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The African American Community of Sacramento County

By Sam Peterson

Summary

This paper explores the concepts of culture, cultural identity and levels of equity within the African-American community, with a highlighted focus on the community of Sacramento County. In specific, this paper identifies specific social inequities and provides ideas and actions that are currently in place to prevent these inequities, more pointedly education and employment. It is a reflection on the African-American community and a reflective exercise on self identity, culture, cultural identities and equity.

Introduction

Since the dawn of this country, all men were declared as "equal," however the reality of all being equal has yet to be demonstrated. The National Academy of Public Administration, which consists of a panel of members on social equity, defines such term as, "the fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice and equity in the formation of public policy." (NAPA, 2008) This definition of social equity, especially in fields such as non-government employment, necessitates close evaluation.

Between the years of 2001 and 2006 the unemployment rate for African-Americans in California increased nearly five percent. Not until January 2006 did this rate began to decrease into single-digits. Since 2001, the unemployment rate of Blacks in California has been as low as 7.3%, and as high as 12.3%. According to the US Census, this 12.3% is the highest of all ethnicities in California. This essay identifies the

various reasons explaining this rate to be as high as reported, including statistics ranging from local poverty rates to educational attainment.

Many authors and activists such as Brenda Porter have well established the claim that African-Americans are discriminated against when applying for jobs. There could be many reasons why this is occurring many of which go well beyond lack of education or poverty levels. This essay supports this view. For example, Porter states that "in February 2004, 13 applicants went on nearly 3,500 job interviews with 1,470 private companies. All jobs were entry level. The men were given the same qualifications and experience, while criminal history was randomly assigned. The most striking results of the study were that white males with criminal records were just as likely as blacks with no criminal history to find employment" (Porter 2006).

This is a strong example of discrimination and shows that in this case, equality did not play a factor in the hiring of employees and race was given preferential treatment. The allowance of businesses to hire white employees *with* criminal records just as often as blacks that have been

law-abiding citizens is unfair. I will be discussing some options, which could help provide answers to why this is occurring, and what could be done to prevent such forms of discrimination from occurring again.

Culture and Cultural Identity

The American Heritage Dictionary defines culture as, “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought” (see also Watters, 1999). According to Mark Nathan Cohen’s book *The Culture of Intolerance* (1998), all human cultures can be characterized by several sets of unifying and simplifying assumptions. These assumptions allow groups to focus on the topics in their world and allow them to interact with one another. “Members of a society can work together because they tend to share assumptions and have learned to focus on the same limited portion of a reality that would otherwise be too complex to comprehend or even conceive” (Cohen 1998, p. 5). Thus, individuals tend to participate with those of their own culture since they share many similarities. Cohen also addresses the point that the assumptions a person learns tend to be transmitted to that individual at a young age by their elder relatives and guardians. With that said, an individual could identify with an unexpected group depending on their upbringing. If an African-American child is raised in a white household, they may not relate to certain traditions held by the African-American community since they are unfamiliar with that culture.

There is more to cultural identity than the commonly recognized “race card.” Everything from sex to religion is part of cultural identity. I am able to identify myself with at least ten aspects of culture.

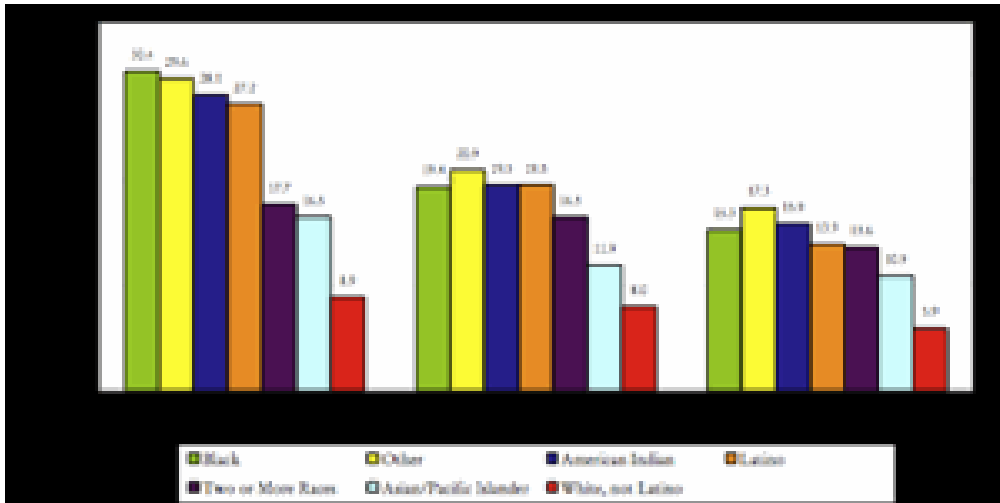
The most significant ones are religion, gender, and social class.

Gender is one of the most significant roles I identify with. The male culture has many stereotypes and beliefs that men are typically expected to maintain. One stereotype that males must abide by is the rule (made famous by the band The Cure) “*Boys Don’t Cry.*” Not only are males not “allowed” to cry, but they also must be the strongest, least scared and most brave of a group (again, all these being stereotypical rules).

Most of us identify ourselves as members of the middle class. There are many positive and negative aspects to this identity. On the positive side, being a member of this class means that you are more fortunate than those of the lower economic class. As a member of this class I was able to live with little financial worries and strong family support since my parents were not forced to work day and night to provide for my sister and me. A negative aspect on the other hand has to do with the all too real challenge of finding financial support for college. By being part of the middle class, we lie on the threshold of little to no financial aid and being able to financially afford college without resorting to loans. Members of the middle class walk a thin line of being able to qualify for financial aid or to having to take a loan. Another element of identity I am able to relate to is formal education attainment. Not only do I have my high school diploma, but I have attained a college degree.

Comparing aspects of my social identity to that of the average individual of the African-American community of California, I find the most significant difference lies in social-class. African-American children hold the highest poverty rate at 30.4% (US Census, 2003). This trend does not change too dramatically as they become adults.

Graph 1. Comparative ethnic groups (colors) and Age Groups (three blocks)



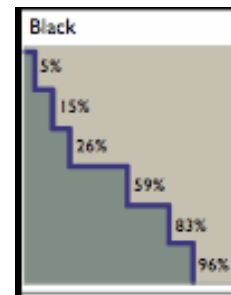
As the Graph 1 shows, the two columns (ages 18-64 and 65+), do take a substantial decrease in poverty rates, yet the African-American population is still amongst the highest ranked (US Census, 2003). The attached appendix shows a mapped out area of Sacramento County highlighting the poverty rates of the African-American community.

Not only is there a substantial difference in the poverty rates, but there is also a great difference between the numbers of African-Americans who have higher than a high school diploma.

Graph 2 shows the educational attainment rates of those older than twenty-five in Sacramento County. From top to bottom, each step stands for the following: Graduated with a professional degree, graduated with a bachelor’s degree, graduated with an associate degree or higher, attended some college, received a high school diploma and attended some high school. For the most part, these percentages stay consistently similar with every other ethnic group, only varying around 7% or less. This changes after “attended some college”. There are significant differences, as high as 15%, between the ma-

ajority of ethnic groups and African-Americans with an associates degree or higher (US Census, 2003).

Graph 2. Educational attainment



Theoretical Interpretation

Social Isolation theory helps explain why those in the African-American community have such high poverty rates and low educational attainment rates. Through research, Colleen Heflin and her colleagues found that, the black ‘mainstream’ is more likely to remain tied to poor blacks than is the comparable white population (Heflin 2006). This means that there is a strong cycle of African-Americans remaining in poverty when born into that life. Heflin was also able to find that, “compared to

whites, we clearly show that poor blacks are more socially isolated and middle class blacks are embedded in more fragile families" (2006).


We are able to conclude from these findings that due to a lack of home stability and strong parental support, many do not have the proper role models around throughout the majority of their lives. With this missing link, many lack the proper support that can help a student stay in school and out of trouble.

Social Policy and Political Action

There are many organizations that have taken action to prevent young African-Americans from dropping out of school or from taking part in negative social involvement. One such organization in Sacramento-County is called the O.K. (Our Kids) program. This program can be found around the nation and varies in techniques used. In Rancho Cordova, my hometown located directly outside of the city of Sacramento, the O.K. program plays a tremendous role in the community. The program, which is limited to African-American males, provides opportunities in sports and athletics as well as adult male role models. Here, they provide rewards, such as field trips to basketball programs for students who have had success in not only school but the community as well. As an extra incentive, the program has volunteers whom open up the local middle school gym during night and weekends. This is done to prevent the students from being on the streets where temptations such as drugs exist. Many young men that have gone through this mentoring program have gone onto college and successful careers. In a small way, it is adding positively to the local culture.

As mentioned, this program can be found across the nation. Indianapolis-

Marion County Public Library located in Indiana describes this program as an organization that, "Provides black teenage boys with successful male role models by encouraging success in school and personal relationships by using a reward system. Their reward for good grades, good attendance and good citizenship comes in the form of field trips" (IMC, 2006).

Much can be done to encourage success in adulthood. In addition to organizations such as the O.K. program, there are groups that teach the youth to fight against racism. One such group is Artists Against Racism (AAR). The goal of AAR is, "to build an understanding of all peoples. To speak to the youth, the future of our global community, about the basic human right of equality, so that a civilized society will, in the next millennium, finally result." There are many other groups that support such goals as AAR. A list of these organizations can be found at <http://www.heartsandminds.org/links/racelinks.htm>. 

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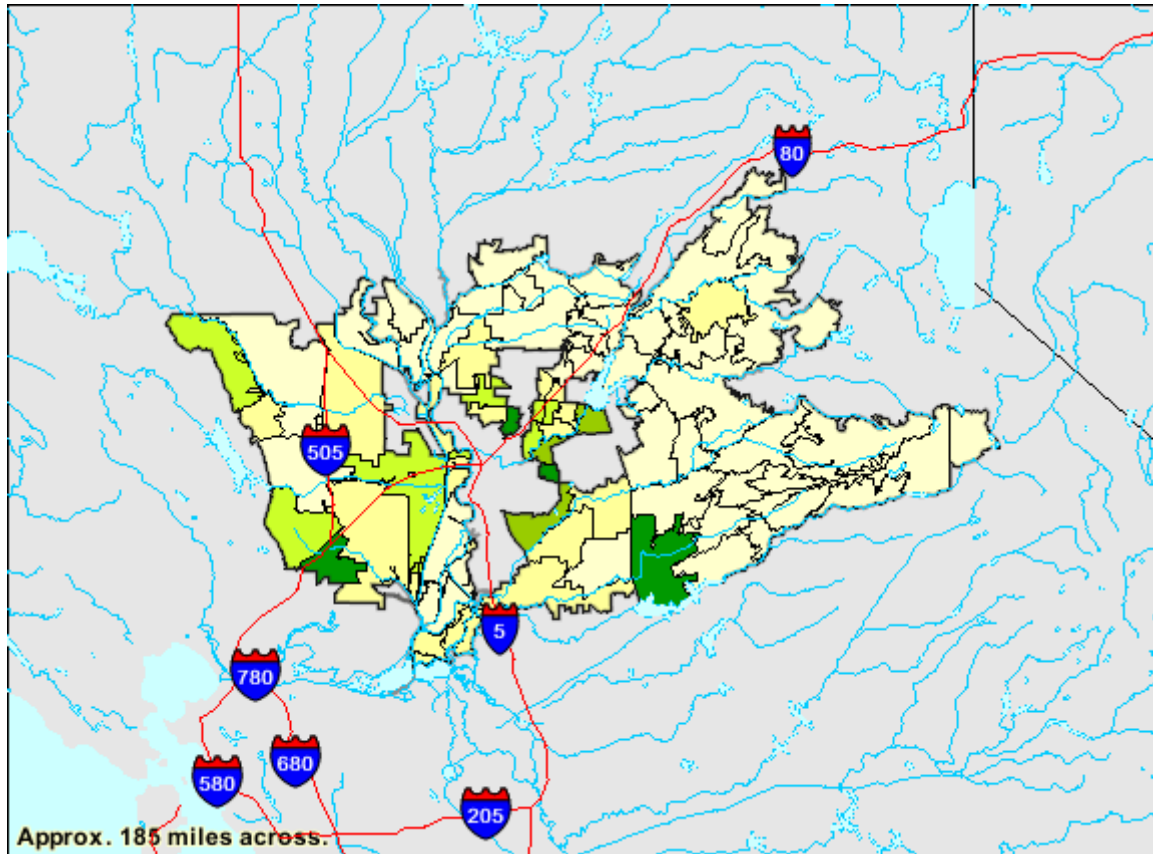
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(US Census, 2003)