achieve is challenged by environmental obstacles preventing goal attainment" (White and Parham, 1990, p.92).

#### FAMILY TYPOLOGY OF SAMPLE

#### FAMILY TYPOLOGY OF SAMPLE

<b>TYPES OF FAMILIES</b>	<b>WOMEN IN THE SAMPLE</b>
<b>Nuclear Families</b>	
Simple Nuclear Family	Melinda, Connie, Vernice, Beverly, Sandra
Attenuated Nuclear Family	Lydia, Roberta, Theresa, Frances
<b>Extended Families</b>	
Attenuated Extended Family	Naomi
<b>Augmented Families</b>	
Attenuated Extended Augmented Family	Natalie

Figure 2

(Billingsley, 1966)

In the sample, 55% grew up in single parent families, while the other 45% grew up with both parents. Billingsley identifies three types of Black family structures, nuclear, extended and augmented. These categories can be subdivided even further into simple, incipient and attenuated. The nuclear family consists of the parents and their offspring. The extended family consists of parents, offspring, and other relatives. The augmented family consists of the nuclear family members, and other people living in the household, who are not related to the head of the household.

There were four single parent families with mother and children living together. Billingsley calls this type of family the attenuated nuclear family. The term attenuated means that a parental figure is not living in the household. There was one single parent family with mother, children, grandmother and other extended family in the household. Billingsley calls this family the attenuated extended family. Another family consisted of the mother, children, grandmother and a non-relative living in the household. Billingsley calls this the attenuated extended augmented family. There were five families consisting of mother, father and children. Billingsley calls this type of family the simple nuclear family. At times, any of these families would change their membership, and consequently, it would become a different type of family structure. This happened frequently due to the precarious economic situation that the majority of African Americans lived in, and at times, when they did not have enough money to maintain themselves, they relied on their family members. Consequently, Black families were flexible enough to absorb others when it was needed.

When the grandmother lived within the home, it was not uncommon for her to be the ruling force, and in some instances, she did not have to live in the household to maintain that status. When the family consisted of the mother and father, the traditional roles were maintained in the family with father as the head and making most of the major decisions. The respondents in this study came from various types of

family structures. We will now turn to how primary socialization experiences shaped the respondents in this study by examining their families of origin: attenuated nuclear, attenuated augmented, attenuated extended and the simple nuclear.

### Attenuated Extended Augmented Family

Natalie. A political scientist and an activist who has a Ph.D. degree, describes her family during childhood as consisting of her mother, grandmother, her younger sister, and Aunt Lucy. Aunt Lucy was not really related to the family but she lived with them for some time, and performed an important role in the family. This is the type of socialization milieu that Billingsley refers to as the attenuated extended augmented family. Natalie's type of family situation was not at all uncommon in the Black community, and it had benefits for everyone involved. Aunt Lucy, who was unmarried and did not have children of her own, was able to fulfill her maternalistic instinct, while at the same time offering emotional and financial support to the family.

Natalie states:

I don't think my mother wanted children. She was not warm or affectionate. I always felt that I was an imposition. There was little contact between us. I got affection from Aunt Lucy who was always touching me. I also knew that my grandmother really loved me. I slept with her, and she really took care of me. My mother was on welfare; my grandmother and Aunt Lucy worked.

Because Natalie's grandmother was frequently working away from home, and her mother had a drinking problem, Natalie talks about how Aunt Lucy made her feel so special, and told her how smart she was. By definition, Aunt Lucy was a significant other-investor to Natalie.

All of this was needed because Natalie's mother had a problem with alcohol and unemployment, while her grandmother could only secure work as a sleep away domestic. This was during the late forties and early fifties when many people in the

Black community, especially women, were forced to work away from their families even if they had children. Natalie's own grandmother did such "sleep away work" and was not as available to help Natalie as she wanted to be. As Natalie explains it:

I don't know what would have happened to me if Aunt Lucy wasn't there. She was always interested in making sure that I got the best, and I received most of my nurturing from her. She had a gentle way about her, and she was the one that was there when anything went on. Sometimes, my mother got drunk and I was too little to come home on my own from kindergarten. I would wait, and wait, and my mother wouldn't come, and then I would see Aunt Lucy coming down the street to pick me up. At this time, my grandmother was doing sleep-in work, and she wasn't at home.

#### Attenuated Extended Family

Naomi. Another respondent, who is a social worker and is currently pursuing her doctoral in sociology talks about her relationship with her grandmother, who was a dominant figure in an attenuated extended family.

I was raised primarily, by my grandmother, although, and I need to put that in context, my grandmother primarily took care of me. I was her primary charge. We always lived in an extended family situation, meaning my grandmother, my parents when they were together, my aunt, her husband or husbands, and other aunts. So we always had a big apartment with all of us living together or an aunt living upstairs, or an aunt living downstairs.

Naomi described one of the many varied types of Black family structures in the United States. Billingsley calls this type of family and living arrangement the attenuated extended family (Billingsley, 1966). This type of arrangement enabled many families to survive by sharing resources, and cooperating with one another (Clark, 1965).

Basically, I'm really my grandmother's child. My mother was young when she had me. My mother was eighteen or nineteen. I think my dad was getting ready to go off to war when she conceived me. They are from Savanna, Georgia, originally. They knew each other

when they were in school. I'm not sure exactly at what point my mother came to New York City, but I know that I was born in New York City.

Despite living in an attenuated extended family situation, Naomi was very aware that she was special to her maternal grandmother. Among African Americans, it was not uncommon for the grandmother to assume the responsibility for rearing up the eldest grandchild. This grandmother was a significant other-investor for Naomi. Naomi explains that she became her grandmother's confidant. "She used to say to me," Naomi remembers with deep emotion, "Mama loves you, and she works for you. I want you to do something for yourself; you are smart." Naomi stated that she and her grandmother always had frequent talks like that. Naomi's grandmother clearly articulated her aspirations and expectations of her. Thus, Naomi was able to say, "My grandmother felt that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to do." This created an inner dialogue: "I can do it. Yes you can. I believe in you." This dialogue will last and will carry the person through dark times.

#### Attenuated Nuclear Family

Theresa. Another socialization pattern which was common was for the child to be raised with the belief that the adults in her family were blood kin, only to find later in life that this was not quite the case. Theresa, a social worker, with a master's degree from an Ivy League school, relates how her earliest memories consist of being in a family with a mother, father, and two brothers--a nuclear family. It was a happy household; however, when she was about five or six years old, she discovered that the man she thought was her father, was not her father after all. In addition, her real father wanted to have visitation rights with her. When this came about, it disrupted the family, and there was tension.

Theresa recalls her biological father's sister, Aunt Minnie, who had a lot of input into Theresa's upbringing during this period. Aunt Minnie was the head of the

father's family, and what she said became law. Theresa knew that she was loved by this aunt, and whenever, she went over, she was spoiled and pampered. Aunt Minnie was a wise, elderly woman, who was a beautician, and owned her own beauty parlor. This was a skilled business woman, and Theresa recalls her as being a very strong, warm, loving figure in her life. By my definition, Aunt Minnie was Theresa's significant other-investor.

When Theresa was about twelve, she reports that her mother and stepfather separated, and that this was an extremely difficult time for them. Like many people around them, for the first time, Theresa states that "We did not have much money. There were many things that my mother couldn't buy for me." Theresa's stepfather was an automobile mechanic, and as such earned a good income. The separation changed their economic status, and it was a difficult adjustment for both Theresa and her mother. Her mother joined the ranks of the single parents who attempted to provide for their children with limited resources. Theresa is now in an attenuated nuclear family. There were many other Black families living under similar conditions.

Frances. Frances, who is director of a children's program and has a master's in social work, states that she grew up in a situation, where at first, she lived with her mother, and two siblings in the home of her mother's friend. This family was called an attenuated augmented family. This lasted for a few years, and then her mother moved out and left the children with this friend. Frances states without emotion, that the lady was not mean to them. She provided food, shelter and clothing, but with no love, affection or nurturing. She reports that her mother did not give any of this either. No one in the household took an interest in Frances and her siblings. When Frances was about twelve, her mother came back into her life. Despite this, Frances and her mother never developed a close relationship. She is a respondent who felt she did not receive special attention during her early childhood, nor was she close to anyone.

Frances resides and works in the same neighborhood. in which she grew up. The outcome of her life was by no means certain in her early childhood, as this passage indicates:

My mother lived a certain kind of lifestyle. She gambled, played poker. We were not really connected. My brother was ten years older than me, so he got married when I was just ten years old. I always felt that I was in the world alone. I wasn't close to my father's family.

Here Frances demonstrated that some children, although not neglected physically, are neglected emotionally.

There must have been some type of animosity between my father's family and my mother. My father was a gambler, street guy, worked in a store. He tried to make up being a good father, by buying me things, and taking me to restaurants, and buying me clothes.

Although Frances's father attempted to connect at one time with her, she stated that he did not know how, and by this time, she did not know how to do so either. Thus, they had little to say to one another. In Frances' case, she had no significant other-investor in her early life, so she had to develop her own vision about life and figure out how to live in the best way.

During Frances' adult socialization phase, after she had children of her own and during the socially active 1960's, she was accepted into a program where she was sent to school.

Lydia. She has already earned a master's degree and is working on her second master's while she is employed as a coordinator of an educational program for children. She was about three when her parents separated, and she was never very close with her father. Being brought up in a single parent family, attenuated nuclear, made her aware of the fact that a woman had to be able to take care of herself, and that an education was very important. She grew up with her mother and other siblings. It was a struggle for her mother to make ends meet, and this had an effect upon Lydia.

Sometimes in families, there is a child with special needs, health problems or otherwise, which result in them developing a much closer relationship with the parental figure than the other children in the family. This happened in the case of Lydia, as she explains:

My mother and I were very close. The fact that my mother was so protective of me made us very close. She tried to keep me sheltered. I was the sickly one in the family. When I was about nine, I had a childhood accident, which devastated the whole family, which I don't talk about.

As Lydia explains, something very difficult happened to her as a child, and she was out of school for a while. It was apparent that the memory was still very painful for Lydia and, indeed, a trauma suffered by her and the family. Lydia went on to say:

More or less, my mother protected me. I think it was because of that accident which caused the friction between my brothers and sisters because they thought that I was getting special treatment.

It appeared that Lydia's mother invested in her heavily and was her significant other-investor. Her siblings were aware of this, and consequently, some sibling rivalry developed. However, Lydia's mother continued to invest heavily in Lydia and her future.

Roberta. She is an elementary school teacher, who is described as a "natural" teacher. She grew up living in a single parent family with her mother and eight siblings. Her mother and father separated when she was very young. Roberta tells the story that her grandmother, who did not live in the household was actually the person, who ran the household. She describes her as a strong, domineering force in their lives, and Roberta was not happy about this. This type of family with a strong maternal grandmother was not unusual among Black families. In the Black family, elderly people and in particular, grandmothers are given a great deal of respect. Many of them assumed great authority and did not have to live in the household to have control over it.

Roberta describes her mother as a calm and soothing person, who never seemed to get excited about anything. But Roberta states, "I always recognized the struggle that my mother faced in providing for us. I always wanted to do the right thing because of this, and I never wanted to add to my mother's worries." Roberta reports that her mother was always there for her. Roberta's mother was her significant other-investor.

All of the respondents described above grew up in non-traditional families, either attenuated nuclear, attenuated augmented, or attenuated extended families. However, in the Black community, these various family structures were not uncommon (Billingsley, 1966). Still, however, their earlier life experience may have given them a unique perspective on life, which enabled them to have a clearer insight into the importance and value of acquiring an education. They were able to see first hand what happens when you are Black, poor, and unskilled. The racism and sexism they experienced in the world outside their families and communities combined to make life very difficult for the single parent families.

### Simple Nuclear Family

The five other respondents grew up in simple nuclear families or intact families, consisting of both parents and the children. Many sociologists believe that this type of family is better able to provide for the needs of the family both economically and emotionally than the single parent household. This was not the case in regard to the respondents because the effects of racism and poverty affects all Black households, whether single parent or two parent.

Of the five respondents that had fathers in the households, two of the fathers had problems with alcohol, and one father was too tired when he came home from work to relate to the children. It is likely that their jobs were demeaning to their

manhood and spirit, thus, they resorted to drinking in their off hours to fortify themselves.

Melinda. She first attended college at the age of thirty seven and was a single parent raising teenage girls. Currently, she has a master's degree and is employed by the Board of Education. She describes her family of origin as one where she lived with her parents and seven siblings. She was the eldest girl. Due to illness, her mother was a housewife. Her father was the type of person who always had a small business, such as selling peanuts, candy or newspapers. The children would help out with these various enterprises, but it was a major struggle for the father to provide for the family. Without the help of the children, it would have been almost impossible for the family to make it. Melinda states that as a result, "you learned early that if you wanted spending money, then you better figure out how to get it on your own" for they knew that their parents did not have any to give away. She learned early to be self reliant, independent, to problem solve, and to rely on her own wits.

Melinda states:

I was very secure in my mother's and father's love. I knew that there was something wrong, but I figured my parents could handle things. We were always given lunch so I thought that we were doing better than others.

Melinda lived in the Black community and was insulated from the larger dominant society. Consequently, for a while, she was unaware of the devaluation, prejudice and discrimination that African Americans faced in the United States.

We lived in a Black neighborhood, and so the few white kids that were there lived in the orphanage. They were to be pitied. So, it was like amazing when I found out that they thought that they were better than me.

Melinda also felt that she was the black sheep of the family because she was not as smart as two of her siblings. Later, she had two children out of wedlock and she felt

that her fate was sealed. Despite all of the problems, Melinda was able to achieve a master's degree later in life.

Connie. She is a social worker who is presently pursuing a doctorate in sociology. She describes the trials and tribulations of a southern family attempting to survive, moving North, then to the South, and then back to the North. The family was seeking a job and an opportunity. She lived with her parents and an older brother. Her mother and father were finally able to obtain employment. The mother became a domestic and the father became a factory worker. Despite both parents working, it was still difficult for her parents to provide the basic necessities of life such as shelter, food and clothing. It was a painful struggle, and Connie recalled her parent's determination, persistence and refusal to give up the struggle, despite the odds.

Connie reported that the relationship between her and her father was very special. She states that she felt that she could do anything because he always spoke about her "smartness," and that one day she would be a very important person. He was the significant other-investor in Connie's life. Connie recalls:

I remember thinking early on that I was smart, and that's because Daddy told me that. It seemed that I could do most things well. I remember feeling very satisfied with myself. I never for a moment doubted him because I just knew that Daddy never lied.

Early on, Connie felt confident about her abilities. She knew what the expectations were of her, and she had a positive vision of the future. She internalized the positive attitudes around her at a young age and the aspirations for her. Although Connie's parents had unskilled jobs and were uneducated, they believed that their children, Connie and her brother, would have opportunities that they never had. They gave this vision to Connie.

Vernice. She is an elementary school teacher, who has a master's degree and thirty credits above. She grew up in an intact family, living with her mother, father and three siblings. She states, "My father had a job as a pullman on the railroad, but

he did not contribute his money toward the household." For this reason, the family was always in a state of financial emergency. Her mother was employed as a domestic, and always impressed her children with the importance of acquiring an education, so that they would not have to perform the type of work that she had to do.

The family was close knit, and her mother was religious. The family, except for the father, spend most of their time in church. They were not permitted to socialize with most of the other children in the neighborhood, because of her mother's belief that these were the common people. According to Vernice's mother, although they were poor people, they were not common people.

Beverly. She is a teacher with a master's degree who is currently pursuing another master's. She feels very good about her achievements. Beverly comes from an economically poor background and describes her family of origin as an intact family consisting of her parents and thirteen siblings. She states that her father worked hard and long hours. Occasionally her mother worked. She did not have a close relationship with her father because he worked so many hours that when he came home, he was too tired to interact with the children. Beverly states, "Nobody was permitted to disturb my father, when he was asleep. All of us had chores, and everybody did what was expected of them, including school work." She reports that they did not question things.

Beverly's early life did not seem too different from other Black families. The parents were waging a battle to provide the basic necessities for their children. However, survival came at a high cost as her father had little time to spend with his children to form a close relationship. Despite this, Beverly internalized values and expectations given by her parents.

Sandra. She is a social worker who was raised by her parents along with her siblings. "My mother was a housewife and a woman who never made any decisions about herself or the household." Her father was authoritative, and the children were

frightened of him. Sandra states that she never liked the way her father treated her mother, as he never permitted her out of his sight. Sandra reports, "My mother never had an apartment key, for my father said that mother would not be going anyplace except with him, and he had a key." She describes him as argumentative, and always trying to make everyone feel stupid. Sandra felt that he had many psychological problems, but despite this, he was intelligent. However, as soon as she could, she prepared to leave the household.

When I was in the house, I daydreamed about someone taking me out of there. Anything was better than living in that house. I wasn't physically abused. It was just a depressing place for me to live in.

Some families have a member or members, who may have psychological problems, and the entire family suffers for it. Due to the historical period, as well as the fact that it was the husband who had the problems, there was little chance that anyone would intervene. The wife and the children were totally dependent on the father for the essentials of life. Her mother was not able to verbalize any of her feelings and stayed in the traditional role of the female.

The boys ran away. Two of my brothers were hoodlums, and they went to jail. They did what they wanted to do. My oldest brother found his niche. He found a way out; he's ten years older. He moved out early on, and he was in the theater and music. He stayed busy. One of my father's punishments was to try to pull him out of school. My father was also drinking heavily.

Not surprisingly, it was Sandra's brothers, who were able to move out of this situation, for males were permitted greater freedom, socialized to be more aggressive and to assume greater control over their lives.

Sandra reports that "Ever since I knew my father, he was drinking. Even when he professed to be a minister, he was still drinking." Sandra's father's alcoholism interfered with his family relations; however, he was fortunate enough to obtain and keep his job as a New York City bus driver. Sandra recalls sadly:

I remember lots of people being in the house. We were always broke, and we didn't have enough food. He basically drank his money away. I always remember being hungry.

Sandra pauses in her recollection, because it is painful for her to recall this.

She then states, "My younger brother and I would go to this fruit distributing place and pick up rotten fruit. We would clean it and eat. I also remember that when my father got angry, he would throw food out the window." Despite Sandra's difficult early childhood, she was able to survive intact enough so that later in her life, she was able to connect with a significant other-investor.

This was an extremely difficult period for African Americans during the late forties and early fifties for they faced racism and prejudice combined with the lack of job skills. For African Americans, times have always been difficult. Even when the economy of the United States is doing well, Blacks continue to face hard times. When they are employed, they are in the lowest level jobs (Fusfeld, 1984). A few people like Sandra's father, who was a New York City bus driver or Vernice's father, who was a pullman for the railroad, were out of the norm in securing employment that was steady and secure. Unfortunately, both of these men engaged in self destructive behavior such as drinking and not bringing their money into the home. Given the particular historical period, and the types of jobs they had, it appeared likely that they had to deal with a great deal of prejudice and racism on their jobs. As a result, they used negative ways to cope with the frustration and anger that was generated.

The times were harsh, and many succumbed under the struggle to survive. The children of these families were aware of the struggles that their parents faced for they could not prevent them from seeing. The ghetto offered few places of privacy to anyone, adult or child. It is felt by this researcher that the struggles of these parents helped to propel these young women in a particular direction. It gave them a peculiar view of the world, and fostered the maturation of their self concept.

### MORAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES

To what extent did the families' values, whether religious or otherwise have an impact upon the respondent's decisions about their lives?

Most authorities state that the values and the norms of the family are transmitted to the individual early in their lives. It is also noted that among those families that migrated from the South, oftentimes, the conditions and the circumstances faced in the urban environment had a negative effect upon the transmission of the traditional values and norms. It was often impossible to live up to them in New York City. As a result, the families used adaptive values based on the traditional ones, but modified in the new environment. For example, in the South, the church was the center of most family life. It was the social institution, the cultural institution, and the spiritual institution. Frequently, after a family moved to the city, they did not have the time to be as involved with the church as they previously were in the South. Still, they managed to hold on to some of those values by having prayer in the home, and discussions about the Bible. The transition to urban life was difficult for most Black families as they were unaccustomed to the cold realities of city life. Religious values were a factor in most of the respondents' lives. However, religion was a prominent force in lives of four respondents.

Natalie. Natalie states that although her mother did not go to church, she made sure that Natalie attended Sunday School and participated in the church activities. In addition, Natalie attended a Catholic School for about one year and a half, which gave her additional religious content. Natalie remembers, "My grandmother was always calling on God, so at a young age I believed in God." To this day, Natalie continues to espouse the beliefs of her faith. She states that she is a spiritual person, and although she does not attend church on a regular basis, she still considers herself a religious person.

Beverly. Religion was a major part of this respondent's life. Growing up, her parents were very religious, and the family spend a lot of time in church. Her father was a deacon in the church. She states that the principles of her religion moved her in certain directions. She currently attends church two or three times a week, and states that she places God first in her life.

Of the sample, four of the respondents came from families that were more religious oriented, not only going to church, but giving the religious foundation for making decisions, and following the teachings of the Christian faith. Religious values were an orientation as to behavior and the expectation for your life.

Vernice. In relating her mother's philosophy about life, Vernice states:

I grew up in the church. My mother was Pentecostal, and that meant that we stayed in church. My mother said that we were poor people, but we weren't common people. We had morals and weren't loose. Therefore, my mother didn't allow us to associate with many of the families that were around because their families would drink and go to parties.

Vernice states that this made a major difference in her life, early on, because she felt that she was different. She knew that her mother had clear expectations for her and her sisters.

Connie. She reports that her family's move from the South interrupted much of the church going. But her father was a very religious man, who read his Bible throughout the week. Most often, aunts and uncles would visit the household with their Bibles, where great discussions and debate about the Bible and its teachings were discussed.

This religious training permeated every aspect of their lives, according to Connie. For whatever went on in their lives, lack of money, illness, and any other concerns of her father and mother were taken to God in prayer. She reports that this

was carried out in weekly family prayer meetings. As a result of the Bible reading and discussion carried on, Connie learned to read early and to read well.

Lydia. Another respondent, Lydia points out that her mother called on God frequently, and would put the "fear of God" in them to make sure that they achieved in school. She, therefore, knew that her mother had definite expectations, and Lydia felt that she had to live up to a certain standard for her mother and God.

In Peterson's study about African American women, their will to succeed and successful women, she postulates that there are four themes that are necessary for the development of a "strong, self determined Black female." They are having strong family relationships, especially with the mother, a close connection with other Black women as sisters, being connected to the larger Black community, and having deep spiritual or religious roots (Peterson, 1992).

Early in their lives, Black females are taught that they must be responsible and that they must determine the path that their lives will take. The religious training that they are given also includes mother wit training, which enables the Black female to deal with the pressures of everyday life. This early socialization and training is done by the mother, who is the central figure in the Black female's life, as usually more time is spent with her. Some of the common lessons taught are the following: 1) you must work hard for what you want in life, and 2) education is very important. Religious values are also taught that include "you can accomplish anything-if you really want to do it, and when it seems like there is no way to accomplish it, God will always "make a way out of no way."

Within the religious families, there were always biblical passages and personal accounts to affirm all of the teachings. These teachings were stored in the minds of these African American females, as they traveled through life, going to college and into their various occupations. These teachings became the basis of a life sustaining faith. During periods of great stress, crisis and low points, in their pursuit of educational

goals and other times, these women were able to draw upon their sustaining faith, those memories and teachings. These teachings served to strengthen and sustain them, while directing and propelling them in a positive direction. The religious and moral foundation given to a child clearly influences the direction and decisions made by that individual later in life. Religious values give the individual a direction, and the ability to distinguish right from wrong. These values will also keep one from getting involved in self destructive behavior. In addition, being involved in an organized church affords one the opportunity to be around more positive role models. Consequently, those in the sample who were exposed to this moral and religious training were already a step ahead of their cohorts who were not indoctrinated with these values.

Frances. Within the sample, there was only one respondent who did not have a significant other-investor who provided her with the moral and religious values. To this day, Frances states that religion does not play a role in her life. Frances' lack of religious belief has probably made it more difficult to cope in this society. However, she has managed to survive without this orientation.

## CONCLUSION

The primary socialization experiences of the respondents suggest that having a significant other-investor has great consequences for the direction of one's life. The majority of the respondents were fortunate enough to have a significant other-investor, who believed in them, and who gave them an extra dose of affirmation. In my opinion, this is essential for every African American female given the type of society in which we live. African American females must have an abundance of encouragement given to them. The society actively oppresses and denigrates the African American female. In order for them to forge ahead in an academic environment, the vision, the expectation, and the encouragement must be given by a significant other-investor. There must also be a way of coping with the negative conditions that surround them,

while at the same time, moving forward and not concentrating on the barriers. In this respect, the religious or moral foundation is important for it enables the individual to have a frame of reference for viewing events and not being overwhelmed by them. Thus, an individual can use religion to strengthen their determination to move ahead.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **SECONDARY SOCIALIZATION: EDUCATION, PEER RELATIONS AND COMMUNITY**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will discuss the experiences of the respondents, African American women, who attended the educational institutions in their communities. In analyzing their subjective experiences, the researcher places them at the center of the analysis while assessing the educational system's impact on the achievements of these women. This chapter will discuss and analyze the following question. Did the educational system help or hinder the respondents in their movement toward achievement?

#### **EDUCATION**

Many authorities have documented the negative role of the educational institutions in the economically impoverished communities within the urban cities (Clark, 1965; Kozol, 1969). They are segregated because children attend schools within their local communities. And since housing is segregated, this extends to the public school system, which is actually a reflection of the larger society. The public school system in the ghetto offers inferior education, and it has the least qualified and experienced teachers, who work without the essential books and supplies. Not only are the schools poorly equipped with supplies, but physically the buildings are often in need of repair, and do not offer the kind of environment that is conducive to learning.

Despite the fact that many schools in the area do not have adequate supplies and are physically unappealing, there are some children attending these schools who are learning and are achieving high grades.

As some studies have shown, the home environment and parental attitudes have a lot to do with the achievement of children. In a study of minority students who were graduates of the A Better Chance, Inc., a non profit educational organization, the researchers found that children who achieve come from various home environments; however, it was found that the parents had high aspiration and expectations for their children (Slaughter, 1985). Other research supports that parents influence their children's academic achievement through the family environment, and their school involvement (White and Parham, 1990; McAdoo, 1992).

Reginald M. Clark, in his study about Black children and achievement concludes that children who are high achievers come from families that stress the importance of acquiring an education. Most of these parents did not have the opportunity to attend college, but they were planning for their children to pursue this goal. These parents also assumed the parental roles of nurturing, directing and guiding their children through the various developmental stages. These children were clear about the expectations of their parents, and the parents often centered their family activities around learning experiences. These parents also ran a structured household in which there was a set pattern or a routine in regard to the appropriate behavior and activities for each day. Homework was done at a prescribed time by everyone. The children were eager to please the parents, and there were consistent rules and regulations (Clark, 1983).

For all children, beginning school is a significant developmental step, which they are socialized to desire. And this is true for Black children as well. The respondents were no exception to this, and all of them reported feeling positive about their entrance into school. They were eager to start for it denoted that they were grown up. But what was the experience of their early school life like? The literature documents that many children perform well at the commencement of their educational experience, however, as time moves on, for many African Americans children, they

begin to fall farther and farther behind. As White notes, "Repeated observation of Black children have shown that once they enter school they fall quickly behind their white counterparts on measurements of intelligence, achievement, and scholastic attainment" (White and Parham, 1990, p.102).

Another researcher, Samuel Bowles, examines the educational system's use of a tracking system. This system places children in classes according to their social class, rather than according to their abilities. As Bowles states, "Class stratification within schools is achieved through tracking, differential participation in extra curricular activities, and in the attitudes of teachers and particularly guidance personnel who expect working class children to do poorly, to terminate schooling early, and to end up in jobs similar to their parents" (Bowles, 1977, p.143).

The women in this study illustrate Bowles' contention. The respondents achieved highly in school, and yet it is significant that none of them were guided toward any of the specialized schools in the city. In addition, they were not in a college preparatory track. These females were not steered toward an academic school because it was felt that they would never have the opportunity to attend college because of their race, class, and gender. Bowles suggests, that "...the results of schooling differ greatly for children of different social classes (Bowles, 1977, p.143). The girls were unaware of what was being done to them, and that their future lives were being decided. Their parents lack the educational knowledge and information to impart to them for they were newcomers to this urban situation.

A study, Ain't No Making It, examines the differences between two working class groups of boys, one white and the other Black (Macleod, 1987). They lived in the same neighborhood, and yet had different aspiration motives. The Blacks were achievement oriented, and had goals of acquiring a college education. They planned to achieve the American dream. The white group of boys were not similarly motivated. They had already given up during their adolescence. They did not believe in the

American dream and did not make any attempt to reach for it. The researcher attempts to explain this phenomenon by looking at the family's influence, and the effect of race on these groups. They concluded that the African American boys and their families perceived themselves as doing better than previously. Although both groups of boys lived in the projects, for the Black boys, this was an improvement, a step up, whereas for the white boys, their families had lived for generations in these projects, with no change in their circumstances. As a result, the African American boys felt hopeful about life, and although they knew that racism existed, they felt that they could still overcome some of it by acquiring a decent education. The African American boys viewed race as the factor that hindered their progress in the United States, which meant that they could identify the enemy. For the whites, they knew that it was not race that was holding them back, and they felt powerless to change their circumstances, as it was based on the class in which they were born.

This study highlights the importance of attitudes, and perceptions. Although the two groups were actually headed to the same positions in life that their parents had, the African Americans were striving for something more, and felt that they had the chance to achieve. The study concludes that the African Americans might possibly secure a job a little better than their white counterparts in this instance; however, none of them would move very far from their original class origins (Macleod, 1987).

Thus, it appears that the African American child enters the educational system eager and ready to learn. However, for the vast majority of the students, it is not a positive experience as they move through the system. The respondents were bright, and had families and a significant other-investor to give them the orientation about the value and the need for learning in school. Still, however, the respondents were unable to receive the benefits from being better students, as the public school system treated them in the same way as the lower functioning students.

The respondents had good early experiences in school. They revealed this information through their accounts of their early educational life.

### EARLY EDUCATION EXPERIENCES

Connie tells the story that she attended a daycare center, then entered in kindergarten. She said that she was bright in kindergarten because her parents taught her at home. She states that she always paid attention when her older brother was doing his homework and learned a lot that way. He was four years older.

Connie received positive reinforcement from her parents for the type of behavior she exhibited. She states:

I always knew that if I paid attention that I would learn. I always liked school a lot. I did well in school, and was always liked by the teachers. I had friends in school, and I always wanted to do well. If I didn't get a hundred on a test, then I was very upset about it.

Already Connie had confidence in her abilities, and because of it, she always performed well. She had already developed a competitive spirit, which served her well in the school environment.

Another respondent, Beverly states, that she went to kindergarten first, and she was very quiet. She faced racism early on in school.

I started out slow in school because I used to miss out on a lot of what was being taught. The teacher would often send me out of the room to be a messenger, a monitor. I was proud of this, thinking this was a good thing. By the time, I got to the sixth grade, they were holding me over, and it was about that time that I realized that being a monitor was not a good thing. It was only me and another Black girl in the classroom, and we were the only ones sent out as monitors.

From this early experience, Beverly realized two important facts about life. One was that the outside world treats you differently, according to the color of your skin, and two, that you must look out for your own best interests.

Another respondent, Sandra, states that she loved school. She loved it because it gave her an opportunity to get out of the house that she hated. Her father realized that she loved school and so his punishment for her when she did something wrong, was to keep her home from school. This was very upsetting to Sandra.

Another respondent, Melinda states that she liked school but found that there was some pressure on her because of her siblings. She had a brother, who was very smart and was a year older, and she had a sister, a year younger, who was almost a genius with an IQ of 145. Both of them were always being skipped in school, and Melinda felt that she did not want her younger sister to catch up with her in school. She relates the story of an incident that happened to her while she was in the fourth grade.

A girl came to tell my mother that she was skipped. I pushed her, and she almost fell down the stairs. She could have gotten really hurt, but she didn't. That was the day I decided to get skipped, because I had almost hurt someone because they had gotten skipped. So, I worked real hard, and got skipped. But you had to work hard, so I didn't try to get skipped again. I said, as long as she (my sister, Ella) doesn't get into my class, it's all right.

This incident revealed the values of Melinda's family as she was concerned about what her parents would say about her school progress. The family members are bright, and Melinda knows that her mother will question the reason why she had not progressed more. It was clear that intellectual achievement was important in the family, and Melinda had internalized this view. Melinda also reveals another reason for liking school. She laughingly shares:

I liked school. It was always warm, and we lived in a cold water flat, so I was glad to go to school. My family had a wood fire.

In addition, Melinda states, "I had double reasons not to want to stay home from school. My mother made you do everything for yourself or else you couldn't go

to school. You had to get your snack, get your clothes etc." Melinda pauses, for a second, shakes her head slowly, and adds, "At a young age, I had to be responsible."

So, Melinda like many other African American children, and especially, the eldest female had to be responsible because her family was poor, and there were many other younger siblings. She had to learn to take care of herself appropriately, for if she had not, she would have missed school and other activities. In addition, she had to help care for and supervise the younger siblings. These were the expectations of the family.

Other respondents had similar positive experiences in regard to starting school. All of them wanted to start school, were interested in learning, and did well after they started.

**Natalie reports:**

I remember that I wanted to go to school. I went to the first grade and I did well because Aunt Lucy had taught me the alphabet and how to write my name. So, they said that even though she is five, we are going to place her in the first grade.

Natalie was feeling positive about school, and confident about her abilities.

Natalie relates with pride in her voice even now, "I remember being the smartest in the class. I felt that the teachers took an interest in me because I was eager, and I knew something." Teachers respond favorably to a bright and confident student. As a result, Natalie probably received additional attention from the teacher and, this reinforced her positive feelings about learning and attending school.

The second grade I remember writing a poem, and I won a contest. I was in public school from the first to the fourth grade. Then, Aunt Lucy came up with the idea that I was too smart for public school. Then I was placed in Catholic School for a year and a half.

Natalie attended a Catholic school which offered quality education. This made a major difference in Natalie's life for when the family moved again, and Natalie was taken out of the Catholic school, she ended up attending an all white school. Natalie

states, "Because I had attended Catholic school, I knew as much or more than the white kids in the school."

Frances, a respondent who did not have a significant other-investor in her life, demonstrated the importance of a child having someone who really cares about them. Frances' behavior in school reflected her lack of self esteem, as she did not want to be noticed.

I liked school and learning. But I was quiet, and I always sat in the back, so no one would call on me. I remember just trying to hide and just doing my work.

This indicates how smart she was because even without encouragement, she was performing at a high level.

Theresa states that she had no real interest in school. It was just something that a child had to do. As a result, she states:

I wasn't a great student. I didn't try to be. The only thing I had to do was graduate. That was the family rule. You have to graduate from high school. There was no thought about it.

Theresa did not question this; she accepted the expectation, and proceeded to follow through. Theresa, also, states that the teachers were not very interested in her.

Another respondent, Lydia, states that she loved going to school, even though she could recall having separation anxiety.

I did very well in school. I was always in the 1-1 or the 2-1 class. Also I had good role models, as most of my early teachers were Black. I did well in school because my mother instilled the fear of God in me.

Lydia had a positive early school experience, and was fortunate enough to have teachers that she identified with and admired. In addition, with the help of her significant other-investor, her mother, constantly encouraging and observing her progress in school, Lydia was moving in a direction that could lead her to achievement.

I knew that I couldn't just settle for a high school diploma. And looking around at the people in the neighborhood, and not wanting to be like that. I was very shy in elementary school. When you are little and shy, people think that you are trying to be a snob, but you aren't. It's just that you are fearful of making friends, and you figure that if you make friends that they are going to leave you.

### Summary

As indicated earlier, the respondents started school eager and hopeful. All of them did well or fair in their early school education. At a young age, some of them had already internalized the message that they should be aiming to be somebody, but did not really know exactly what that meant. None had very negative experiences in school, and as they continued their education, they remained interested in the learning experience. Some were taught early the value of education and though they were too young to express it, they had already embraced this notion. In addition, there were teachers that served as role models, especially when the child had Black teachers. Still, however, the role model did not have to be Black. The positive educational experience, the development of the self, the moral and/or religious training combined to move the respondents closer to using education to achieve some upward mobility.

These women believed in the American dream that states that one can make it in this society with the proper education, despite the other barriers, such as racism, classism and sexism. However, as well as the motivation, one must have the basic information and procedure for moving in a particular direction. Due to the fact that these women were from working class families, their options were severely limited. "Access to a college education is highly unequal, even for children of the same measured 'academic ability' (Bowles, 1977, p.144)."

The females in this study were seeking a better life; however, like the African American boys, it was unlikely that things would have improved for them, except for the changing of the society, at that particular moment. Because of their unique backgrounds, being in the right place, at the right time, they were able to take

advantage of the opportunities that suddenly emerged. They were prepared academically, socially, and psychologically to take advantage of any opportunity that came their way.

All of these rare opportunities for African Americans and other minorities suddenly appeared in the late sixties and early seventies. For those individuals like the respondents, it was like a gift from heaven. But for many other African Americans who were not socialized and motivated prior to this occurrence, they found it difficult, if not impossible to take advantage of the opportunities that were now available. If no opportunity presented itself when the respondents were ready, then most likely, they would have dropped by the wayside as many of their counterparts.

#### RESPONDENTS' PEER RELATIONSHIPS

It is important to examine the peer relationships of the respondents to see what effect the peers had on their achievement, and movement in a positive direction. As a child continues to mature, both chronologically and intellectually, the studies have shown that the peer group influence becomes greater. The child begins to move away from the family members, and seeks the approval of their peers (Clausen, 1968; Elkin and Handel, 1984; Macleod, 1987). This is another developmental stage. It is stated that peer relationships have a lot to do with an individual's ideas and decisions about their lives. Below the respondents share their memories in regard to peer relationships.

Natalie was very quiet, as a child and had very few friends. Because of her quietness, and lack of street knowledge, she did not have a particular peer group to which she related.

As time went on, during adolescence, she had two friends that she was very close to; however, neither of the friends moved in the same direction as she did. They went to a different high school from Natalie, and as a result she saw very little of them as they got older.

Natalie stated that her high school opened up a large world to her. To go to Manhattan everyday for school was seen by Natalie as a major achievement. She felt grown up, and vowed that one day she would live there. Although she continued to have the same friends, she spent less time with them because of attending school in Manhattan. Later as the girls reached fifteen and sixteen years of age, many of them became pregnant. Natalie continued through high school and graduated with skills that enabled her to attain a position as a legal secretary.

Connie reports that she was always very selective about her friends. They were usually very similar to her, in that they were high achievers in school.

In high school, I had three close friends, Josephine, Marva and Louise. They were similar to me, and we all became interested in boys at the same time. But we were all clear, that even though there were some fast girls having sex, we weren't like those girls. I knew that I had to do something with my life, and that if you had sex, you had a baby, and that wasn't for me. I had a boyfriend, and he knew too, that I wasn't that type of girl. Back then, boys knew that.

Connie faced adolescence aware of the fact that this was the period when many Black females became pregnant. From her earlier socialization in regard to her self identity, expectations of her significant other-investor, and her internalized view of her self, she was conscious of the fact that her life was aimed towards achieving some mobility. Connie was consciously making choices about her life. She continues her story:

Anyway, all of us completed high school. My friends just wanted to complete high school. That was a big accomplishment at that time. You know, as much as I wanted to be somebody, I didn't have the vaguest notion of what to do after high school.

So, I stayed at the job I had in high school. I was working for an Insurance Company. My three friends got jobs after high school. One worked for the city, the other two for private industry. I also met another friend, Natalie, while I was attending high school. She seemed to have a goal too.

Thus, Connie's plan to be somebody was unclear, and undefined. She wanted to achieve, but with no direction coming from anywhere, it seemed unlikely.

Melinda states that she had many girlfriends and boyfriends early in her life. As an adolescent, she became pregnant, and at that time, there was such a stigma that parents did not want their children to be friendly with her. Still, Melinda states that most of the girls were not aiming to attend college, but rather, they were planning to marry.

Lydia relates that she had a few friends, and, in particular, she was close to two girl friends. Of the three of them, only two of them graduated from high school. Lydia states that one of the friends became pregnant in junior high school, and she never made it to high school. As Lydia explains, "She just kept having babies." Lydia's other friend is now a lawyer.

Vernice relates that she had a few friends growing up. She states that her mother was very selective concerning with whom they could socialize. As a result, this limited their interaction with the neighborhood children and when their friends started going to parties they were not permitted to go.

Frances points out that she was on her own a lot due to the lack of parental involvement. She became friendly with two other girls on the block, Brenda and Alice. Brenda's mother was a drug addict, so she had a poor family situation like Frances. Frances states:

Alice was the nurturing one among us. She was always doing the right thing. But by the time, we got to be fifteen and sixteen, all of us had children.

It is apparent that adolescence is an important developmental stage especially in the Black community. It is a time whereby actions are taken that have great consequences for the rest of the adolescent's life. In particular, the adolescent females are more vulnerable if there is not the proper guidance or supervision. It is not

surprising that all three of them, Frances and her two friends became pregnant at the same time.

Sandra states that she had a lot of friends in the neighborhood, growing up; however, most of them including Sandra became pregnant during adolescence. She reflects now, "Most of my old friends died from the neighborhood because they got on drugs."

Theresa states that she had a weight problem growing up and she felt this interfered with her relationships. She had some friends; however, she had one best friend that she was always with. Theresa states that she used to listen to this friend, and follow whatever she told her. This friend often engaged in acting out behavior such as being truant from school and drinking. The two of them went on to high school, and finished without becoming pregnant. It seems likely that if one of them had become pregnant, the other one would have done so also.

### Summary

In examining the peer relationships of the respondents, it appears that none of them were into large groups or gangs. They usually related to a small number of friends, and most of the friends were similar to them. Peer relationships have an influence on the decisions made by these adolescents.

### COMMUNITY AND COMMUNITY AGENCIES

The community that one grows up in is a major socialization agent. The community has its own norms and values, and it encourages the individual to live up to their norms. Each of the respondents was a member of a particular community, and their experiences within the community is important to examine.

Each of the respondents grew up in a ghetto located in New York City. Although the environment had some negative features about it, the community had

many positive aspects. Many of the respondents described the neighborhood as caring, nurturing, and just being home to them.

The respondent, Melinda states, that as a child playing outside, as soon as her parents arrived in the block, everything was shared with them regarding her behavior during the day by others in the neighborhood. Everyone participated in this, including, the winos, the gambler, and prostitutes.

There was a feeling of real community, and every adult felt responsible for the children growing up in the neighborhood. As a result, nothing escaped their notice, and all was reported to the parents. Adults had great authority during this period of time, and often the matter was dealt with prior to the arrival of the parent. It takes a community to raise children, and during that time, this occurred regularly. This manner of childrearing was brought to the North by the southern migrants, who were trying to rear their children in the same way that they were reared.

A few of the respondents reported that the neighborhood had some white families living there and the Black and white children played together. When the families lived next door, usually they exchanged food and their culture.

Vernice reports that she watched her neighborhood, Brownsville turn into a slum over the years that she lived there. She states that as long as there were some white people living in the building, the landlord make repairs, and kept the building up. As soon as the white families moved out, then the landlord stopped putting money into the building. Many years later, these became the abandoned buildings that are found all over the city. This same process was repeated in all of the neighborhoods where Blacks were living. The society attempts to blame Blacks for the terrible conditions of the buildings, and the deterioration of the neighborhoods, when in actuality, these people are victims of a racist system (Clark, 1965; Fushfeld, 1984).

The importance of all of these factors: family, friends, significant other-investors, life experiences, community and community agencies cannot be denied.

These supports serve to develop and enhance the individual's sense of self and their level of confidence.

### Community Agency Involvement

For some respondents, the community impacted on their lives to a greater degree. In fact, the less there was of parental involvement, the greater the impact of the street. For some of them, there were community agency involvement such as the Police Athletic League, Henry Street Settlement, and the Brooklyn Community Services. These agencies provided the supports that many families could not offer their children. It gave them the opportunity to visit places that their families were unable to take them. It provided supervised group experience interaction, and taught them useful information about their health, and skills of daily living. Many of these agencies offered programs for adults, and some of the respondents' parents participated in these activities. Community agencies also figured in the socialization process of some of the respondents.

Lydia reports that:

We went to a program called the Brooklyn Community Services. We used to go to the Girls' Club, and the boys went to the Boys' Club. My mother went to their group, and this really gave my mother a lot of support because she was raising six kids by herself. We would go there and play games and have ice cream. It was really good.

Another respondent, Theresa relates that:

We used to have a club at the Educational Alliance. We used to go to camp, and work as staff assistants. We either went to the Educational Alliance or the Henry St. Settlement every day after school.

For the other respondents, there was little community agency involvement. It appears that most of the respondents' experiences were more centered around the family and the neighborhood. Part of this was due to the fact that many of the families were from the South, and they were not accustomed to the involvement of outside

agencies. The southern experience consisted of remaining in the folds of the community, kin folk, and church activities. All of their needs were met in that grouping.

## CONCLUSION

In examining the secondary socialization experiences of the respondents, in terms of their educational experiences, peer relationships, community and community agencies, the researcher found that education was a powerful and important event in the lives of these African American females. The majority had a successful early school experience, which encouraged them to desire to attend school, and also to feel that they were capable of excelling in school. In addition, they had friends that were similar to them, in terms of having the ability to learn, and also the desire to learn. When there was a friend, who did not have the same motivations, interests and behavior, the forces of life usually separated the friends, and moved them in opposite directions.

The community had both positive and negative forces; however, the community did not move the respondents towards any destructive activities. The strength of the familial relationships had a direct impact on the community's influence on children; consequently, for the respondents, the impact of the community was very little.

A positive early educational experience can have great consequences for an individual, and such was the case with these African American women. The respondents' relationship with their significant other-investor, their moral and religious training, combined with their positive early educational experience enabled them to be at a point in their maturity, intellectual development, and motivation to take advantage of the opportunity when it came about. The next chapter will deal with the structural opportunity that came about and the barriers faced by these respondents.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **STRUCTURAL OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will discuss the respondents' experiences with structural opportunity and the barriers they encountered. Structural opportunity is defined by the researcher as a governmental support program or policy, which enables citizens to pursue certain selected paths such as higher education.

This chapter will analyze the manner in which the respondents became aware of the opportunity, their perception of the opportunity, and lastly how they acted upon the opportunity. For this group of working class African American females growing up in the inner city, there were numerous barriers that did not permit many African Americans to move beyond. I will present how each of these respondents were able to move ahead in spite of the many problems facing them. The life history interviews revealed that the respondents faced many barriers to success such as structural, social and psychological barriers.

The findings in this chapter will reveal that the respondents were eager and receptive to any opportunity that came along. Some had involved themselves in other programs, only to find that they were not the correct vehicles for self improvement or upward mobility. The findings also show that despite the fact that the majority of the respondents had a significant other-investor, were socialized to value education, and had an early positive school experience, they were unable to move ahead without a structural opportunity.

### **STRUCTURAL OPPORTUNITIES**

For certain groups in this society such as the white middle class and upper class, educational and employment opportunities are readily available. However, for African Americans, this is rarely the case. Therefore, the significance of structural opportunities becomes apparent.

As youth, the respondents, did not have the knowledge and their families did not have the experience to move their lives in a direction that would enable them to acquire higher education. They had fantasies and dreams which they lived out through their academic performance. They did not usually have a well developed plan in mind, nor did they have a concept of how to achieve upward mobility. Although most of the respondents did well in high school, they were not anticipating going to college because first, they lacked information on the process, and secondly, they lacked adequate finances.

In describing their road to mobility, the respondents still showed a feeling of amazement and excitement about the direction of their lives. Those who were religious felt that God had led them to where they are today. Others felt that they were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time.

Six of the sample became pregnant prior to the completion of high school. The other five completed high school on time, yet none of them went to college right after high school despite their good grades. Usually, the high school guidance counselor is the person who guides the student in seeking college admission.

Connie shares one of her experiences in this regard. She states:

I was in high school and my average was like 98, and I remember being called down by the guidance counselor, who was white, of course, and she asked if I planned to go to college. I knew that my parents didn't have any money so I said no. I am going to a business school. Of course, I didn't know anything about a business school either, but I had heard someone say that.

Here Connie revealed her class origins for she was unaware of the real significance of the guidance's counselor question. Had she been more aware of the possibilities than she would have responded to the question in a different way. In addition, perhaps the issue of race played a role in this communication because the guidance counselor did not relate in a way that would encourage a young student who did not really understand the issues to ask questions. Furthermore, for Connie relating to this white guidance counselor was uncomfortable, and she attempted to respond quickly. According to Connie,

The guidance counselor never bothered to inquire if I knew that there were scholarships available to go to college if I so desired. Nor did she bother to explain that the City University was free to *anyone* with grades as high as mine.

As a result of not acquiring the proper information, Connie did not attend college until she was twenty three. By that time, she had married, had a child, and divorced. She decided if she was to give her daughter a decent life, then she needed higher education to secure a better job. She did not know of any college except Bronx Community College, so she decided to write and inquire about attending. Connie states, "Right after I made that decision, I noticed a sign posted in my housing project building that asked the question, 'Do you want to go to college? If so, call this number at Queens College.'" Connie phoned and was told to go in and take a test. If she passed, then she would be in the SEEK Program, which offered full tuition and a stipend. This was a miracle to her.

SEEK was a program that was developed in response to the upheaval of the sixties and seventies. It was the result of a government policy which would provide higher education for racially oppressed people. Seven of the respondents were in the SEEK Program at their particular college.

Another respondent, Theresa, tells the story of working at an Insurance Company after having had a baby out of wedlock. This had some significance for this

particular socio-historical period, for when females became pregnant, they usually married. If not, it was considered a stigma, and therefore, it became a secret that was hidden from the larger society. Black families have traditionally accepted these mothers and their babies; however, this was not a view shared in the dominant society. Theresa states she felt settled in this life. While at the Insurance Company, she meet a Black female, who had just returned from maternity leave and had a baby around the same age as Theresa's. Theresa states that she and Connie became close friends.

My friend Connie was going to this program, and was excited about it. Actually, I thought my school days were over. School was not something I was looking forward to. It was something you did because you had to.

Theresa had already fulfilled the expectations of the family. She had secured a high school diploma, and the family felt that she had a good job at the Insurance Company. She was surprised at her friend's response about attending college.

Connie was so excited about college. College was such a great thing to her. I had another friend at the job name Debra, and she was like me. At lunch time, we would often have an alcoholic beverage with our lunch. I think we were getting bored with the position that we had as keypunchers on the job.

Theresa revealed that her aspirations were already fulfilled at this point. No one that she knew was doing anything very different from her. In fact, most of the people that she knew were not doing as well. Theresa shows her surprise:

I thought that I was too old to go to college. Connie had decided to attend college full time, but before she left, she told us to take this test, so that we could go to college the following semester. We promised to do it, but we didn't really want to follow through. But we gave our word, and our word was our bond, so we felt that we had to follow through. If you gave your word, and didn't follow through, you were a liar, and that was a terrible thing to be. At least, this way, we felt that we could say, I tried, but I didn't pass the test.

Theresa revealed that peers can have a powerful influence on an individual. Theresa and her friend, Debra felt that they must follow through because of a promise to Connie. They lacked confidence in their abilities and did not expect to pass the test. They clearly did not see the possibilities of their life being changed by pursuing an academic degree.

I was waiting for Debra in the subway station because we were supposed to go together. I called her house, her grandmother said that she was sleeping. I said to wake her up because I didn't want to go out to Queens College by myself. Debra finally came two hours later.

It was apparent that Theresa was more motivated than Debra, and this would have great consequences in the years to come. Theresa was more motivated because she was a parent. Debra had no real responsibility except for herself.

When we arrived at Queens College, two hours later, the lady told us to come right in because the test had just started. We ran in and took the test. Debra and I said that we didn't know if we passed the test, but at least we could say to Connie that we took it.

Theresa and Debra passed the test, and were accepted into the program. However, it was only Theresa who remained in college and completed the degree. Theresa stated that she began to think about leading a different kind of life than she had initially envisioned. The importance of knowing someone who is engaged in moving through a system that is unfamiliar to you cannot be discounted. It invites the individual to identify with that person, and to follow in their footsteps.

Opportunity arrived for Sandra after she became a single parent of two boys. Sandra struggled to survive after the final separation from her husband. She became pregnant as a teenager, and married a few years later. The marriage did not work, and at one point, Sandra was forced to obtain public assistance. She was ambitious, and had enrolled in various job skills programs; none of them led her to a good job. At one point, her oldest son became rebellious. Nothing seemed to help him, so she placed him in a residential treatment facility.

My son was in Wilwyck School for Boys, and I would visit every week, and was very interested in it. Once, this woman came up to me from the agency and said that she was trying to get some parents to do some social work. They would give training and send you to college. She asked me if I was interested. And I said yes.

Sandra being a concerned parent reached out for help for her son. This act of acquiring treatment for her son resulted in an opportunity being presented to her. She was receptive to this experience for she had been seeking a chance to move ahead. According to Sandra, this was the first real one offered to her. She decided to try.

They paid for my associate's degree. I went to school for three days, and worked in the office for two days. Then afterwards, I started to doing outreach, running parents groups, and giving service back to Wilwyck.

Sandra was approached about participating in the program because the agency had been impressed with her natural ability. She had been seeking a way to make it. When she was offered the opportunity to go to college, she accepted it.

Frances' experience was similar to Sandra's. She had three children and was a single parent. She had worked many jobs including the post office and had left all of them. At the time of the opportunity, Frances was on welfare, and generally had no plan in mind. Like Sandra, one of her sons was acting out because of his father leaving the home. He was running away from home, sleeping in hallways, and not attending school. Because Frances feared for his safety, she had him placed in the Wilwyck School For Boys, a Residential Treatment facility. After a time, Frances was also approached by the agency. She states:

The agency wanted to start a community based program whereby they used preventive work in the neighborhood where the children came from. They wanted to work with welfare mothers, who were sitting at home doing nothing. They sent a letter to the parents and interviewed them, and if they were interested, they would offer job training. So I was enthusiastic, and they were only taking three people. Sandra was one of these people, and I was the other.

Frances, as previously stated, never had a significant other-investor and she never received guidance or direction from anyone. As a result, she got involved in some relationships that were not beneficial for her. She initially involved herself with an older man, who was a drug abuser. Later, she broke up with him, but by this time, she had three children. She got a job in the Post Office. She soon found, as many other women on welfare have stated, "Babysitting expenses were eating up too much money for me to continue working." So, as Frances states, "Now I was just sitting around watching soap operas."

Consequently, when the opportunity was offered to her, she was very receptive to the idea of going to college. Unlike most of the other candidates, she did not have a family support system behind her, and yet at this particular point in her life, at the age of twenty seven, she desired a different type of life.

They opened an office at 169th Street. We went to school three days a week. The kids were upstate, and when the kids returned to the families, we helped them to adjust. We organized the community and parents in the community. Whatever was needed, we did it. The year was 1970.

Naomi tells the story of her expectation that upon graduation from high school, she would enter college. She applied to Ohio State College, and was accepted. As graduation approached, Naomi found out there was no money for her to attend college. Naomi was crushed for this was something that she had looked forward to for many years.

Naomi states, "I sent the deposit in for my college room and board, and when it was time to send in the tuition, I learned there was no money." She acts out her anger by becoming pregnant, but does not really recognize the consequences of her actions before it is too late. She did not wish to marry but was pressured into it.

I didn't want to get married. And I'm not certain that I wanted to have a baby. But I would have had the baby without the benefit of marriage, but pressure came down so hot and so heavy. I was the oldest, what kind of example was I going to set for them. What I found most interesting was that there was no money for me to go to college, but everybody dug down deep to throw this fine wedding.

Naomi found that her family's traditional values and norms were important, and especially to her grandmother, from the South. Consequently, the family would not accept Naomi having a child out of wedlock, and she bowed under this pressure. However, Naomi held on to her dream of acquiring a college education, and she states, "I told Frank (husband) that the first chance I got, I was going to college. I wasn't giving up my dream to go." Naomi adds, I told him:

As soon as I see you are on your feet and can support us, I'm not going to work, and I'm going back to school full time.

It was a while before this occurred. Naomi's husband had a child from a previous relationship that he brought into the marriage. So Naomi now had two children to care for. She worked many jobs, helping her husband to support the family. Naomi states:

In 1970, I said to Frank, this is it. We had an apartment; it was furnished. Things were pretty much paid for, and I said, "you're on your own."

Naomi was true to her word, and after eight years of marriage, work, and sacrifice, she was ready to pursue her college education.

I found out from a neighbor, whose sister was attending college, about the SEEK Program. Everybody knew that I wanted to go to college. That's all I ever talked about. Jean said to me, "Do you know about the SEEK Program?" My sister is in it. I thought to myself, she's not that smart; if she can get into college, I certainly should be able to do it. So I found out all about the SEEK Program and I was accepted.

From her early socialization, Naomi had confidence in her abilities and never doubted that she would perform well in college. The expectations of her grandmother

were internalized and she felt that she must move ahead. In addition, Naomi always loved to learn.

Another respondent, Beverly, tells about her pregnancy at the age of sixteen; however, this did not prevent her from finishing high school on time. She attended a school for pregnant girls, and after the birth of the baby, she returned to a regular high school. She heard about attending college from the school bulletin. Her first interest was medicine, but she states that her counselor told her that Blacks and Hispanics were not good at medicine. As a result, instead of majoring in pre-medicine, she majored in interpersonal communication and education. As indicated previously, guidance counselors influenced the direction that many students moved in.

Roberta is the only one of the respondents, who went straight to college from high school. It is significant that she is the youngest of these women, and that she attended school in the late seventies and early eighties.

I went to junior high school and high school in Queens because my mother had moved over there. I don't know if I would have made it if I had stayed in Brooklyn. I wasn't a bad kid, but the influence of the environment was becoming stronger.

Roberta talked about the environment having a great effect on her life. The other respondents did not really complain of the environment, but Roberta's comment also demonstrates that the communities were beginning to change in a negative way due to the increase of drugs in the community.

When I went to Forest Hills High School, I got involved in the activities, and that kept me going. Most of the school was white. I had no problems with that. I had a lot of friends there, but only in the school.

Roberta moved to a Black neighborhood in Queens, and at that time, many of the white schools were seeking minority students. Forest Hills High School reached out to her and she was made comfortable in that environment. Roberta mentions the fact that she had many friends during the school hours, but after school, they did not

socialize with her. This reflected the superficiality of the school's integration plan which continued to perpetuate the segregation of the society.

The teachers were very nice. Once you get in a certain circle, they just cling to you. I got good grades, 80's and 90's. Then you have teachers that see that you are doing well, and they just give you that extra attention.

Roberta points out that because the teachers thought that she was smart, she received additional support. Because all of her classmates were applying to college, she followed suit. It appeared that everyone in Forest Hills High School, which was considered an excellent school, went to college. In addition, Roberta points out that everyone knew that financial aid was available, which suggests that the guidance department was doing their part to make sure everyone was aware of this. Roberta started college in 1978.

The respondent, Lydia, graduated from high school at the appropriate time, but found that the jobs she was able to obtain were dead ends. She, like most of the other women in the sample, did not know the route to gaining entrance to higher education.

A girl who lived in the apartment above me applied to the SEEK Program, and she got in and she wasn't as smart as me. So, I applied. I was accepted. I got the stipend, work study, and the Model Cities grant.

Lydia was ready to take advantage of the opportunity being offered.

Vernice tells her story of being pregnant at fifteen, dropping out of high school, and following the traditional route of marrying the father of her child. Shortly after then, she was pregnant again, and had another child. Vernice states, "My only plan was for him to get a job, and an apartment for us." When she saw that the marriage was not working because Samuel, her husband, could not assume responsibility, she was finally able to get a room for herself and her children through public assistance. Vernice states:

I got this room on Oxford Street. There were other girls like me, and we would take turns babysitting each other's children. We did domestic work, but everybody wanted a factory job.

Vernice demonstrates what happened to teenagers who became parents. Her husband was too immature to assume the responsibility that accompanies being a husband and a father. There were many other working class Black girls in this same predicament. Although, the majority of them received welfare, they supplemented the meager checks by working off the books and performing domestic work. None of the girls wished to do this type of work. This group aspired to obtain a better position, and in their view, a factory position was a step up. Vernice states she did not let her husband know where she lived after the separation for she feared that he would come by and she would end up being pregnant again.

I started taking courses at Bushwick High School, and after that I went to this business school. I thought that you needed your high school diploma in order to attend the business school. They taught me typing, English and grammar. I don't know if welfare suggested this, but I knew that I would benefit from this. It was an opportunity. It was 1967.

Vernice revealed that she was determined to move ahead despite the setbacks of a failed marriage and having two children. Any opportunity that opened, she was receptive to it. At this point, she was not really looking toward college, but desired to provide her boys with a decent life. She was all too aware of her earlier mistakes. She states that she never used the skills from the business school for by the time she finished, the SEEK program came along.

SEEK gave a stipend of ten dollars. I learned about SEEK in church. Anyway, I heard about it and I was skeptical. Somebody going to pay for you to go to college, and get a college education. It sounded too good. I asked them when you get your degree, what do you have to do? This man said nothing. I still didn't believe that there wasn't more to it. This man told me to come to this meeting. I went and he went over this same information, and told us where to go.

Vernice could not believe that this was a real opportunity. She could not believe that the education was free, and that all she had to do was attend the college. Although, not really believing, she followed through with the procedure. It was understandable that she would not believe that this was a real opportunity because there had been so few in her experience. Vernice states:

I did everything he told me. I didn't believe that it could be that easy. It really surprised me. I don't mean that the work was easy. Even after we started going nights and weekends, it wasn't until that fall when I started to attend school full time, that I began to hope that it was really true.

### Summary

From these women's responses and actions, it appears that none of them knew the route to achieving academically, despite their desires to do so. As White and Parham state in The Psychology of Blacks, "They have only a vague notion about the preparational steps involved in getting from where they are to where they might want to go (White and Parham, 1990, p.124)." Not only did they not know how, but they were not knowledgeable as to whom to seek such information from. They were seeking opportunity but in such a way that it was unlikely that opportunity would have landed within their grasp. The respondents were fortunate because at that particular historical time, the social forces in the society influenced the creation of a structural opportunity for those who had been shut out of the higher education process. Yet even with the structural opportunities, many barriers had to be overcome by these women to reach their ultimate goals. We will turn to an examination of some of these barriers.

### BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT

For working class African American women, there are many barriers to higher education. There are structural, social, and psychological barriers.

### Structural Barriers

Structural barriers are obstacles that are strategically placed in a society to prevent certain groups of people from gaining access to the resources of the country. Structural barriers emerge out of institutional racism and are strengthened and perpetuated by it. Such structural barriers also prevent Black families from participating and accessing the opportunities and resources of this country. These barriers are found in all areas of the society, namely, employment, economics, housing, health and education. The barriers' functions are to keep African Americans in ghettos and to prevent them from having an opportunity to work in better paying jobs, live in decent housing, and obtain quality health care and education. As Stephen Steinberg states:

Among Blacks who are employed, many--probably a majority work at jobs in the secondary market that are generally not unionized, involve unstable or irregular employment, pay low wages, offer few benefits and provide no entry into more desirable job categories (Steinberg, 1981, p.211).

In the larger dominant society, there is little recognition of the existence of structural barriers. As a result, the society has always attempted to attribute the conditions African Americans are forced to deal with to their deficiencies instead of these structural barriers. It is important to state that these barriers exist and to articulate that when some individuals are able to move beyond them, it is often at tremendous personal cost. At times, the society lifts the barriers to allow a chosen few to succeed so that they can be pointed to as examples of upward mobility. In truth, there are many barriers and few structural opportunities.

The respondents were able to move ahead because of the particular time that they were living in and the particular opportunity that they were given. However, they were quick to point out that these structural barriers still exist and that they must be eradicated.

### Social Barriers

Social barriers came about as people were segregated and unable to engage in the regular interactions and activities that were found in the larger society. These social barriers were created by the larger structural barriers such as the lack of economic opportunity, the segregated residential housing and the segregated school systems.

An example of a social barrier is a child whose entire existence has been spent only in their immediate neighborhood, and has had little experience of participating in the larger society. The lack of exposure to the larger world severely limits the amount of general knowledge that the child acquires and their general ability to function. Indeed, when they do venture out, many times they are uncomfortable, and do not wish to move beyond their neighborhood borders.

Many of these children do not know professional people on a personal basis, consequently, they have difficulty imagining themselves in similar roles. As a result, they do not have direct access to the necessary information that would move them in a particular direction. Positive role models are important in the community because they serve to encourage others to come behind them or just by their very presence, indicate to the children that they can accomplish what others have done.

Barbara Williams Emerson, in her study regarding disadvantaged college students with social welfare needs, found that these needs impacted negatively upon the academic performances of these students. She defines social welfare needs as the following: health, housing, employment, social services, and income maintenance. The findings in the study show that "social welfare needs are important determinants of achievement" (Emerson, 1990, p.145). As a result, she recommends the implementation of a program called Access Services Model, which is an advocacy agency, as well as an information and referral center. This agency would ensure that the disadvantaged college student's social welfare needs would be adequately dealt

with, so that their achievement in college would not be disrupted because of these needs (Emerson, 1990). Certainly such an agency would, in particular, help the working class African American women in attending college, and would eliminate many of the barriers that they face in their pursuit of education.

Another social barrier to achievement consist of becoming a parent at an early age, and having to meet the emotional and physical needs of a child. This barrier is significant because many of the respondents were single parents, who had to provide for the well being of their children. These women had to cook, clean, and wash for their children, as well as supervise their homework. These mothers had to be available to interact with the child. In addition, if the child was having any other problems, whether in school or at home, the mother was involved. Additionally, the parent had to be available to spend quality time with the child. For the respondents that were married, there were other stresses and strains. Although the husband often helped with the children, still the wife had the usual traditional role to play as the wife, and mother which included tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and washing.

On the other hand, those respondents who were not married, but were involved in male/female relationships often faced problems that impacted on their attainment of their college education. If the relationship was positive, then certainly, it could enhance and aid the educational experience; however, a few of the respondents reported that the relationships were a hindrance, and caused unnecessary pain and suffering.

As Beverly states, she had a child, while in high school. She continued to see the father of the child, and by the time, she entered college, they had started to live together. She entered college and after a year she became pregnant. She stopped college long enough to have her second child and returned back to school. Later, she had another child and still continued to attend college. Beverly reports that she was involved in an abusive relationship which she remained in it until 1977.

Beverly was obviously very committed to obtaining her education, but these were difficult years, because of the destructive relationship, and the many children. It took her many years to free herself from that relationship.

Another respondent, Connie shares that she was always trying to maintain a relationship; however, it proved to be very difficult because the men she knew were not in college, and consequently, did not really understand that she needed time to do her classwork. She states, "Early in the relationship, they did not take my attendance in college seriously. However, as time went on, and they saw the time commitment that I gave to school, they could not accept this." She also added, "I never really had much time anyway, because I had a child and was going to college."

Connie states that it didn't take her long to see that she wanted a relationship in which the male was in college too. She wanted someone she could share her experiences in college with and discuss the many topics she was learning. There was a shortage of men like that, but she did meet a few.

For most of the respondents, the relationships were a source of instability, for most of them were young women who were still in the process of developing and sorting out their own identities. In addition, the men were at the same point. Of all the respondents, only one was still married and living with her husband while she attended college.

Another frequent barrier that the respondents faced was the fact that they lacked ample time to devote to their college assignments. For often times, after performing all the chores that needed to be done in the home, the mother was exhausted and unable to perform at her highest level. There was only a limited amount of time to devote to the task. In addition, this made it difficult for the mother being able to pursue any of her interests.

Also, these mothers had to concern themselves with childcare and wonder if their children were cared for properly in their absence. When the children became ill, it was the mother's responsibility to nurse the child back to health. If someone had to stay at home with the child, it was the mother. If it was a single parent, then there was little doubt that the mother would be the person to take the child to the doctor. As a result, if the mother was attending college, she had to miss classes which caused her to fall behind in academic work, borrow notes from a classmate or do whatever was necessary to pass the class.

Furthermore, when library work was needed, the mother had to make arrangements with a babysitter or she had to take the child with her. If she took the child with her, then she was constantly distracted from the use of the library for she had to supervise him or her. The mother's mind was constantly being torn in two directions. If she was fortunate enough to secure a babysitter, then she had to deal with her guilt about leaving the child with the sitter for an extra number of hours. It was necessary for the mother to rationalize and justify her behavior to herself.

In addition, the lack of adequate funds was a constant strain and worry, and the respondents were always preoccupied with this particular problem. Connie reports that during her attendance in college, the financial situation became so bad that she had to apply for welfare assistance.

I didn't have a coat and boots for my little girl, and it was winter. This meant that I couldn't take her outside. That's when a friend told me, you need to go to welfare, if not for yourself, for your child.

For if one is worried about the basic necessities of life, such as food, shelter and clothing, it is difficult, if not totally impossible to concentrate on an intellectual argument. Barbara Ann Stolz states that the government's failure to provide adequate financial assistance for educational purposes suggests that the government does not

want everyone educated. She points out that industries continue to need to keep a portion of the population in low paying jobs (Stolz, 1985).

### Psychological Barriers

The psychological barriers are as profound as the structural and social barriers. An example of one of these psychological barriers is how the Black student must now function in a primarily white environment.

The respondents saw few Black people on the campus. This was a powerful message to the students for it conveyed to them that attending college was a privilege that they may or may not have been entitled to. It suggested that they probably did not belong because most of the people who looked like them were not there. It took a lot of psychic energy to continue to go to a place that they felt did not really want them there, and a place where people saw them as very different.

Attending classes on the campus was a major step because these respondents were enrolled in institutions that were predominately white students. For example, quite a few of the respondents spoke about entering a college class, and seeing "all white faces." They spoke about hoping that there would be at least one other Black person in the room. The respondents also spoke about their feelings that the other white students were looking at them, and that at other times, they were completely ignored. The respondents state that when the class discussions were about Blacks, they were expected to be the expert. Some spoke about the struggle over attending classes, since it was such an uncomfortable situation.

In addition, some reported a feeling of inferiority that came with going to class because this was their first exposure to this information. They pointed out that it was only years later that they were able to recognize why they had not performed better in class. At times, they found that the white students excelled in college because they came out of schools that had prepared them with the necessary information that they would need in college.

But for these African American females, none of the barriers were great enough for them to drop out of college. They knew that if they dropped out of the educational system, their lives would be more difficult. In addition, since many of the respondents were attending college during the late sixties and early seventies, when the society was changing, some of the respondents felt that education could be used as a liberation tool for their people. So, they persisted despite the barriers, the pain, and the discomfort.

### CONCLUSION

Examining the respondents' experiences with opportunity and barriers reveals the range of some of their efforts to survive in a world that was not supportive of them or their families. Various life experiences aided in their development and maturation. Their experiences enabled them to move forward, rather than to remain struck in the same situation. Structural, social and psychological barriers prevent many African American women from acquiring higher education. The respondents shared some of their experiences facing these barriers, which tend to take on a life of their own, and create other roadblocks. These barriers also serve to mask the larger problems that exist in this society: the lack of equal access to the existing resources for working class people and the racism that permeates the entire society.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **TRAVELING THE ACHIEVEMENT ROAD: COLLEGE EXPERIENCES**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will discuss the findings from the respondents' college experiences. In examining their experiences, the findings reveal that these respondents have certain characteristics in common: 1) they were able to cope under very stressful conditions, 2) they had high motivations to achieve, 3) they were able to believe in themselves, and 4) had the ability to remain focused on a goal. These qualities enabled them to make the transition to college life and to achieve. In addition to the respondents' strengths, they had a social support system that enabled them to stand up under pressure.

All of the respondents were overjoyed to enter college. Their emotions ran the gamut from excitement and happiness to apprehension and disbelief. Most of them recognized that this was something out of the ordinary, as they saw their peers and family members following the usual paths that working class Black people traveled. Although they had hoped for a way to move ahead, when the path presented itself, they found it to be a little disconcerting.

#### **PASSAGE INTO THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT**

Vernice tells about her feelings upon entrance into Queens College.

By the time, I had matriculated, I was gung ho. In the beginning, we took all SEEK courses. I was fascinated by the college just going there to take all the courses, and I just knew that I was going to be a teacher. That was my plan. But I knew that I had to get through all those courses.

Vernice was excited and realized that she may actually earn this degree. She was able to focus herself on the goal of becoming a teacher, and she was intent upon making this happen. Through the religious training that she received from her mother while she was a child, she was able to utilize the doctrine of "work hard and you will succeed." She was persistent and determined to use all opportunities that were given to her. She was highly motivated to achieve at this point, for she was a single parent who was the mother of two children.

The work in college was difficult. It was a lot. I knew that I had to work hard in college, and then I had a family to go home to, to wash for them, and see off to school.

Vernice confesses that the white students irritated her because it appeared that they had it so easy. They were younger, and had no responsibility except to go to college and do their homework, while Vernice was mother and father to her children, and had to provided for their needs. It is understandable that she felt some resentment about this situation because it seemed to be unfair. And yet these feelings, apparently, did not completely preoccupy her thoughts because she needed all of her attention focused on being the head of her household, and pursuing a college degree. All else, had to come secondary.

My teachers were good. They were just excellent people. I felt their personal touches. Of course, they were all SEEK teachers. I don't think I remember any of the regular Queens College teachers being nurturing figures. I think the SEEK teachers wanted to see the program succeed. They wanted to give this new breed of students, a chance to succeed. They knew that we could, and they were encouraging in that sense. They knew that we had some difficulties in life, so this was our chance for a comeback.

Vernice felt fortunate that she was able to be on Queens College campus. She states that she knew plenty of people that didn't get this opportunity, so she tried hard to succeed. Vernice states, "I didn't anticipate being a teacher after getting pregnant and getting married."

Connie reports her experience at Queens College:

From the moment I set foot on Queens College Campus, I knew that I wasn't leaving there until I got a degree. My thoughts were if they try to put me out, I'm not leaving. I don't care what.

So Connie, like Vernice was very pleased to attend college, and she made a vow to herself that she would have a degree. She apparently, felt confident that she would be able to handle the work, for she believed that she was intelligent, having internalized this thought many years ago. Connie said:

I used to visualize myself walking across the stage, picking up the degree. I used to figure out the number of credits needed, and how long it would take me to graduate. When I first started college, I didn't know what I wanted to be. I just wanted to learn and get a degree.

Connie cannot believe that she was really attending college, and that reading, which she always enjoyed, was the requirement for every class.

From the very beginning, I found the classwork interesting. It was so fascinating to me that all I could talk about all day was college. The topics and issues were so exciting.

Connie was a suitable candidate for attending college. Her love of learning and reading combined with her high motivation enabled her to succeed.

I initially started going to college one night during the week after work and on Saturday mornings. It was difficult because I worked full time in the day, and my daughter Laura was almost a year old, and still in diapers. She went to a babysitter, who lived in the apartment above me. When I went to work, the following day, I would give out all the knowledge that I had received from school. I was so excited that I convinced many of my friends to join me in college.

It was necessary for an individual in Connie's position as a single parent with few resources to be highly motivated. Lacking that drive, they would not succeed. Since Connie was already a mother, there were many things that it was necessary for her to do regardless of the school work.

I was in the SEEK Program. This program was set up for disadvantaged minorities to enter college. The teachers in the program were so special, very giving, nurturing, and encouraging to the students. I didn't exactly have a plan in mind, but I knew that education would help me to accomplish whatever plan I came up with.

It was hard though for me. Queens College had the best students of the City University. In addition, I had never learned most of the stuff that they were teaching because I had a commercial high school diploma. Financially, things were tough. I received fifty dollars a week for Laura and me to live off. Occasionally, my daughter's father gave a little money. But despite it all, college life was one of the best things that ever happened to me.

For Beverly, the experience of college was quite different from the other respondents. She was pleased to be going to college, but she did not find the teachers or counselors interested in her. She had to seek out information on her own. No one tried to engage her, and guide her in the right direction. She found that most of the teachers were very negative, and her counselors were not helpful to her. She felt like an outsider, but was determined to remain in college.

Like Beverly, Roberta found that her experience in college was not very satisfying. She felt alienated and although she had attended school with whites previously in high school, somehow these white students seemed different. Roberta attended Pace University, and the difference in the white student body can probably be attributed to the class factors. Roberta and another friend went to Pace together and she noted that the professors always gave Blacks lower grades and criticized their writing. In high school she was one of the top students and college seemed to be a disaffirming and devaluing experience. Fortunately, for Roberta, she was a mature African American female who focused on her goal and was clear about not leaving the university until she had accomplished her goal. As Roberta explained,

Although I didn't like college, I knew that I had to finish. The courses were boring. Between me and the professors, there was no relationship. But just knowing that I needed that degree in order to do something with my life kept me going.

Another respondent, Sandra, tells of earning her associate's degree first.

I went to school for three days, and worked in the office for two days. Then afterwards, I started to do outreach, running parents groups, and giving service back to Wilwyck. I got my degree from the College for Human Services. After this, I stopped and worked for Wilwyck School for Boys till 1974. When I heard about a job at Lincoln Hospital, I went there and then decided to get my B.A. at Adelphi University. I did that for two years, and then I stopped.

Sandra was acquiring her education in stages, and enjoying the growth process.

She continued to care for her family, work and attend college.

The college work was a breeze. I did very well because I had the practicum already, and now I had the theory to go with it. Going to school was very easy. There were students that were snobs, and they wouldn't work in certain areas. They were racist, but it didn't bother me because I came there to get my degree.

Sandra was focused and goal directed. Her life experience made her more advanced than the white students that she encountered in her classes. Her self confident had increased and she surprised herself with what she accomplished.

Another respondent, Naomi, considered herself fortunate because she had two professors who mentored her. She viewed her college experiences as enjoyable and she had little difficulty with the academic work.

I started college in 1970 and finished in three and a half years. I tried to do it in three, but one of my professors said that I was doing too much. But when you are older, and more goal directed, as I was, I didn't have the time to waste. I was a mother, and a wife, so I did it in three and a half years.

Naomi's mentors failed to realize that she had been waiting patiently for between nine and ten years to attend college; consequently, she was in a hurry to move forward. It was understandable that she was eager and felt that she did not want to waste any more time.

I remembered that I was elated when I went to college. I was twenty seven. And even though I had gotten pregnant, and married, I never gave up my vision of going to college.

Naomi's grandmother taught her the value of pursuing success through acquiring a college education. Her granddaughter internalized these values and had high expectations of herself.

I liked college, but I did not find it intellectually challenging. It was a lot of work. I did very well. It did not stretch me. The only course that I felt did, was a philosophy course. I like the ideal of using your brain.

Naomi reflects on the professors, who mentored her.

There was one professor whom I loved dearly, Henry Turner. We talked a lot about sociology. He hired me as his research assistant. At that time, he was in a doctoral program. He had a very good friend, Anthony Johnson, another sociologist. Because I visited Henry, and had long discussions, Anthony and I used to talk also. Anthony forced me to think, because of the discourse and discussion. There was a Professor Pitts, who was very professional, and she was a Black woman with a Ph.D. I gravitated toward Blacks with Ph.D.'s.

Not only did Naomi have mentors, but they were young African American professors, who were interested in encouraging other minorities to move ahead. So, Naomi identified with her professors and felt she could follow in their footsteps.

Frances, like the other respondents, was happy to have the opportunity to attend college. She had no difficulty with the academic work that was required of her. She states:

When I went to get my master's, this man was telling us that we would have to go to Garden City, and it would be mostly white. I felt like he was trying to tell us that we couldn't do it. We went out there, and we knew more than the white students. I always felt that common sense takes you a long ways. If I don't understand, I'm going to ask questions. It didn't bother me at all going out there, except that it was so far. I left in the dark, and returned in the dark.

Frances tells about her friend, Sandra, who went to college at the same time. This was significant for Frances and Sandra have traveled the road to achievement together as they were selected by the agency to attend college. Throughout, they were

a source of mutual support. This enabled both of them to feel connected with someone and to know that they were not alone in this endeavor.

Another respondent Natalie, tells us of her first application to college, being rejected, re-applying and being accepted.

I was so excited about going to college and about reading all of those books. I started college in the SEEK Program in 1970. When I saw it was a fat envelope from SEEK, then I knew that I had been accepted. I told my boss that I was leaving my job in September because I was accepted in college. My boss said I rather have you part time than somebody else full time.

Natalie had support from her job. Her boss recognized that Natalie would need money, and so she arranged for her to keep the job part time. Consequently, Natalie did not have the concern about money issues, which can have a detrimental effect upon the experience of attending college.

It was the happiest time of my life. The teachers were nice. I had some mentors at school because I was an older student, and they took an interest in me. One of them was Dr. Brown who showed me how education could be used as a liberation tool, rather than as personal enrichment. At that time, it was all about commitment to your community.

Theresa states that college opened up a new world for her.

I first went to school one night a week and Saturday mornings. By this time, my mother and I were not getting along. I then left my job, to go to college full time. I was determined to make it. It was like a new life. I left home, had my own place and was in school.

Theresa reveals that she was scared.

I had doubts about my ability. I think the teachers were special in how they taught us. They helped us build up our self confidence and let us know that we were as good as the other students.

I had an art teacher who gave me a different perspective. I said to her, I can't do art, and she showed me that I could. And I came away with the idea that there wasn't anything I couldn't do. Maybe you may not be the best, but if you try, you could do it.

For most of these women, however, pursuing a college degree was a wonderful phenomenon. They were excited, scared, but happy to be involved in this. While they were in college, all but three of the respondents had children that they were rearing at the same time. Only one of them had a husband to help them with the children, financially or emotionally.

It appears that because of their added burdens, these African American women were goal directed, and focused on the importance of earning their college degree. So unlike many of their peers, they did not become involved in many of the extra curricular activities or any of the self defeating behaviors such as drug use, cutting classes, and playing cards in the lunchroom all day. They were in a hurry, and felt the urgency to graduate, and secure a job. Some of the respondents' children were already attending school, and money was very scarce. Still and all, the majority of the respondents state that they enjoyed the college experience, which involved building friendships and expanding their world.

### SOCIAL SUPPORTS

A social support system was important in helping these Black women accomplish the goal of acquiring higher education. As Myers defines it, a social support system consists of "...those helping agents or individuals within their environment whom Black women identify as those who provide social support and feedback involving problems or during periods of crisis" (Myers, 1980, p.26). Supports came in various forms for them. For some of them such as Connie and Lydia, the emotional support of family and good friends were important. For others, there was less family support but there were good friends. Still for others, there was a need for them to give, rather than the families being able to give to them. Oftentimes,

for working class families who are barely able to survive there is little to give in terms of financial resources; however, emotional support is a significant gift and many gave this.

Rubie Malone, in her dissertation study, identifies four categories of support that are needed by, what she terms, the "disadvantaged student" in order to perform well in college. They are:

1. Emotional support - encouragement, sense of personal worth, understanding and emotional tolerance
2. Social support - shared leisure, social skills, setting to entertain college friends, conversation
3. Financial support - tuition, carfare, school supplies, clothing, room and board
4. Informational support - financial planning, college choice, academic decisions (Malone, 1982, p.26).

Malone found that the urban living conditions created barriers to family support, when compared with the rural experience. For example, small, cramped living space made it difficult to take in extra relatives, as it was possible in the South. The high cost of living and joblessness, placed resources at a premium and caused some families to feel resentment when one individual was pursuing a college education rather than working.

She points out that working class African American students must have family support as well as non-family support in order to make it. According to Malone, "Children in disadvantaged families are thus socialized to expect help from persons other than blood kin" (Malone, 1982, p.99). This has great importance for African American college students, whose families often do not have the funds to meet emergencies; consequently, they must often look beyond the immediate family for the

support needed. However, she notes, "There is no denying the importance of family and non-family support "(Malone, 1982, p.101).

Connie talks about the supportive role that her mother and brother played in her life during the years she attended college.

Even though they didn't know that much about college, if anything. They would help me out with my daughter, sometimes keeping her, or picking her up from the babysitter, or coming out to pick me up from school. Most important, they were interested in listening to everything that I was learning in college. I was so excited about learning, and I brought it all back to my family.

Connie in relaying her story now, states that,

I never thought of it then, but I guess, they were proud of me. I was the only one that they were really close with that had attended college. So, I think it did a lot for their own feelings about themselves, because I always wanted to share everything that I read or that the teachers told me. I think my brother was starving to learn new things also. In any case, they gave me what I needed.

Connie's relationship with her family was a reciprocal one, in that she was further encouraged and motivated by them, and they were encouraged and inspired knowing that someone in the family was moving toward achievement. They were invested in her success. Connie also states:

I also had girlfriends. My best friend, Natalie and six or seven other females were mighty important in my life. In addition, I always had a large extended family around me. That helped a lot. We discussed everything. When I felt down or just plain tired, I could go to my friends or family. Without that I don't know if I could have made it.

In addition, Connie reports that her neighbors helped with the babysitting, which was a major support for her.

Lydia reports:

My mother was thrilled when I went to college. She was very supportive. Many nights when I stayed up to study, she would stay up with me, and keep after me because sometimes I would fall asleep.

Here Lydia's mother provided support by just being with her daughter and Lydia was satisfied with this arrangement.

Theresa reports:

I think my friends helped me make it through more than my family. My family didn't understand what I was going through, so they couldn't help me. My family was helpful in a financial way. Anything I needed for them to do such as babysitting, or time out they would do. The pressure is a lot. I couldn't go to my mother and sit down with a problem. Even about my child, I didn't really discuss with her. I would call a friend first about any problems with Judie.

For some respondents, their families had little to offer in terms of financial and emotional support. Natalie's family was often in crisis, and it was necessary for her to stabilize their situation. Natalie's significant other-investor, Aunt Lucy was still around, and offered her emotional support. But many times, Natalie had to lean on the support of close friends, who became like family to her. Despite Natalie's family problems, she continued to attend college and work part time.

Frances tells about the support she received from her friend Sandra, who was also going to college with her.

It made a difference having someone go through the program with you. That helped a lot. I think we really pulled each other. A lot of times, we didn't want to go, and there was another person saying, 'come on, let's go.' As hard as it was, it was much easier because we did it together. It made it easier having a partner. I probably would have done it but it made it easier. And one time, she left, and went back to school before me, and got her B.A. Once I saw her go, then I said if Sandra can do it, then I better get up off my ass and get mine. She motivated me.

Naomi was married when she attended college, and she reports her husband was supportive of this. Yet, Naomi states:

He had barely made it out of high school, so I could not have discussions with him because it would have been a one way conversation.

Most of the respondents could not have made it without some support. For they faced the same problems as their families, namely, child care problems, housing problems, economic problems, as well as college problems.

In the colleges, the respondents were assigned counselors. They found that most often the counselors were well intentioned white middle class people who did not understand the problems and issues that these students faced. Since these respondents were the first of their families to attend college, they did not know the right questions to ask.

### CONCLUSION

All of the respondents were enthusiastic about the opportunity to pursue a college degree. The respondents faced many problems, as well as had many victories, coping with their new experiences. Their expectations were high, and they felt privileged to attend college.

There were two respondents that did not find the experience satisfying, although all of them were able to earn their degrees. These two respondents felt that their professors did not have a real interest in them because of their race. They felt isolated and alone on the campus.

The other respondents were initially nervous because none of them had attended college before, but as they continued through college, they began to understand what was expected of them, and how to accomplish their objectives.

Despite their elation over the experience, some of them faced difficulty with the academic work, and this was because most of them had not received academic preparation for college in high school. Still, they had the intelligence to do the work, and although, they probably had to work harder, the respondents were certainly up to the task.

Still another important factor that weighed favorably for these particular respondents is the period of time in which they attended college. They attended during the late sixties and early seventies, primarily except for one respondent, Roberta. The sixties was a period in American society, whereby opportunities were forced to open up to African Americans. Moreover, the issues that were the major concerns of the society were directly related to the lives and experiences of this population. It was a time when "Black was Beautiful" and poor people's issues were at the top of the agenda. It was a time of great affirmation and cultural identification with Africa for African Americans, and still later, the women's movement came into being.

As a result, these respondents were able to study and analyze the forces that impacted on their daily lives. This debate in the larger society gave validity to the personal experiences of these women, and added to their sense of personal self worth. This in turn, increased their coping skills in dealing with the stresses and inequalities in the society.

The respondents, now, had an analytical framework for explaining what had happened to African Americans, to their particular families, and what was presently happening to them. For the first time in their lives, they were able to look ahead and make choices based upon greater options than most of the people they knew. It was a time in which it appeared that liberation and transformation were not only possible, but that they would be occurring shortly. The possibilities of life were endless. That was the times that the respondents were educated in and this contributed to their ability to remain focused with their "eyes on the prize."

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES/RACISM/ADVICE TO OTHERS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will present the respondents' reflections on some life experiences and their views on racism and sexism. These experiences helped the respondents to develop their identity, consciousness, and their problem solving skills. This chapter will also include advice from the respondents to African American females that are planning to achieve through higher education.

#### **SIGNIFICANT LIFE EXPERIENCES**

Some sociologists point out that life experiences can have a dramatic effect on some individual lives (Williams and Kornblum, 1985). In telling their life stories, there were some life experiences that seemed to have a profound effect upon the direction of the respondents' lives. For some, it was the choice of a particular friend, who introduced them to something new; for others, going to a high school in another borough expanded their world; and still for others, reading a book, which had an impact on a particular decision made. All of the respondents had some incident that occurred and when they chanced to look back, they noted that certain key decisions were made that had significant influence on the direction of their lives.

For example, in the life of Connie, the family traveled a great deal from the South to the North, from New York City to North Carolina. As a result, she was discharged and admitted to different schools frequently. She learned to make new friends quickly, and since being at the head of her class was important to her, she had to catch on quickly to the school work. Her ability to be flexible and adapt to changes

was enhanced during this period. She also gained confidence from this experience and felt that she could keep up with any educational group.

Naomi reflects on the close relationship between her and her grandmother, and also how she helped her grandmother with financial affairs. Naomi states:

I took care of my grandmother's banking. She taught me about that. She made no money, you can imagine what it was working in a laundry. She saved, and I would go to the bank with the money. She had a savings account. Not much, believe you me, but it was just the fact that she was saving. I also knew that in some ways, I was her little bookkeeper, because everyone borrowed money but it was my responsibility to go and get the money back. She would send little notes for me to collect.

Through this experience, Naomi developed capabilities to take charge and manage money and other things. She learned there is value in saving, even in small amounts. In addition, Naomi knew that her grandmother fully expected her to perform well and, as a result, have a better way of life.

Sometimes, speaking with a person can have a profound effect on their lives. Of course, at the particular instance, the individual may be unaware of the great significance. The respondent, Sandra, recalls that there was a social worker, who helped her in high school. She said to me:

Sandra, you can do anything; you just got to believe in yourself. If others come along and believe in you, that's fine, and they will. But you must first believe in yourself. If there's something you want, you go after it.

Sandra reports that these words often came back to her as she traveled through life. It was only later in life that the words took on great significance to her.

Theresa talks about the experience of going with her mother to do domestic work. She was initially surprised at how different and how well the white people were living in comparison to her life situation.

I always saw my mother working and working. I didn't think that was fair. I got angry because she made me go and help her. We went to the co-ops that my mother's old ladies lived in. They were in walking distance of where we lived. My mother used to clean and do the laundry. My mother would leave me to do the cleaning, while she was doing the wash. When she finished the wash, then she would let me go.

Theresa was very angry about the work that her mother had to do. She hoped that she would never have to perform those type of duties.

Another respondent, Lydia, states that the environment she grew up in made her aware of the type of life she did not want for herself. Lydia states:

When I was growing up, I saw how the men treated the women, and I didn't want that. I didn't want to become like the women in the neighborhood, going from man to man, and I knew that they didn't have much education, and that's why they depended on men for everything. I just knew that my destiny would not be determined by a man. I knew that I had to do for myself. The women did not have control of their lives.

Lydia was very clear about how her life was not going to be. She looked around for ways to ensure that she would not end up like those around her. Her mother was supportive of her attitude, and encouraged Lydia to perform well in school.

Roberta reports on an incident that occurred in her life when she was in Junior High School. At the time, the family was living in Brooklyn. Roberta got into a fight in school, and was thrown out. Roberta states:

I had to go to court and everything, and the only thing that saved me was I was a good student. My mother had moved to Queens during this period. I was about twelve, and staying with my aunt.

After the incident, Roberta states that she went to live with her mother in Queens, and attended a Junior High School over there. From there, she attended Forest Hills High School. In looking back, Roberta feels that this move made all the difference in the direction of her life.

The influence of the environment is powerful. When I got to high school, I got involved with track, and volley ball. I became senior class secretary. Getting involved with activities kept me going.

Roberta highlighted the fact that the negative environment led her to trouble, whereas the more positive environment engaged her in activities that promoted her growth and development.

For Beverly, the event that is prominent in her memory was attending an elementary school, whose population was mostly white children. She recalls that everyday after school, she and her siblings were chased home by the white students. One day, they decided to stop running, and fought back. Beverly reports that immediately the school called her mother to inform her that they were fighting. Beverly states her mother stood up for them, and told the school that they had not said anything when the white children were attempting to beat them, therefore, they didn't have anything to say now.

This incident gave Beverly a view of how the society viewed African Americans, and that you must have courage and fight back. From her mother, Beverly received the message that one must fight for the right to exist if necessary.

Vernice tells about her mother's job as a domestic which stimulated her to think about different types of roles in later life. Vernice states:

We did a lot of role playing. We used to play this lady named Miss Robb. She was the white lady that my mother worked for and she was rich. She had a lot of things. We had teas, and when my mother was around, she would correct us. Not that she went to Emily Post's school of Etiquette, but she worked for these rich people, and she saw us doing that stuff, and she would say, 'Oh no, its done this way.' I also used to role play being a teacher because I had decided at the age of eight that this was what I wanted to be.

This early role playing indicated an awareness of other people, and their different ways of living. The various roles that Vernice was trying out indicated that she was aware, and interested in achieving upward mobility. Vernice was aware that

the people who employed her mother were from a higher socio-economic group, although she was unable to verbalize this thought.

Melinda recalls that she had to do all kinds of work to support her and the two children. She worked hard during the week, and felt that she had to party on the weekend just to forget the past week. She states that she could not have made it during the week, if she did not keep in mind that the weekend relief was coming. Initially, she had only unskilled positions in factories or was doing (domestic) day's work and later she was able to pass the test for the Post Office position. She felt that this was the first time that she had a secure and decent job. However, soon after, she realized that the Post Office position was demoralizing and physically demanding. This resulted in many workers drinking on the job.

Melinda states that she became aware during this period of the racism that occurred on the jobs. She was uneducated at that time, but she noticed that whenever a job consisted of mostly Black workers, the individual had to work hard, and there were few benefits. If the job consisted of mostly white workers, then there were many fringe benefits to the job. She gave an example of working in a film developing company, and initially it was seemed as a skilled occupation. Most of the workers were white. Melinda recalls how they used to receive large bonuses for the holidays. They were always paid before the holidays and got off from work early on those occasions. A few years later, most of the white workers were gone and the majority of the workers were Black. Melinda states that the company began to give turkeys instead of monetary bonuses. There were times that they did not receive their pay until after the holiday with the boss saying, "You might not come in if I pay you before the holiday." In addition, Melinda states the work load increased immensely. Many of the fringe benefits were changed or taken away completely. Melinda concludes that

something was wrong and when there were few whites working at a job, the working conditions deteriorated.

Two of the respondents, Theresa and Connie report that when they were ready to go to college full time that many people felt that they should not leave their "good jobs" with the Insurance Company. Connie states:

As much as my father always told me that I would be somebody in life, when I told him that I was quitting my job to go to school full time, he was very upset. And he said, "don't you quit that good job!" But I said, "Daddy, I'm going to college," and he said, "It don't make sense to leave a good job."

Connie reports that it made her think more about what she was doing. And then, she went to her mother and brother, and they said, "Go on and take a chance. It probably will work out." The importance of having someone that you trust to encourage you when you doubt yourself cannot be denied. Connie seemed to feel that she was taking the right direction, but it was difficult because she was the first one in the family to travel that road. Although her father was her significant other-investor, his life had been so difficult in regard to obtaining a decent job, that he did not want Connie to gamble what she already had for something that she was hoping to acquire.

This was indeed, a significant period in her life for if she had not taken the opportunity, she would have remained at the Insurance Company for the rest of her working career. If one did not take the chance at a young age, it was unlikely that later in life, they would do so.

Theresa reports that when she informed her mother that she was going to school full time, and would be leaving the Insurance Company, she was horrified. She seemed to think that Theresa had "taken leave of her senses." Theresa stated, "I tried to explain it to her, but she didn't seem to understand. It made me question myself a little, but I saw that my friend, Connie was in the same situation that I was, a single parent with a baby, and she was making it." I thought to myself, "I can do it too."

This too, was a turning point for Theresa, whereby she had to make a commitment to the idea of attending college and finishing. It meant that she had to embrace her dream, and work toward making it happen. She had to assume responsibility for her own dream. Theresa and Connie were entering a world whereby, their relatives could not advise and direct their movements for it was unknown territory to them.

In the life of Natalie, when she was nineteen, she decided to move into her own apartment. This was a period of time in which most young women remained at home, until they were married. However, in Natalie's case, she had been given the responsibility of the household, while her mother continued to deal with her drinking problem. At times, her mother would not pay the rent. Natalie began to experience health problems, which her doctor related to the stress and strain that she was experiencing from her home situation. As a result of the doctor's strong recommendation that she should have her own place, Natalie decided to move. When she informed her grandmother of this decision, she used every method that she could to change Natalie's mind. However, Natalie stood firm.

It was clear that to stand up to her grandmother took a great deal of courage, for everyone listened to her grandmother. Natalie noted that if she had not acted at that particular moment in time, she would have been stuck forever in the role of caretaker.

These significant life experiences helped to increase the respondents' level of maturity, and helped to develop necessary problem solving skills which aided them in making critical decisions. In addition to the respondents' significant life experiences, the racial situation in the United States added to their knowledge base and increased their level of consciousness.

## RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES

The respondents shared some of their experiences in regard to racism. Many of the women verbalized concerns about the African American life, and what would happen to them as a group. They saw the class issues surfacing, and that the number of Blacks who were poor would continue to increase. They were concerned that there were too few other African Americans, and in particular, African American women, that were following in their paths. One major issue that was consistently mentioned was the racism they always struggled against.

As Connie states:

Racism has had a major impact on my life. I believe that if I was not an African American, then I would have gone to college immediately, and would have been a professor by now or an artist. Due to the limitations of race, combined with poverty, there are many areas that I would have discovered earlier.

In my opinion, things for African Americans in the future will continue to get worse for them as a group. As individuals, some Blacks will continue to achieve, and make financial progress. Those Blacks who are at the bottom will probably remain there. Those Blacks who are middle-class will continue to prosper. Class issues will continue to intrude in the lives of African Americans, and they will have to face this.

Another respondent Naomi talks about her early experiences with racism.

I applied to Hunter College and City College from high school. I was wait listed at City. I learned that they didn't take me because the preference was for Jewish men. I didn't get into Hunter either. I felt that I didn't belong. I was the only Black having tea at Hunter. All these white women were perfectly attired with the white gloves. When I think about it, that was class at work. I said no way, but I didn't get in.

So I went to my counselor in high school, as the FBI came to do a presentation for working with them, as a clerical person. The criteria was a B or better average, and that you planned to go to college. They would pay for you to go at night. I had an A average; I went to the counselor, a white counselor, because you needed your counselor to recommend you before you could apply. I told the counselor that I couldn't go away to school because there was no money, but that I

wanted to apply to the FBI. She told me that I was not qualified and that she couldn't write this letter for me. Later, I found out that there were whites and very fair complexioned Puerto Ricans who were recommended. I had the FBI investigate the school. I wrote a letter to them saying that I thought I was qualified, and they came out, investigated, and agreed with me. I knew this was discrimination.

Early on, Naomi was aware of racism and had decided that when it intruded in her life directly, she would deal with it. Her self esteem was high and she dared to challenge the school.

Connie's family was from the South and they traveled back and forth frequently. She recalls traveling to the South on the Greyhound Bus and after the bus reached the southern states, the family had to move to seats in the back of the bus. She recalls that many times on the trip down, they were not permitted to use the rest rooms in the restaurants, and they had to go behind the buildings to relieve themselves. Connie recalls that there were separate schools for Black and white children.

These experiences made Connie aware of the struggle that Black people had to face and the need for Blacks to put forth effort to change things.

Although all respondents felt that racism impacted on their lives, one felt less strongly than others. Sandra states:

I think what mostly impacted on me, yes, I know the system will impact on you, but I felt that if I could have had things happened for me, the way I figured things should have happened. I think that the family is most important. The family telling them who they are, and that you can do something. My own self esteem, which came from the family was low. I don't think racism had anything to do with it. Racism wasn't the major focal point for me.

Sandra's family situation was so devastating to her that racism was not seen as a major problem. Her father's mental problems affected the entire household.

If racism did not intrude upon these women lives at a young age, it usually impacted upon them when they graduated from high school and had to assume a role in the larger society.

Theresa shares an experience that happened to her after high school graduation.

When I graduated from high school, and was looking for a job, I couldn't understand why I as a high school graduate had to go to work in a factory. It didn't last long, and then I ended up at the Insurance Company. My family felt that I had made it. In the factories, there were all kinds of people working there, and we were all treated like shit! I felt that I didn't belong there because I considered myself educated. I had a high school diploma. I don't think that the rest did.

Many of the Black high school graduates were not able to secure better positions than other Blacks who did not have a high school diploma. This was due to racism.

When Naomi graduated from high school, she faced a similar incident with regard to racism.

My aunt worked for some very wealthy white people. One of whom was the Ambassador of England. It was the Timberman family. The matriarch of the family invited me to lunch, and to pick up my graduation gift. She lived on fifth Avenue in the eighties. I arrived at the appointed hour, lunch. The doorman insisted that I use the servants entrance. I asked, "Did I look like I was delivering anything." I said, "I don't work here; I am having lunch with Mrs. Timberman." When he went to open the taxi for someone, I went on up. He came back and was about to give me hell, and Mrs. Timberman asked him what was going on. She gave it to him, and I didn't have to open my mouth.

One of the respondents, Frances spoke about growing up in the South Bronx, and being in a Black world only.

So, when you are young, ten blocks away seems very long. So I went to Fordham to buy an ice cream cone, and this lady would not wait on me. It was like I was invisible. She did not acknowledge me. I stood for fifteen minutes. I turned around and walked out.

In the sixties and seventies, I was a very angry woman. I started hating white people with a passion. When I got into the field, I started taking them on an individual basis. They are not all bad, but I still have a lot of animosity for the things that go on. I read a lot. When I went to college, I took Black history courses, and I learned what we did. I remember when I got my Afro. I felt good.

Beverly states that Blacks continue to face a difficult time in this country. She feels that there are still many whites that are interested in doing harm to Black people, and the media projects negative images about Blacks. She feels that Blacks in other parts of the world don't really want to be with us. Beverly states, "We should be pulling together, instead of pulling apart. We have a slave mentality."

Another respondent, Natalie states her views regarding African Americans.

I think our future is grim. People are saying that they don't know what to do. If you look at leadership from the left to the right, they kill everybody. We need an economic system, where equity is at the center. There is enough in this country to provide decent housing, and food. So it is a matter of political will. It is not about resources; it is about the distribution of resources, and who gets what. Tied to the question of distribution is the question of criteria, and women and children are on the margins. I think we are going to split along the color line for the future.

These women had to cope with the stresses of academia, as well as the stresses of being single parents, and being economically impoverished. Many of them were receiving public assistance, which often closed their cases for no apparent reasons. In addition, racism was a constant in their lives, and they had to learn to function with all of the stresses and strains.

#### ADVICE TO OTHER AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES

The respondents were asked about the advice, they would give to other young working class African American females. The respondent Connie states:

I would say to them, decide on what you want to do, and then find out everything you can about the process. Read, ask questions and then pursue whatever it is. As a philosopher, Joseph Campbell put it, "Follow your bliss."

Another respondent states:

You have to be determined and have it in you. Once you are determined, you don't let anyone stop you. You have to be focused and determined no matter what happens in your life. You must have faith in God.

As would be expected, many of the respondents felt that earning a college education was the best way to achieve upward mobility. They had been successful with this, and felt that parents should begin early to prepare their children for going to college.

Vernice offered this piece of advice.

I would tell her to be strong, and think with her intellect, not with emotions about personal relationships. Don't let your emotions about men over take your intellect. Don't let a man that you are emotionally involved with interfere with your good judgment. You cry if he doesn't come over, if he doesn't call, but don't let that interfere with your goals.

Finally, Naomi adds that there must be an early beginning to the preparation for children moving in the direction of college. She always suggests this to parents that she encounters.

I am talking to parents now about college. I tell them that it is not enough to say that your child passed, how did he pass, and how well did he do. Talk to someone who went to college. It is never too early to ask about college.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter illustrates some of the experiences that individuals face growing up as Black, female and poor. The struggle to survive and make sense out of a world had to be a major preoccupation for these females. The majority of them had significant other-investors, intelligence and the desire to achieve; still, however, there was a lot to overcome if they were to achieve any upward mobility.

## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **CONCLUSION AND SOCIAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will present a summary of the findings. As stated previously, this study is descriptive and it does not purport to draw conclusions about all working class African American females. It does, however, attempt to shed light on the process of acquiring higher education based on these case studies. In addition, these findings can be used to point to the direction that further research is needed. The findings from this study enabled the researcher to generate a model that encapsulates the factors needed for the respondents to be able to acquire higher education. Based upon this discussion, the researcher will recommend social policy changes.

#### **SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSIS**

Drawing on the discussions from the previous chapters, and the life history interviews, this study found that these working class African American females were able to move in the direction of higher education because of the four factors hypothesized previously, namely:

1. A significant other-investor--A person who contributes to an individual's development of a positive sense of self. Having a sense of self enables the individual to be able to function in a productive way in society. An individual must have a feeling of capability, an assurance that they are as intelligent as the others around them, and that they are valued. The significant other-investor is able to envision a greater role in society than the individual can see for themselves. They must be able to give a sense of trust, and well being to the individual. This positive sense of self is given to the child by the significant other-investor and it is internalized at a young age.

2. Moral or religious foundation--The child needs a frame of reference that will place value on education and moving ahead. In addition, they need a belief system that encourages them to push forward even when there are problems that develop. In particular the African American female needs to have a belief system that is supportive of her everyday reality.
3. A positive early school experience-- Having a positive early learning experience gives the child the expectation of being able to achieve, and feeling confident in her ability. This encourages interest in further learning. The relationship with the teacher becomes important for in the child's life, the teacher is a significant other.
4. A structural opportunity--A government sponsored opportunity must exist for the individuals who are ready to move toward higher education.

The researcher found that a significant other-investor did not have to be present early in the individual's life to effect a change. There were two respondents who did not have an significant other-investor until later in life. Despite this, the significant other-investor was able to move them in a positive direction. The majority of the respondents in this study were fortunate that they were able to acquire significant other-investors early in life.

In addition, all of the respondents had positive feelings about their school experiences. As a result, the idea of returning to school for further education did not activate unpleasant associations.

The respondents' peer relationships did not appear to be as strong as the usual adolescent relationships. In two cases, the respondents were very close to their peers, and followed the path that the peer was involved with such as a group of three girls becoming pregnant around the same time. In another instance, a peer engaged in drinking and being truant from school, and the respondent followed the direction of the peer. Still for the most part, the respondents were not very involved in adolescent group activities.

Interestingly, the community seemed to offer the respondents a feeling of security, warmth and comfort. The respondents were aware of the crime, drugs and violence that could be found in their community but they were not forced or enticed to be a part of this. When the community recognizes that some individuals are attempting to lead a different type of life, the community will often support such an effort, and no attempts to lead them into a destructive direction will be made. There was one respondent whose mother was involved in illegal activity, and so this respondent was more knowledgeable about the negative aspects of the community than the other respondents. Basically, the respondents saw the community as home to them, and most of the time, they were not worried about the dangers that were nearby.

Also, the research data showed that the respondents started college at a later age than the traditional college student; however, this did not seem to have a negative impact. In fact, it appeared to have a positive result in that the respondents were focused, highly motivated, and did not drop out of college. The majority of the respondents had other roles that they were fulfilling as they attended college such as being mothers. This was, indeed, a difficult position for them to be in as most of them were single parents. Still, however, it gave them great incentive to complete their schooling as soon as possible.

### **MODEL FOR SUCCESS**

The researcher has developed a model which depicts the factors necessary for the respondents to achieve. The model is called the African American Female's Socialization for Success (AAFSS), and it depicts the influences on her, and the four factors previously mentioned that promote the attainment of success.

## African American Female's Socialization for Success

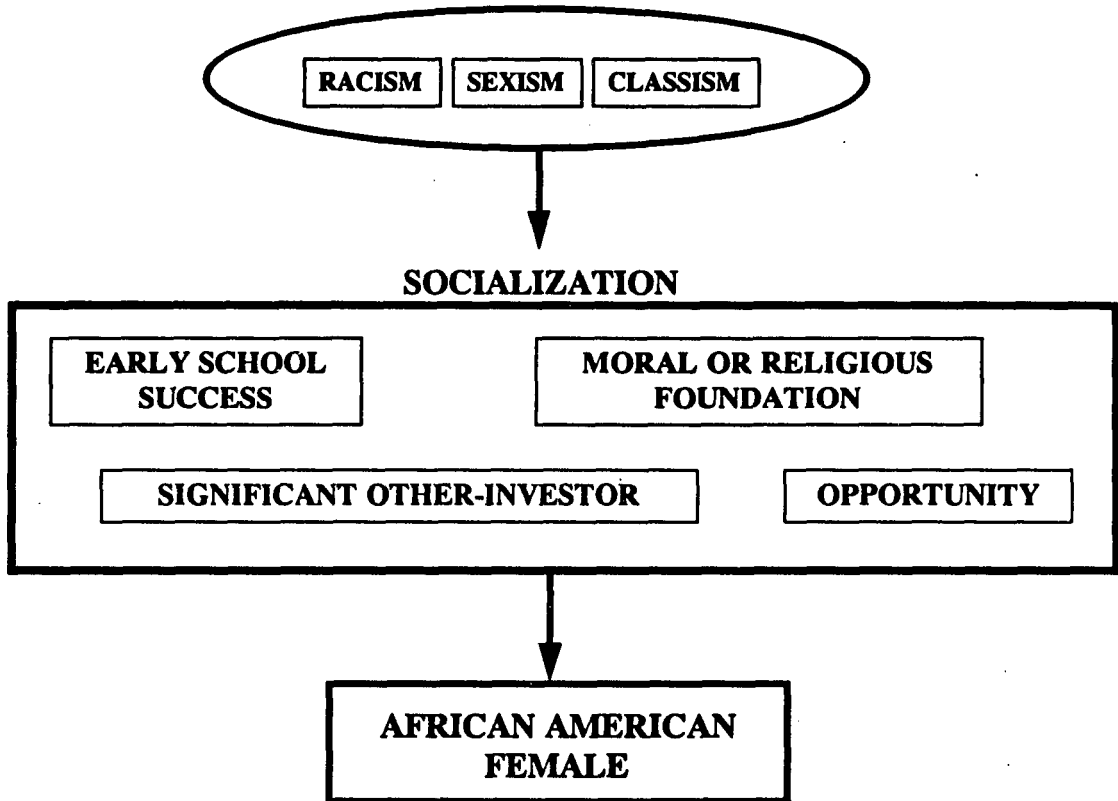


Figure 3

If the individual has three of the four factors needed, and is not given the fourth factor which is opportunity, then it is unlikely that the individual will be able to achieve. It is essential that an opportunity is given. However, when there is an opportunity, there must also be a supportive network whether it is an individual, group or a belief system such as religion. Those individuals who do not have a sense of capability or a positive sense of self, when an opportunity presents itself, they do not take advantage of it.

There are other individual cases in which by the time the opportunity presented itself, their life circumstances did not permit them to take advantage of it. One of the respondents attended a commercial high school, and consequently, did not have the appropriate high school courses to attend college. She decided to make up the courses

in night school. She needed three years of math, three years of science and social studies. She was highly motivated; however, it is unlikely that she would have made up all of the courses because of the length of time involved. She was fortunate enough so that the SEEK program came along. So, one can say that it is a dynamic interplay between a multiplicity of factors such as a sense of self given by the significant other-investor, intelligence, moral foundation, societal opportunity and luck. Other researchers support the idea that family interactions and school experiences have a positive and a direct impact upon the achievement of individuals (Clark, 1983; White and Parham, 1990).

Most of the women faced the same problems as they moved through elementary and secondary schools, they were tracked into non-academic programs which did not permit them to attend college without making up the required courses.

After the women were enrolled in the colleges, they still faced the same or greater economic problems. They had to concern themselves with the problems of caring for a child's needs, as well as providing the proper childcare arrangements. This group also did not have a sufficient amount of information regarding the college process, and how to survive in a college environment. Most of them had counselors, but found that oftentimes, they did not give them the necessary information.

For the most part, the majority of the families were supportive in an emotional way, and also in sometimes being able to offer babysitting services for no fee. Still, the families were not able to be helpful in regard to the various college experiences because these students were the first of their families to attend college. Connie reports that after she started college, she asked her brother to attend a college class with her one day, so that he could see and understand the experience she was having. Connie states, "I was hoping that I might induce him to return to college." She felt that he was much brighter than she was. It was only much later, on reflection, that she realized that he could not attend college for the same reasons that many other African

Americans were unable to attend. He had married young, and was the father of four young children. He had a job, as a long distance bus driver, and consequently, spend time away from home. He could not afford to attend college, as he could not leave his position to go to college full time.

Most often though, it was the women who were supporting families, who could not afford to attend college full time. There were many other Black females that were unable to take advantage of the educational opportunities that became available in the late sixties and early seventies. Another respondent reports about a few of her peers that were very bright and did not take advantage of the opportunities that came along. She stated that she encouraged her friend Eunice to enter college. She was a young widow, and the mother of four children. The four children was not the reason that she did not attend college but going back to the model, it was clear that she did not have a significant other-investor, nor the socialization of the value of education. As a result, when the opportunity came along, Eunice was not emotionally or intellectually ready to move on it.

There were other Blacks that did not take advantage of the opportunity because long before this, they did not believe that they could achieve upward mobility through education. They had long ago given up on that dream, as they had seen educated Blacks unemployed or underemployed; consequently, they would not take a chance on what appeared to be an opportunity. White states, "The psychosocial reality of oppression based on an abundance of concrete evidence is what prevents Black children from feeling realistically confident that by putting forth a sufficient amount of effort, they have a solid chance of options" (White, 1984, p.123). This suggests that in order for an individual to take a risk, they must have some belief that things will work out in the desired way.

The Black community gives its members various strategies for coping with life, which include dealing with racism. They give to them a frame of reference in which to view and understand events that occur in terms of the Black experience. This prepares one to know that in the larger society as a Black person, one will not be affirmed, and that you must look to your family and community for this. Preparation for the experience makes a major difference in the individual's response to the behavior of racism.

In general, those African Americans women interested in achieving upward mobility must be able to function in the white dominant society. They must be prepared intellectually and psychologically to cope with their feelings about their position in society, and they must cope with the expectations and perceptions of the dominant society. Learning to balance these feelings will increase the African American females' ability to succeed in a society that does not encourage their advancement.

Interestingly, all but three of the respondents had little to say about sexism. They acknowledged that it is a man's world, but when pressed for how sexism had impacted upon their particular lives, they found it difficult to respond. From this, the researcher concluded that unlike racism, sexism is not as easily recognized for it is so ingrained in the culture and social fabric of the society, that it appears to be a normal phenomenon. The socialization experiences of these women growing up has caused them to accept many of the roles and attitudes in which society has placed women. In addition, the concept of race dominates the lives of most of these females. Another factor may be that the majority of the women are working in female dominated occupations; consequently, it is less obvious to them. It appears, also, that the respondents in the higher level positions that are male dominated, were more likely to identify sexism.

These working class African American women's life stories illustrate the amount of social understanding of the society as well as the enormous motivation and effort needed to pursue a higher education degree when one is dealing with race, gender, and class issues. In addition to the fact that they had a significant other-investor, a positive sense of self, an early positive school experience, moral or religious values, still, without the needed opportunity, they would have been unable to acquire higher education. And what would have happened to these women if at this particular moment in time, the educational structure had not opened up to allow them access? As the late great African American poet, Langston Hughes wrote:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
 Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
 Or fester like a sore--  
 And then run?  
 Does it stink like rotten meat?  
 Or crust and sugar over--  
 like a syrupy sweet?  
 Maybe it just sags  
 like a heavy load  
 Or does it explode? (Hughes, p.14)

All but one of the respondents attended college during the late sixties, and the early seventies, which was a time when many of the traditional barriers were lifted. Because these women were already socialized for achievement, as soon as the structure permitted this to occur, these women were ready to move in that direction.

This exploration of the lives of working class African American women, who succeeded affords us the opportunity to suggest the kind of interventions that would enable many other people to follow in their footsteps.

### SOCIAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important for the United States to assess their strengths and weaknesses in order to maintain their leadership role in the world. The future of a country is

dependent upon the strength and well being of the citizenry, and ultimately, the family unit. In this society, however, many families are having enormous difficulty in surviving and in the socialization of their children.

This country's citizenry must be adequately provided for in terms of food, housing, health and education. In order to do this, the United States must make a real commitment to their citizens to ensure that all families, without consideration of race, creed or religion, are able to provide their members with the needed resources. This calls for a federal policy that would place first, the needs of the citizens. As Cornel West states:

The tragic plight of our children clearly reveals our deep disregard for public well-being. About one out of every five children in this country lives in poverty, including one out of every two Black children and two out of every five Hispanic children (West, 1993, p.7).

### Intervention Plan I

My recommendation is for the creation of a federal agency called the Department of Family Entitlement. The headquarters of the department would be located in Washington, D.C., with regional offices placed around the country, and would relate to the local community based agencies that must have the responsibility for providing direct services to the people. The function of the Department of Family Entitlement would be to assist families experiencing difficulty in meeting the needs of their families. All families are entitled to this assistance if they do not have adequate resources for their households. Cornel West concurs with this recommendation, and states, "...some form of large-scale public intervention to ensure access to basic social goods--housing, food, health care, education, child care and jobs" (West, 1993, p.7). In other words, The Department of Family Entitlement would consist of six major components, namely,

1. Financial which includes guaranteed employment with an income that would support a family adequately.
2. National health program which includes preventive health care, as well on going medical, dental and mental health needs.
3. Education which starts from birth to higher education.
4. Childcare which is affordable and adequate.
5. Race and Ethnic Relations which will address their concerns.
6. Women Issues which will address their concerns.

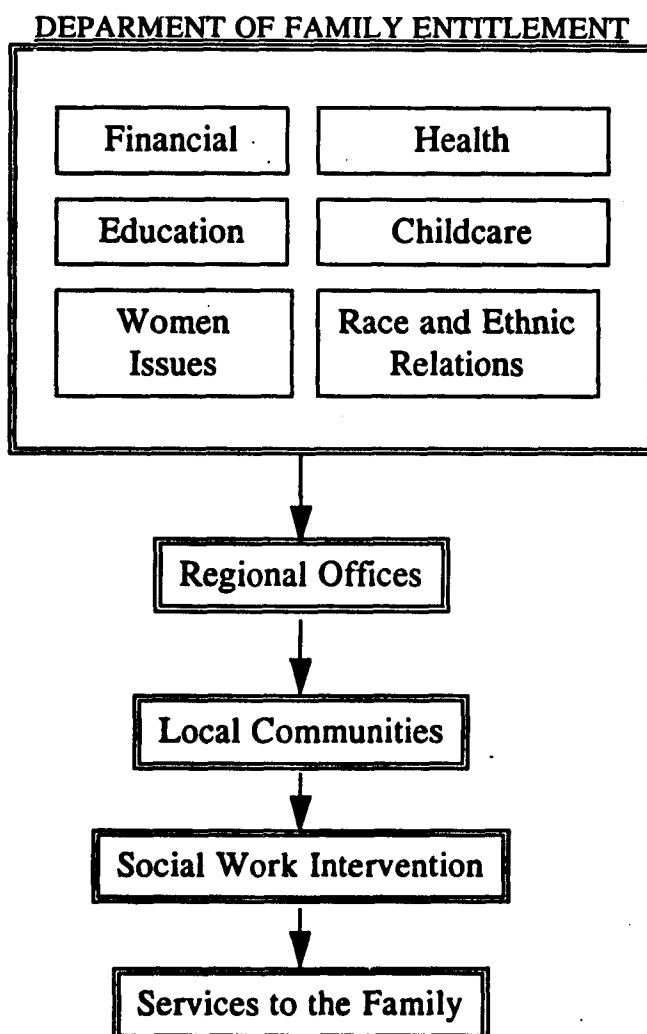


Figure 4

A massive restructuring of the Clinton Administration's priorities is necessary. In order to create the Department of Family Entitlement, sociologists and other social scientists must assess the needs of the population and generate theories and methods that would guide the functioning of the department. The department's mandate would be the enhancement of the family. There must be an interdisciplinary team to work out the necessary details for such a large scale operation that will affect all of the nation's people.

Although the program will originate from the Federal Government level, the delivery of services must occur at the community level. The people must be able to reach out directly for the services, and they must be made to feel that this is the appropriate response when the family is in need.

At the community level, there is a need for professions who are trained to work with individuals, couples, families and children in strengthening the family units, and encouraging them to move ahead in productive ways. The professionals must not only have interpersonal skills, but they must also have knowledge of the system in order to advocate on the behalf of these families.

The social work professional has the skills necessary to carry out these goals. However, there is a need for a cross section of professionals such as activists, teachers, religious groups, and civic organizations to play a role. All must be committed to helping families survive which will help the children. Helping families and children will enable the country to maintain their position in the world.

Through various referral sources as hospitals, schools, clinics and community agencies, those families requiring assistance would be identified. In addition, the family can also seek out services for themselves. Once the family is identified, a social worker will reach out to them to assess their needs and to determine how to best help them. Social workers would be involved with each aspect of the family's lives to guarantee they would receive all entitlement.

The social worker would be involved in the educational program, making sure that each child was reaching their potential, and also ensuring that those who wanted to attend college would be able to do so. In this way, the working class children would have as much opportunity opened to them as the upper class. In addition, the educational system must reflect the goals of the country by providing each student with quality education, regardless of their economic class background. With such a system in place, no child would be left out because of the lack of educational opportunity or because no one gave them the necessary information to move in that direction.

To implement such a policy, there must be a political will for this to occur. Consequently, a national ideology based on a moral foundation must begin the process. It must be a stated policy that everyone must share equally in the resources of the country, regardless of their personal characteristics such as race, religion or gender.

If the society is to intervene to help more African Americans achieve, then they must start when the child is young. On a macro-level, the society must be restructured so that the wealth of the country is distributed equally among all American citizens. This position leads to justice and equality in the society.

### Intervention Plan II

This intervention is being recommended in the event that the first intervention plan is not accepted. This policy recommendation consists of a two part approach. Part 1 consists of the changes that the Federal Government should implement, and Part 2 consists of steps that the Black community should take in their community. African Americans must assume a major role in their struggle to achieve full equality.

Part 1 recommends that the Federal Government place additional social workers in the school systems that would advocate on the behalf of children. They would work, not only with those children who are able to move in the direction of higher education, but also to encourage and work with those who may be interested in moving in other

directions. Indeed, the social worker would be there to help guide the child in a direction that would increase his mobility and desire to be a productive citizen. The social worker, also, would work to distract any movement of the children toward any self destructive or crime activities.

The social worker's role would include working closely with the families of these children to support them in their role as parents, and also aid in their development. This would greatly benefit the country because it enables families to perform their functions while strengthening the country. In addition, the social worker would also ensure that the guidance counselors and others who have a role in guiding children would direct them according to their interests and abilities, and not according to their race, gender or class.

Each child, upon entrance to the school system would be assigned a social worker that would follow them until their graduation from the school. In this way, the social worker knows the child and his family in a way that is conducive to a trusting relationship which enables the social worker to help them more.

Part 2 consists of African Americans focusing additional energies upon the Black child and the family. Utilizing the strength of the Black church, which is the major institution in Black life, there is great potential to reach out to large numbers of African Americans in an organized fashion. The church must reach out to all classes of Blacks, males and females to engage them in working directly on the problems of Black children and the problems that concern Black America. African Americans need to address the many problems that affect their lives.

Education is necessary for the children; however, it is unlikely given the track record of the United States, that the society will give the African American child the kind of education needed to improve their condition. As a result, African Americans must move toward developing schools that will adequately educate their children. The researcher is not suggesting that the child should be removed from the public education

system at this time although that would be a solution if it was financially possible; the researcher is suggesting that cultural schools need to be developed in the community to supplement the African American child's educational experience in the public school system.

Cultural schools are important for African American children for the following reasons:

1. African American children would be taught their history from a Black perspective.
2. African American children's self esteem would increase due to the understanding of their history.
3. Every African American child would have a significant other-investor assigned to them, if they did not have one.
4. African American children should be given an abundance of love, encouragement and affirmation.

The cultural school, in conjunction with the African American Church would give the community a message that things can change for the betterment of the people. Within the church and the cultural school, there must be various types of professionals to guide the students, and give all the information they would need to move forward in the community.

As a result of the Black Church and the cultural school, Black females would no longer start to have babies at such a young age because they would have other goals and objectives. Young Black males would be involved in obtaining their education and would have a vested interest in not impregnating girls. They would not see this as a reflection of their manhood, but would recognize that implanting seed into a female does not make one a man. These are the values that would be taught in the Black Church and in the Black cultural school.

The Black Church and the Black cultural school must work closely together, and be unified in purpose. Jointly, they must work on political issues and demand jobs, a drug free community, childcare, health care and other concerns of the community.

These institutions will provide the children with appropriate role models, and give them an awareness of the expectations that the community has of them. These institutions will also offer them a prospective on the larger community, and give them an appropriate frame of reference to resist the racist elements in the United States.

Those children who are able to progress and make it to college will need the social support of the family and of the Black community. Malone in her study of urban, disadvantaged youth found that this group needed a great deal of emotional and social supports which was usually received from the family and extended family. She recommends that "...higher education must now reach beyond giving isolated support for the students on campus and buttress supports available in families and communities" (Malone, 1982, p.106).

One of the ways in which the higher education community can be supportive to those students who need emotional, social, financial and informational support, according to Malone, is the placement of social workers as the college counselor. I concur with this idea because social workers have the skills and knowledge to enable these students to move ahead more easily. The social worker has the interpersonal skills, as well as the organizational skills to provide the student with the needed supportive environment, as well as enabling and encouraging the family to be supportive of the student.

In regard to my respondents' experiences attending college, most of them would have had an easier time if there had been the involvement of a social worker. For example, one respondent talked about being very worried about her family who had to move from the apartment they resided in due to an emergency heating situation. Natalie had to take time from school to relocate her mother and grandmother. Another

respondent had babysitting problems and had to figure out a way to resolve this situation. In the meantime, school was in session, and she had to miss classes because of this. One respondent had so little money that she did not have the proper attire for her baby to come out each day. Though my respondents were able to succeed despite these circumstances, they faced many hardships and suffered more than was necessary.

Another generation should not have to pay such a high cost to obtain an education. For a good education not only helps the individual and their families, but it ensures the strength of the country. This country must begin to move the corrective process forward in regard to institutional racism. Institutions that do not work for the good of all of the citizens, and do not perform according to high expectations must be abolished, and structures that promote the development of all people must be put into place.

As I see it, we cannot afford to wait any longer to put these changes into effect. Many of our children are dying, both physically, and mentally. The children are the future, and if nothing is done, then not only is our future as a world leader at great risk, but internally, the country will face major problems from those who do not share in the American dream. Although my particular interest is in African American women, I feel that if the problems of the poor are addressed, then African Americans and African American women will be included.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Additional studies are needed to continue the examination of the subjective experiences of African American females. A reassessment of the existing literature on this population is necessary because earlier studies did not place women at the center of the analysis, nor were class factors considered. We need a greater understanding of the everyday realities of these women in order to further the sociological knowledge of how women cope in an oppressive society.

My future research goals are to investigate the lives of children of these African American females who achieved higher education. The purpose of this study would be to evaluate the effects of the parents' upward mobility on their children's lives.

Sociology needs to accumulate as much information on African American women as they have on white males. The researcher hopes that this study will be a contribution to this effort.

### CONCLUSION

This research is one African American woman's effort to document the experiences of the average working class Black female growing up in the ghetto. These life history interviews reveal the struggles, the strengths along with the personal costs to achieve upward mobility. There are many other Black females growing up in the ghettos, who are desirous of achieving, but are unable to find their way before the destructive forces overtake them. With the many cutbacks in programs and services that offered some hope, it is more difficult to move in a positive direction now. It is my hope that the government will implement the social policy recommendations that I have made. If this does not occur, then it is necessary for those of us who believe in racial justice and economic equality to organize to make these changes occur. In the meantime, I hope that some of my sisters will use this study as a light that will lead to self discovery, and to a realization of their dreams.

**APPENDIX A**

## **LIFE HISTORY INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **A. IDENTIFYING INFORMATION**

- Name
- Address
- Past Address (Where you grew up)
- Date of Birth
- Parents
- Telephone
- Marital Status
- When did you marry?
- Number of children
- What are their names?
- Date of birth of the children
- How many times have you been married?
- What is the educational level of your spouse?
- Who do you work for?
- What kind of work do you do?
- Educational level of the children
- Who did the children live with?
- What are the children like?
- Where were you born?
- Who raised you?
- How would you describe your family's socioeconomic status?
- What was your mother like?
- What was your father like?
- What was your mother's educational level?
- What was your father's educational level?
- Which side of the family were you closer with and why?
- What kind of jobs did they have?

**A. IDENTIFYING INFORMATION (continued)**

- How many siblings do you have?
- Tell me about them
- Are you close to any of them?
- If so, which one?
- How often do you see them now?

**B. EARLY CHILDHOOD**

- What was it like for you growing up?
- What were you like as a child?
- What was the community like that you grew up in?
- What do you remember most about your childhood?

**C. EDUCATION**

- What was your elementary school experience like?
- What kind of a student were you?
- Did you have any favorite teachers?
- Did you have many friends in school?
- If yes, why?
- If no, why not?
- What did you like most about school?
- What didn't you like about school?
- Did anyone encourage you to do well in school?
- What about junior high school years, what was that like for you?
- Did you achieve high grades?
- Did you read much?
- Did you have friends?
- Were you involved in any of the extra curricular activities after school?
- What kind of things did you do for fun at that time?
- Did you have any particular daydreams or fantasies during that period?

**D. ADOLESCENCE**

- What was adolescence like for you?
- What high school did you attend?
- What were your grades in school like during this period?
- Did you read much during this period?
- What were your aspirations at that time?
- What did you think about school?
- Were you permitted to date? If so, how old were you when you did?
- How was the relationship between you and your parents during this time?
- Did you have any particular concerns at that time?
- Did you have any close friends during this period?
- Did you finish high school? At what age?
- How did you feel about that at the time?
- What was the reaction of your family?
- What did you do after high school?

**E. EMPLOYMENT**

- Tell me about your early work experiences.
- Which one did you enjoy the most and why?
- Which one did you learn from?
- What position do you hold now?
- What position do you aspire to?
- What are some of the duties that you enjoy the most on your job?
- What are some of the duties that you enjoy the least?
- Did you have any problems on your jobs?
- Were there other Blacks on your jobs?
- Were there any opportunities for advancement?

**F. COLLEGE**

- What made you think about going to college?
- Did you know anyone that went to college?
- Did they complete college?
- Did you have a plan in mind for
- When did you first get the idea about going to college?
- What are the circumstances surrounding you going to college?
- How did you finance college?
- What was the experience like for you?
- What were the professors like?
- Did you ever experience frustration? And if so, how did you handle it?
- Why did you go to college?
- Were there other options open to you?
- In general, how would you describe the years you attended undergraduate school.
- How would you describe the graduate years.
- What qualities do you think one needs to have to attend college?

**G. RACE**

- Do you recall any racial incidents that happen around you, or to you?
- When did you become aware of the race issue?
- How did you understand it to be when you were adolescence?
- How do you understand it now?
- How much interaction did you have with white people, while you were growing up?
- How much do you have now?
- How much did you think about this issue as a teenager?
- Do you feel that it has much impact on your life now?

**H. YOUNG ADULT**

- Tell me about your experiences as a young adult.
- How did you meet your husband?
- What kind of work did you get?
- What do you think about your job?
- Do you think racism affects your job situation?
- Has it ever impacted upon your employment?

**I. MATURE ADULT**

- What was life like for you during these Years?
- What were some of the problems that you faced?
- How did you cope with these problems?
- Has racism affected your life? If yes, how?
- What impact has it had upon the people in your family?
- How did you deal with the racism?
- Was that a good way to handle it?
- How do you see life for African Americans in the future?
- What do you think African Americans should be doing about racism in the United States?

**J. RELATIONSHIPS**

- Did you have a mentor?
- Who were you closest to?
- Who are you closest to now?
- How often do you see them?
- Do you have many old friends that you continue to see?
- Who do you go to for advice?
- Do you have a mentor?

**K. RELIGION**

- What is your religious background?
- What are your religious beliefs now?
- What role does religion play in your life now?
- How often do you participate in organized religious life?
- What do your parents think of your religious practice?

**L. MEDIA**

- Did you grow up with a television set?
- If no, how old were you when you got one?
- Did you watch much television while growing up?
- What did you watch?
- What was your favorite program?
- Do you watch much television now?
- What do you think about the images of African American women that you see on television and in the movies?

**M. POLITICAL**

- Did your parents vote?
- What party did they identify with?
- What political party do you identify with?
- Do you vote?
- How would you describe your political philosophy?
- Are you a conservative or liberal?

**N. REFLECTIONS ON LIFE**

- What do you think has been the most significant part of your life journey thus far?
- What has the best part, and what part has been the worst?
- What things are important to you now?
- How significant is the concept of race to you now?
- What do you think about gender issues now?
- What do you know now that it would have been important to know earlier in life?
- What are your political beliefs now?
- What are your religious beliefs now?
- What do you think is important for young black working class females to know?
- What role has feminism played in your life?
- What role has marriage /relationships played in your view of the world?

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