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Franklin D. McFadden
College of William and Mary

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**“LIFTING AS WE CLIMB”: AN EXPLORATION OF OLDER BLACK MEN’S
WILLINGNESS TO HELP YOUNGER BLACK MEN SEEKING WORK**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of Sociology from
The College of William and Mary

by

Franklin D. McFadden, Jr.

Accepted for High Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Deirdre A. Royster
Deirdre A. Royster, PhD, Director
Associate Professor of Sociology

Jennifer Bickham-Mendez
Jennifer Bickham-Mendez, PhD
Associate Professor of Sociology

David P. Aday, Jr.
David P. Aday, PhD
Professor of Sociology and
American Studies

Michael Blakey
Michael Blakey, PhD
Professor of Anthropology and
American Studies

Williamsburg, VA
December 12, 2008

I.

INTRODUCTION

The Extent of Young African American Men's Labor Market Difficulties

The labor market struggles of young African American men crosscut several fields of scholarly inquiry with each identifying this problem as one of the most disturbing social issues in the United States (Wilson 1987, 1996, 1999; Holzer 2007; Stoll 1998; Royster 2007; Holzer and Offner 2004; Holzer et al. 2004; Mead 2007). This is especially true for work-bound young black men who choose to bypass college and seek entrance into the workforce directly after their high school careers (Royster 2007). Emphatically, economist Ronald Mincy exclaims, "...there's something very different happening with young black men, and it's something we can no longer ignore" (Eckholm 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com>). Between 1940 and 2000, the proportion of African American men in the twenty-one to twenty-five age group who were out of the labor market jumped from 9 percent to 34 percent (Katz and Stern 2008). In addition, while working and middle class white and Latino men recovered from the devastating effects of the deindustrialization movement beginning in the late 1960s, young black men continued to have poor employment outcomes (Wilson 1987; 1996; Stoll 1998; Anderson 2000; Holzer and Offner 2004; Newman and Massengill 2006; Holzer 2007). Even during times of economic upsurge—specifically during the 1990s—African American men under the age of thirty-five failed to compete successfully in the labor market (Holzer et al. 2004; Holzer et al. 2006; Mincy 2006; Holzer 2007; Mead 2007). By 2000, 65 percent of African American male high school dropouts in their twenties were unemployed, and by 2004, this number jumped to 72 percent, compared with 34 percent of white and 19 percent of Latino male dropouts remaining unemployed (Eckholm 2006). Tragically, one quarter of these unemployed young African American men, by

2005, completely dropped out and stopped looking for employment (Sum et.al. 2004). Even when young black men find employment, they face substantial wage disparities relative to white men. According to Royster, black men have reached a high mark of only 80% of comparable white men's earnings over the last several decades (Royster 2007), and this gap holds at the national level as well. Often underpaid and unemployed, why are young black men performing so poorly in the labor market?

Scholars addressing the labor market crisis facing young black men typically attribute the problem to employer discrimination (Pager 2003; Roscigno et al 2007), deindustrialization (Wilson 1987, 1996; Stoll 1998), deficient skill and achievement (Wilson 1987), oppositional behavior and values (Harris 2004; Mead 2007), and a lack of helpful labor market assistance. While this study cannot examine all of the explanations above, it does seek to examine what factors influence those who may be best positioned to provide direct mentorship and or sponsorship for young black men, namely older black men who can link younger black men to jobs or employers. Though older black men face their own sets of labor market and entrepreneurial difficulties, younger Black men must confront an often hostile labor market with few resources that distinguish them, including poor network assistance. For men who are suspect before they even apply for jobs, not having someone who vouches for them can mean the difference between a chance and no chance. In *Motivating and Preparing Black Youth for Success* (1986), African American educator, writer, and motivational speaker Jawanza Kunjufu warned that, without positive intervention by community elders, young African American boys' chances for success would grow increasingly problematic. Kunjufu's thinking in the 1980s seems prophetic in retrospect, but it also seems completely consistent with values associated with the black community—"it takes a village to raise a child" and the importance of "lifting as we

climb.” It seems obvious that young black men would need help in their transitions from childhood to adulthood, from school to work, yet scholars seem to have understudied the role of community members in assisting these young men during difficult times, in a number of respects.

Statement of Purpose

In examining the labor market difficulties of work-bound young black men, this study places special emphasis on the potential relationships young men hold with older black men. Research shows that older males are more likely than are women to be able to link work-bound young men to jobs, especially the blue-collar jobs that they want most (Royster 2003). Moreover, the collectivist traditions of black communities would logically push well-positioned older black men to assist younger black men in making positive transitions into the workforce. In *The Talented Tenth* (1903), W.E.B. Dubois called for elite black men to reach out to the depressed among their people, when he charged “exceptional men” with the duty of saving the Negro race (p. 133). Moral imperative notwithstanding, it is not clear that well-positioned, older, black, male elites are seeking to provide guidance and opportunity to disadvantaged young black men, and sadly, it is not clear how much of an impact such persons can have if they are willing. In addition, some older black male elites appear to be among the loudest critics of young black men, calling into question whether they believe young black men are deserving of assistance.

Books such as *Stupid Black Men: How to Play the Race Card and Lose* (2008) by Larry Elder and articles such as “A Poverty of the Mind” (2006) by Orlando Patterson are part of a steadily growing social text or discourse that blames the “weak character” of young black men for their existing mobility difficulties. Emblematic of this divide is the battle between the “decent” and the “street” folks depicted in *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral*

Life of the Inner City (1999) by ethnographer Elijah Anderson. According to Anderson, limited opportunities cause young African American males to acquiesce to an oppositional subculture of deviance—a code of the street—that often alienates “decent” older black men. But there is another side to this story; one could argue that older black men alienated younger black men before the code of the street became so prevalent. Specifically, older black men seem to have diverged from mainstream norms and values, when they failed to marry or support the mothers of their children. In so doing, they may have left many sons poorly positioned to adhere to other mainstream values they hold such as strong school commitment and conventional dressing standards. The absence of fathers has certainly led to pain, depression, and hardship within black families. In this respect, M.D. Bennet and Mark Fraser argue that “alienation and hopelessness contribute to a climate where oppositional behavior receives tacit support” (2000, p. 105).

With the aforementioned concerns in mind, this study examines the degree to which investment from older to younger male members of the black community is contingent upon the exhibition of certain qualities among the young. This study asks how older black men make distinctions between younger black men they know—distinctions including *human capital factors*, such as educational achievement, work experience, and *character factors*, such as willingness to work hard and prior criminal record—when they consider helping younger black males more generally, and in finding employment. The ultimate goal of this study is to better understand which characteristics, if any, are significant with regard to well-positioned black men’s decisions to provide job-linking support to young black men. To accomplish this goal, I designed a study that includes interviews with older black men using a small set of semi-structured questions that provides time for older men to share and examine their experiences

with and perceptions of younger black men, looking especially for how key variables—human capital and character— determine when and how older black men make offers of assistance.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

There are two guiding analytical questions and related hypotheses for this investigation:

- 1) How do well-positioned older black men interpret and assess human capital holdings, previous work experiences, and character/values among younger black men?

Hypothesis I: Older black men will use human capital, previous work experience, and character/values factors to determine younger black men’s worthiness relying most heavily on character-related judgments.

- 2) How do their assessments affect their choices about whether to sponsor or assist any particular young black man?

Hypothesis II: In some instances in which human capital, previous work experiences, and/or character/values factors are deemed poor, older black men will determine some men to be entirely unworthy of assistance and thus will identify these men informally as “throw-away” men.

Significance of Proposed Study

This study will expand understandings of how older black men view their own potential and power as mentors as well as young men’s worthiness of sponsorship. Specifically, it will shed new light on how older black men determine when and whether to intervene in the lives of African American boys and adolescents and what that potential intervention means to them. This research project is truly unique and exciting in that there is limited research that explores the connection between the social networks between young and older African American males and the extension of opportunities to the former by the latter. To date, no research systematically

asks older men to discuss what goes into their choices to mentor younger men. This research will be a first-of-its kind examination of *specific variables* that could determine if there is a disjuncture between younger and older black males, and if so, what its sources are. This exploratory study will allow us to gain more insight into how older men interpret the disturbing trajectories of young, *un-sponsored*, African American males and how they see their own potential as sponsors. Ultimately, older black men cannot be held accountable for the difficulties younger black men face as the result of a myriad of institutional failures, but their efforts undoubtedly have the potential to help some younger black men overcome the odds that seem stacked against them.

II.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Among social mobility scholars, occupational achievement is the key object of study. While scholars vary with regard to what they view as the most significant factor influencing occupational mobility, the role of social support networks in the process of work entry and transitions has emerged as a central variable. This review discusses the theoretical and empirical findings concerning social mobility and the influences of social support networks in occupational attainment and mobility specifically. Additionally, this review specifically focuses on research findings on young black men in search of job-linking assistance within the black community.

Mobility Systems and the Role of Social Networks in Occupational Attainment

Explanations of differing labor market trajectories typically emphasize two competing perspectives: (1) individuals find placement in the labor market based mainly on meritocratic competition or (2) “elites” within the various niches of the labor market sort individuals based on

subjective selection and exclusion processes. Sociologist Ralph H. Turner offered a concise conceptual framework for examining these divergent perspectives in his 1960 study of mobility in the American and British secondary school systems. Turner (1960) proposed that there are two ideal types of mobility, namely *contest* and *sponsored mobility*. According to Turner (1960, p. 857):

Contest mobility is a system in which elite status is the prize in an open contest and is taken by an aspirants' own efforts... The contest is judged to be fair only if all the players compete on an equal footing... The governing objective of contest mobility is to give elite status to those who earn it.

Metaphorically, Turner contends that contest mobility systems are like “sporting event[s] in which many compete for a few recognized prizes” (p. 856). To be competitive, individuals must acquire “credentials” recognizable by society-at-large. Sociologists and economists refer to these credentials as “human capital,” identifiable by “knowledge and skills that have economic value” (Lin 2001, p. 8). In the American labor system, sources of one’s human capital are educational achievement and work experience, for example (Garnett et al. 2008).

Contest mobility assumes that success comes with hard work and investments in bolstering human capital through further education and training (Wayne et al. 1999). Under a contest mobility system, one can perceive young black men’s labor market failure as an inability to compete against more qualified and determined individuals. However, work experience, as a metric of credential/human capital is somewhat a moot point, in the case of young job seekers, who, due to their age, are likely to lack an abundance of work experience (Granovetter 1995). Moreover, even after controlling for human capital factors, studies show that labor market disparities between white youth and youth of color remain (Conley 1999; Roscigno et al. 2007; Yang 2007).

Research suggests conflicting results regarding the weight employers place on credentials; they matter but race of applicant influences how much. In their article, “An

Employer's Eye View", economist Phillip Moss and Chris Tilly contend that employers are increasingly implementing skill requirements in their hiring process. The researchers base this contention on data mined from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI). The MCSUI consists of survey data collected in four metropolitan areas (Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, and Los Angeles) by the Russell Sage Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation from 1992 through 1996. In a multi-stage approach, the MCSUI consists of data from a household survey of randomly selected individuals aged twenty-one and older, an employer telephone survey, and face-to-face interviews with employers to gain information on changing labor market dynamics, racial attitudes and stereotypes, and racial residential segregation (MCSUI, <http://www.sociology.emory.edu/MCSUI/>). Consistent with contest mobility, Moss and Tilly (1999) found that 80 percent of employers require at least a high school diploma, 78 percent require general experience, 67 percent require specific skills (such as computer literacy), and nearly half (42%) require vocational or other training for entry level positions. In kind, the researchers conclude, "...skill barriers...put even entry-level jobs out of reach of many inner-city workers" (1999, p. 16).

In contrast, sociologists Shazia Miller and James Rosenbaum (1997) found that employers often ignore information that highlights human capital in potential recruits. These researchers conducted interviews with 51 firms in Chicago and its western suburbs offering entry-level jobs available to high school graduates. The firms ranged in size from less than 10 to more than 80,000 employees and included a wide range of industries (such as, manufacturing, graphics, skilled trades, financial services, and office work). Interestingly, although 35 of the 51 employers in the sample note that their jobs require basic math, reading, and writing skills, many mistrusted official markers for achieve in these areas. 33 employers noted that they found

teachers, grades, and test scores to be biased. Some employers argued that teachers would exaggerate the skills of students they like and underplay the skills of students they dislike. Moreover, many employers found grades and test scores to be “subjective or based on superficial attributes” (Miller and Rosenbaum 1997, p. 503). Instead, employers made hiring decisions based on impressions of the applicants’ character perceived during interviews or employee referrals. Notwithstanding the conflicting results regarding employer preferences, the plausibility of contest factors singlehandedly sorting young black men out of the labor market is questionable at best (Royster 2003).

In contrast to the contest mobility argument, sponsored mobility involves a “controlled selection process” (Turner 1960, p. 856-857) under the supervision of sets of “elites.” As Turner explains:

Under sponsored mobility elite recruits are chosen by the established elite or their agents, and elite status is given on the basis of some criterion of supposed merit and cannot be taken by any amount of effort or strategy. Upward mobility is like entry into a private club where each candidate must be “sponsored” by one or more of the members. P. 856

The idea here is that the “cream of the crop” claims the right to select its heirs. Functionally, one can argue strong points for and against a sponsored mobility system. McDonald and colleagues (2007) opine, “...with few institutional mechanisms facilitating the transition to stable employment”, sponsorship serves as “a hidden mechanism of advantage... [that] can expand labor market information and opportunities for youth and enhance their chance for employment through guidance” (p. 1329). Wayne and colleagues (1999) posit that elites provide recruits with high levels of support and guidance that they would otherwise lack without sponsorship and that this benefits organizations. Turner adds that sponsorship within organizations allows elite recruits to avoid “the strains of competitive struggle” (p. 860), while allowing the elite to maintain their status generation after generation. The drawback of course is that such systems

are highly exclusive. According to Turner, "...members grant or deny upward mobility on the basis of whether they judge the candidate to have those qualities they wish to see in fellow members" (p. 856). The subjective nature of this system assures the elite that "an interloper will [not] succeed in claiming the right to elite membership" (p.858). Roscigno and company (2007) describes this inclusive-exclusive dichotomy as "social closure"—"the process by which collectivities seek to maximize advantage by restricting access and privileges to others" (p. 21).

In sociological studies, the traditional sponsored mobility framework typically translates into a set of perspectives on how social networks influence occupational attainment. Researchers on job-seeking and occupational advancement overwhelmingly underscore the significance of sponsorship in determining individuals' trajectories (Lin et al. 1981; Lin 2001; Burt 2001; Marsden 2001; Mouw 2002). This perspective seems to question to what degree human capital, as a market factor, propels occupational mobility in comparison with the power individuals access when they draw on contacts within their social networks. According to Smith (2005), for example, social contacts link roughly half of all job seekers with employers (Smith 2005). Lin and company (1981) show that job seekers who pool support from those of higher status achieve higher occupational status. Moreover, employers often insure the power of networks by creating an "internal labor market" in which they advertise job openings mainly to current employees. In this case, employers prefer to hire from a pool of individuals referred by current employees or their own personal contacts (Granovetter 1995). Conceptualizing labor market competitions as part of a sponsored mobility system allows for investigations of labor market success and struggle in terms of how "connected" an individual is to elites or well-placed contacts and how willing these contacts are to offer sponsorship.

Social Support Networks and Occupational Attainment in the Black Community

Despite their significant role, only a few studies explore the utility of social contacts for young black men in their occupational attainment efforts. One of the first scholars to document the nuances between the formal and informal job-linking support available to young black men and young white men was sociologist Deirdre Royster. In her 2003 book *Race and the Invisible Hand: How White Networks Exclude Black Men from Blue-Collar Jobs*, Royster set out to determine if similarly situated young black and white men would have comparable labor market outcomes upon entrance into the workforce. A major contribution of this study is that it systematically differentiated the effects of contest and sponsored mobility factors for young black and white men.

Royster (2003) began her research by picking up where an earlier unpublished study, led by sociologist James Coleman at Johns Hopkins University in the early 1960s, left off. The original study sought to determine if blacks and whites in Baltimore with comparable educational backgrounds achieved similar labor market success. The researchers examined white and black men and women from graduating classes at Baltimore's Glendale and Wakefield Vocational-Technical High Schools. Glendale was nearly all white, while Wakefield was nearly all black. Due to differences in preparatory courses at the two schools, the "researchers were unable to determine empirically whether inequalities resulted from access to different specialized training programs or from more systematic forms of racial exclusion (p. 46). Fortunately, Royster found a "diamond in the rough" in that Glendale's student population at the time of her investigation, some thirty years later, reached near parity between whites and blacks, which gave her a site where black and white students received identical "academic" preparation within the same schools.

After selecting 25 white men and 25 black men, who were seniors at Glendale during 1989 and 1990, Royster conducted semi-structured interviews with the men. Using the work information provided by the men, Royster divided them into five “success categories”: *High Success Within Field* (HSW), *High Success Outside Field* (HSO), *Moderate Success Within or Outside Field* (MSW/O), *Low Success* (LS), and *Miscellaneous* (MISC). Royster based the criteria for participants’ placement into each category on “the ability to remain in one’s original field or to switch field successfully, alongside more traditional criteria of success, such as wage rates, spells of unemployment, and employer-supported skill upgrades” (p. 70). In specific terms, high success individuals maintained stable employment within their original trade of study (HSW) or switch fields (HSO), increased their wages to at least \$7-8.00¹ per hour, and consistently upgraded their skill level (pp. 71-72). A perk of this “high success” status is that these individuals often received employer-sponsored training. Of the 50 men in the study, 16 white men compared to 4 black men increased their human capital through employer-paid training. Moderate success individuals experienced relatively stable employment, but more or longer spells of unemployment than high success individuals, earned no more than \$8.00 per hour, and received no employer-sponsored training (p. 75). 3 white men and 10 black men fit into this category. Low success outcomes, which Royster equates to an “at-risk” category, included young men who found only minimum wage jobs, experienced significant spells of unemployment, and at times stopped looking, fell into the discouraged worker category (p. 76). Furthermore, men in this group never earned wages exceeding \$5.00 per hour and made little or no effort to increase their skill level. 5 white men and 7 black men fit into this category. The Miscellaneous category referred to men enrolled in higher education, rather than participating in the workforce full-time. Royster argued they were likely to seek professional or managerial jobs

¹ The minimum wage from 1990-1996 was \$4.25 per hour.

after graduation. Because of this group's "delayed trajectory," Royster excluded these men from her analysis of the men who fell into the other categories. From data provided by this set of men, Royster made three conclusions (p. 80). First, white males in the study were more likely than black males to experience highly successful school-work transitions. Second, white men's chances for having stable trajectories, whether in field or out of field, were markedly better than black men's chances. Third, despite a significant number of black men in the study achieving moderate success, it typically involved them leaving their original field to pursue service sector jobs (p. 80). Overall, the black men in the study earned 73 percent of what white peers earned and had unemployment rates that were 10 percent higher than did the white men (pp. 60-61).

Because Royster had data on the young men's school accomplishments as well as their access to contacts, she was able to compare the validity of the contest- and sponsored-mobility frameworks for these young men seeking their first jobs after high school graduation. Specifically, Royster examined variables pertinent to human capital variables, such as course of study, grades, and standardized test scores, but also related factors such as character and motivation/preparedness (p. 91).

Examining academic achievement, Royster found that the white and black students' grade point averages and reading and math standardized test scores showed no significant differences—that is, these factors could not explain significant differences in the employment experiences of the young men as the contest-mobility framework contends. But other factors, such as initiative might have played a role similar to human capital. For example, Royster asked the young men whether any Glendale's personnel offered to write letters of recommendation or pushed them to attend college. The logic of this line of questioning suggests that differences between the two groups of men, in terms of offers for letters of recommendation or suggestions

that they attend college might highlight subtle differences of potential that school personnel might have observed. Again, Royster found no significant difference. 76 percent of black males and 72 percent of white males received offers from the school's personnel for letters of recommendation and 44 percent of black males and 48 percent of white males were told by school personnel to go to college.

Royster also thought potential differences in the two groups' character and values were worth exploring. Because, as Royster contends (p. 94), "...urban employers, conservative social scholars, and ordinary people have exhibited concern that black men, particularly those who live in cities, may not have developed the sort of character traits that make them good employees," not exploring these concerns would have left questions about character/values open. Mead (2007) argues, for example, that urban young black men have a "self-defeating quality" about them that hinders their employment prospects (p.50). To examine the relevance of these character concerns and to distinguish between possible character differences between the black and white men, Royster identified five variables for consideration: the percentage of students who reported significant trouble with teachers, the percentage of students who admitted to having been arrested or incarcerated, the students' reservation wage (the lowest wage an individual is willing to accept), the number who held jobs in low-status, service sector jobs, and the percentage who would not take jobs in low-status fields

In terms of behavior, Royster found no significant differences on the five variables. The only variable that even came close was one indicating that 16 percent of blacks and 4 percent of whites reported have trouble with instructors. Although the difference was not statistically significant, it may have hindered some teachers' sponsorship of black men. As for trouble with police, the results showed some rather atypical results. While 20 percent of white males reported

being arrested, only 12 percent of black males in study reported being arrested. Considering these results, Royster concludes that behavioral differences cannot explain the divergent pattern of employment success she witnessed. In terms of work orientation, Royster's results did not confirm the "all too familiar...media's pronouncements that young African American workers are unwilling to work at "honest" jobs just because the wages that are offered to them in such jobs are low and their trajectories are not promising" (p. 96). The young black men in Royster's study did not validate these stereotypes. Indeed, the reservation wage of the black men was \$1.50 less than that of the white men. Moreover, the black men worked more low-status jobs than did the white men in the study. 76 percent of the black men held low-status jobs, while, only 44 percent of white males held these types of jobs (p. 97). In addition, the black men were less likely to refuse the low-status jobs noted earlier than were the white men.

Based on the findings, Royster concluded there were no differences in work orientation between the white and black men in this study. In total, the men in this study reflect similar character traits. Therefore, Royster argued that character differences did not account for the differences in the two groups' labor market outcomes. But the belief that black men have poorer work orientations than their white peers is hard to dislodge even with Royster's persuasive data. Unfortunately, one can presuppose that many black boys and men face "statistical discrimination" (Holzer 2007), whereby the overrepresentation of black men in crime statistics raises fears of hiring them and the entire group is cast as deviant. Devah Pager's 2003 audit study of Milwaukee employers provides suggestive evidence regarding this claim. Pager found, when she sent black and white men out to apply for similar jobs with the same resumes', varying only whether they claimed a former criminal conviction or not, that employers were more likely

to call back and hire a white man with a criminal record than they were to call back and hire a black man without a criminal record with comparable credentials.

Royster's final measurement, motivation/preparedness, addressed claims that that young black men lack the enterprise or drive necessary to be good employees. To ascertain any differences in motivation and preparedness between the white and black men in the study, Royster asked the men questions related to their school attendance, resumes, attempted work-study, attempted post-high school training, willingness to travel to work, and potential reasons they would quit a job. Of the men in the study, 68 percent of blacks compared to 48 percent of whites reported having high attendance (measured by thirty or fewer absences in the four-year high-school career). Blacks and whites reported having resumes in equal numbers (32%). 72 percent of black men compared to 76 percent of white males reported attempting to get into a work-study program. 68 percent of black men attempted post-high school training, while 60 percent of white men did so. The black men in the study were willing to travel further distances (measured in minutes) than were the white men, with the black men willing to travel an average of 78.64 minutes to work compared with an average of 55.2 minutes for the white men. 44 percent of black men had walked or taken the bus to work, while only 12 percent of the white men in the study did so. Blacks selected one more reason than did whites to a quit a job (8.32 and 7.28 avg. respectively). Commenting on these results, Royster argues, "...in no case are black men lagging substantially behind their white peers and in some cases they appear to be more impressive from a prospective employer's likely standpoint, stereotypes notwithstanding" (p. 100).

The fact that there was no significant human capital or character-related differences to explain the differing work experiences between the black and white students is consistent with a

number of other studies seeking to find a correlation between human capital/contest factors and labor market trajectory (Miller and Rosenbaum 1997; Roscigno et al. 2007). Nonetheless, if contest factors cannot explain the dissimilarity in labor market outcomes between such similar black and white men, then what can?

Royster contends that the employment disparities she observed between black and white Glendale graduates were the result of differential job-linking assistance at the school and beyond the school. Specifically, the white males received highly effective informal job assistance from the school, while the black males received less-effective, formal, assistance. According to Royster (p. 142):

The modal pattern for white teachers and students involves the active and frequent extension of teachers' personal resources to assist white students in getting within-trade jobs and work opportunities, particularly in teachers' own small businesses, that are not generally available to all students...In addition, white male students' personal network portfolios were broadened considerably when teachers linked the young men to personal contacts who could facilitate younger men's entry...In contrast, the modal pattern for black students and white teachers—who were in many cases the same ones who gave munificent, concrete, network-based support to white students—involved verbal support and encouragement, and frequently only that.

What Royster describes is clearly illustrative of a dominant sponsored mobility system. According to Garnett and company (2008), elites select recruits “by virtue of trustworthiness and social similarity, abilities that need not necessarily stem from educational experiences or encompass the wielding of credentials” (p. 160). The white teachers sponsored the white male students' transitions from school to work, while their negative feelings about black males were evident through their inaction or failure to provide equivalent assistance across their male students. So few of the black students in the study received referrals from their teachers or a job offer in their businesses that it is startling to see how very many white men received this sort of help. As a result, the black students had to rely on the schools work-study program, which was much less effective in linking the young black men to the best jobs. Lydia Williams, Glendale's work-study coordinator describes this difficulty:

Well, you have to understand that Glendale was all-white for most of its history...So now, the school is over half black and the principal is a black woman and the work-study coordinator is black, and the employers are expecting white people—white students, white principals. The shop teachers are still white but a lot of the employers are, you see, former students—they graduated years ago when it was still just “their” school. Royster 2003, p. 111

According to Royster, “In many ways, white families, students, and employers seemed to perceive both Ms. Williams and Glendale’s black students as irrelevant intruders” (p. 142), or as Turner (1960) explains: “interlopers” seeking elite status. In fact, this stratified pattern Royster observed was prevalent in the surrounding community as well. Royster explains that “local whites own many of the small and medium-size businesses in fields like construction, automotive services, and plumbing, which provide work-study opportunities and full-time jobs for Glendale graduates” (p. 142). In turn, sponsorship of young white men by their older counterparts ensures they have a smooth transition from school into the workforce; whereas, older white males deny sponsorship to young black men and sometimes block their access into “opportunity structures” in the community (Steinberg 1995; Royster 2003).

The significance of Royster’s study is that it shows how young black men can display the requisite skill, character, motivation, and preparation for successful entry in the labor market and still fail. This study highlights the troubling racialized sponsorship system that promotes young white males through the ranks seamlessly, while excluding hard working young black men from equal access. Moreover, Royster highlights the significance of social bonds, mentorship, and collectivism in helping the young to excel. Observing the power of the white sponsorship of young white males compels me to ask: “How eager is the black community to create networks of sponsorship to assist young black men with work entry?” It may be that older blacks are not as well placed as older white to help youth in their communities, but there is also the question of willingness.

Sociologist Sandra Smith provides two studies that examine the strained social support networks in black, urban, poor communities. In these studies, Smith stresses the importance of the *mobilization/activation* of social network contacts for occupational attainment; whereas, previous occupational attainment studies focused more singularly on presumed network access (Lin et al. 1981; Burt 2001; Lin 2001; Marsden 2001). Smith's work inquires into *how* job seekers motivate social contacts and *how* social contacts assist in the job matching process—i.e., providing job information, putting in a good word, or directly hiring the job seeker—advancing the literature on black labor market experiences in a manner that illustrates a peculiar strain faced by less-affluent black job seekers. Like Royster, Smith finds that blacks have difficulty mobilizing contacts to act on their behalf.

In her article “Mobilizing Social Resources: Race, Ethnic, and Gender Differences in Social Capital and Persisting Wage Inequalities” (2000), Smith utilized the MCSUI to analyze racial, ethnic, and gender differences in labor market penetration and wage inequalities. Smith's analysis of the MCSUI data found that white men were more likely than were white women, blacks, and Latinos to access and mobilize social contacts to gain employment. Moreover, black men were 62 percent less likely to use male job contacts than were white males. Smith concludes:

Among personal contact users, white men are more likely to mobilize ties deemed to affect positive employment outcomes. Moreover, differences in social resource mobilization help to explain a substantial part of wage differentials. Not only are their odds of using weak, white, male, and influential ties significantly greater than their black, Latino, and female counterparts...they experience wage advantages as a result. P. 529

The fact that employers prefer recommendations from within their extended network (i.e. current employees or friends) regarding perspective hires, (Granovetter 1995) and the mobilization disparity between blacks and whites in Smith's study suggests that white males' superior ability to mobilize social contacts over black males results in better labor market outcomes for white

men relative to black men. Moreover, the inability to mobilize influential male contacts among black men highlights a concern warranting further analysis of the relationship between males in the black community.

In her 2005 article, “‘Don’t Put my Name on It’: Social Capital Activation and Job-Finding Assistance among the Black Poor,” Smith builds on her previous research and examines the attitudes of contacts and social network constructs that constrict mobilization. As she states: “This study is centrally concerned with uncovering the conditions that enable black, urban, poor job seekers to mobilize their network of relations for job-finding assistance” (p. 13). From 1999 to 2002, Smith engaged in in-depth interviews with 105 low-income blacks pooled from a social services agency in southeastern Michigan. The participants of the study were black men and women between the ages of 20 and 40 who had no more than a high school diploma. Participants answered questions regarding their orientation to providing *job-finding assistance*. Overall, 75 percent of potential job contacts reported that they based their decisions to offer assistance based on perceptions of the job seeker’s character and reputation. The results of the study show that potential job contacts *hold strong reservations* about assisting others in the black community, especially those with “questionable” character. While not mutually exclusive, contacts held three common concerns related to helping job seekers, namely about “issues of motivation, neediness, and delinquency” (p. 20). 20 percent of contacts believed that their job-seeking peers lacked motivation; therefore, they would not follow through on job information or offers. 10 percent of contacts felt that offering assistance would make the job seeker dependent upon them for future favors. However, a striking 70 percent of contacts feared that once the job seeker gained employment they would act in a manner that would jeopardize their (the contact’s) status in the workplace.

Ultimately, Smith's research resonates with Royster's findings that young black men have more difficulty mobilizing social contacts for sponsorship; whereas, whites do so with ease and to great advantage. Moreover, Smith uncovers a troubling pattern, namely great distrust within urban, poor, black communities that makes collectivism a difficult task. Therefore, a great disadvantage that young black men face vis-à-vis young white men is the reluctance among contacts to take a chance on young black male workers and the reluctance to sponsor them. This study takes up where Royster and Smith leave off, examining the views of older black men, with at least some demonstrated sponsoring capacity, about the younger black men they have encountered.

III.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Originally, this study proposed only to gather information from a sample of male members of the Richmond Black Contractors Association (BCA), but eventually I chose to broaden the sample to include non-business owners who had been identified by business owners. But, because members of the BCA operate contracting businesses, a number of which provide apprenticeship and employment opportunities to African American males, I thought male BCA members might serve as an especially powerful network for young African American males seeking entry-level blue collar jobs. Indeed, these business owners may be especially valuable social contacts given that they are socially embedded among other employers. Other studies have not systematically attempted to include black business owners, and even though my sample of business owners is quite small, this group of subjects differs in important ways from non-entrepreneurial blacks studied in previous social capital research. Specifically, this group has

important information about labor market issues from both the demand-side (as employers) and supply-side (as contacts for young job seekers). In addition, previous studies have either ignored race, focused on white-collar labor, or used employer data that was less focused on black employers.

Instrument

For this project, I developed a structured interview schedule with just a dozen or so open-ended questions, which I asked respondents to answer, but then also to reflect on more generally—making this a very open-ended interview process. I chose to conduct in-person interviews recording and writing down subject responses, so that I could also pay attention to facial expressions and other subtleties. The questions related to the respondents' attitudes regarding the behavior, employability, and future trajectories of young African American males in general, asking them also to reflect about those with whom they have worked (assisted or employed) or chosen not to work. The questions also provide opportunities to hear how respondents rank sets of characteristics young men might exhibit (including incarceration under a variety of circumstances) on a “scale” of desirability in terms of sponsorship.

After collecting the data, I pored over it to identify emergent themes in the older men's experiences with and attitudes about young African American men. Although I was not able to include, in this report, all of the themes that emerged, a few highly salient themes were in evidence from the first to the last interview.

DATA AND RESULTS

During the late summer and fall of 2008, I gathered the data for this study. Although I was able to contact more than fifteen individuals, this paper is based exclusively on data from in-depth interviews I conducted with 10 black male business owners and community leaders. The

primary location for the study was Richmond, VA. This location was an appropriate site because of its large African American population, with many young black men experiencing the employment problems that have been observed in previous studies. Moreover, this research setting was convenient for me because I reside in Richmond, making travel to and from interview sites less complicated.

Although I had originally decided I would only interview black men in Richmond, who owned their own contracting businesses, I soon discovered, after asking the first business owners to suggest others whom they thought might be good to talk to about the mentorship/sponsorship of young black men that it might be just as important to talk with leaders who were not business owners. Because the sociological literature indicates that job-linking assistance occurs at multiple levels of density, ranging from assistance provided by strong ties to that provided by weak ties (Burt 2001; Lin 2001; Marsden 2001) and many young black men have few if any business owners within their networks, I knew that I would learn more by including non-business owners as well as business owners. Moreover, the research literature shows that at least some of the ties young men are likely to have access to will have varying social status, placing them at different points of access to the labor market (Lin and Ensel 1981). For these reasons, I chose to broaden the sample to include a wider variety of community members, still seeking to understand how the poor labor market trajectories of young black men might be impacted by the ability and willingness of well-positioned older black men to provide job-linking assistance. Though it is doubtful that community-level, network-based solutions, have great potential for addressing young black men's labor market difficulties, it would likely be a component of any larger effective strategy, so my very small study of older black men serves as an opening to

better understand well-positioned older black men perceive the labor market, themselves, and young black men, in relation to one another.

Though the sample I finally came to rely on is perhaps too small to have the breadth and depth of data I originally deemed necessary for this type of study, I do feel that the data begins to tell a story about how older men attempt to help younger men that is valuable nonetheless. From discussions with the contractors with whom I was able to make contact, I learned that complex processes of exclusion and the current state of the local and national economy share culpability for both the void of black contractors in the city and for the lack of opportunity young black men face. Ultimately, the non-contractors I interviewed echoed the observations of the business men.

Five individuals were selected from the black business directory distributed by the Black Pages ©. The other five participants were selected using a snowball sample. The selection criteria were black male business owners and community leaders, aged 35 and older, operating in Richmond, VA. Table 1 (Appendix) displays the mean sample characteristics. The mean age was 49.5 years. The mean years of education completed were 14.8. The mean years of business operation, for business owners, was also 14.8. This study has three areas of concern or themes: the participants' *dispositions towards young black men*, *ability to provide assistance*, and *willingness to assist* and in lengthy interviews with each of these men, which I tape-recorded and transcribed, I gathered in-depth accounts for each of three areas. Below I indicate which questions I used to get at older men's opinions of younger men and I explore common themes that emerged in the interviews in the words of the men themselves. In each instance, I use a pseudonym but not the real names of the men I interviewed.

Disposition towards young black men

I determined the participants' general attitude towards young black men with whom they've had contact or observed—in terms of character and work ethic—by examining responses to the following questions:

1. What has been your general experience with the young black men with whom you have interacted, hired, trained, or mentored?
2. How optimistic are you about the future prospects of young black men?

When asked, “What has been your general experience with the young black men whom you have interacted with, hired, trained, or mentored?” nine of the ten men responded negatively. The nine men who responded negatively shared a view that today's young black men are disrespectful, untrustworthy, and lack positive goals and a sense of work ethic. John, 41, a barbershop owner and a barber college instructor, expressed concern regarding the character of the young black men with whom he has interacted. His concerns stemmed from his perception of younger black men's lack of respect:

Man, these young cats don't have no sense. They're rude. They don't have no respect for themselves or nobody else. I got cats that come into the shop and every word outta they mouth is fuck this and fuck that, bitch this, and bitch that. And they talk that way around women and children. I mean no respect.

Matthew, 51, the owner of a landscaping business and a small engine repair shop, views young black men in a similar vein. He argues, “These young guys act like showing respect is a weakness.” However, his greatest concern dealt with the trustworthiness of young black men:

I've dealt with too many young bums. I'm not talking about a homeless guy or nothing. I'm talking about these that will take advantage of you when you try to help them. I've had a lot of these young guys that I gave a chance lie to me and steal from me. I just think you can't trust them. They are cut from a different cloth than when I was at they age.

Solomon, 65, a painting contractor, had similar experiences with the young black men he worked with in the past, as did Abe, 44, a caterer and culinary instructor. Matthew's past experiences with young black men also made him extremely distrustful of them. As he explained,

I'm a black man and I wouldn't bother with ninety percent of em'. It takes a lot of believing in God to look past the things they do. They will steal from you thinking they doing themselves a favor. They will steal from you even though you cutting them a check every week. So to deal with people like that, with that mentality, it's a hard thing to do. I had a guy steal my equipment and sell it. I've caught guys drinking and smoking reefer in my client's homes. So I had to start following them to the bathroom, like a damn prison guard or something. I had a guy get arrested for drug possession and for stealing a car. You just can't believe they gonna do what they are suppose to.

Peter, 61, a restaurant owner, realtor, and home re-habber, saw grave deficiencies in the character of the young black men with whom he had interacted, especially with regard to work ethic:

The ideology when I was growing up was work for what you earn and earn what you work for. Now, it's "you owe me." They don't want to do anything because they feel it should be done for them. We are all a sum of our life experience. If your life experience is not doing a damn thing, then that's the way folks will see you and treat you. The kids have a life experience of not doing shit, not wanting shit, at least nothing they want to earn. They have a screw it attitude.

Paul, 35, a street vendor and motivational speaker, expresses similar concerns regarding the work ethic of the young black men he has observed or mentored:

You know, black folk are not lazy people. We slaved for a long time, and we still slave to make it. We know what it means to work hard. But, these young brothers today got lost somewhere in the shuffle. They are lazy. They want to lay in bed all day and don't want to get up and do any productive work. It's a shame cause they got a lot of fire.

In general, this set of black men did not have favorable views about the character of their younger counterparts. However, one participant, Phillip, 53, a minister, and both chairperson of a black professionals networking organization and founder of a non-profit housing restoration business, stands in the positive minority with regard to his view of the character of today's young blacks.

My general attitude is that they have been mischaracterized in so many ways. I don't believe that educational institutions are preparing them to be successful. Not only that, but the job market is not structured on a level playing field. These young brothers have to work so much harder to make it than men of other races. Even those that do play by rules don't always break through the cracks. Society places limitations on the opportunities available to these young brothers. So, their way of thinking revolves around these constraints. So, of course they do things that mainstream society might not accept. Of course they come across as being angry. It is understandable that these brothers show little respect to a society and a culture that hates them. I believe these young brothers have great character and determination, but they've been beaten down.

Given the general negativity expressed by this set of black men towards the younger cohort, it is not surprising that their predictions for the future prospects of young black men were overwhelmingly negative. Six of the ten men predicted poor outcomes for young black men in the future. Mark, for example, returned to the issue of character:

I'm not too sure. There's a lot of good guys out here and there's a lot of bad guys out here too. And like they say, "one rotten apple will spoil the bunch." The bad ones make it hard for the good ones. So, it doesn't matter what they do. As long as there are bad apples, all the apples will turn rotten. It's going to be hard to break this cycle.

Interestingly, the recent election of Barack Obama served as an intervening variable in some cases, leading some men with otherwise negative predictions to qualify their statements. As Abe suggested:

Once young black men let go their tough guy demeanor, and make themselves presentable, then I can be optimistic. Right now, I don't see that happening. The attitude is too ingrained and you have people condoning it, so these guys don't see anything wrong with it. I hope that with Obama as president, they will see this smart guy, who has it together, and think to themselves, I can do better.

Tim, 55, the owner of a records storage firm and another business related to mainframe manufacturing, hints at an Obama factor as well.

I believe that if Obama can trump up funding for education, thing can get a lot better. The problem is that a lock of these young people lack knowledge because schools are failing. I believe Obama will do what he has to do to place them on right track.

Despite his concerns about the respectfulness of young black men, John nevertheless proposed:

Man these young cats can do whatever they put they minds to. If Barack Obama can be president, they can do whatever. The only thing that can stop them is themselves. They gotta be hungry. They gotta realize that it's real out here and ain't nobody playin' no game with them.

Paul expressed his optimism without equivocation, claiming:

I'm pretty optimistic. I know they will be alright. What people don't understand is that they got this striving energy inside of them that's gonna pull them through. They ain't gonna be lazy for long. Talking with the young brothers you see this fire and you know that everything is going to be o.k. They already know how to do for self. They just need to find positive ways to do and they will. Listen to what I say, their struggles are temporary.

Ability to assist—

Considerations of disposition aside, prior to determining these men's willingness to assist young black men by hiring or providing job-linking support, it was necessary to determine if the men actually had the ability to provide assistance. I determined the participants' overall ability to provide job-linking assistance to young black men seeking employment by examining the responses to the following question:

1. As of today, how many individuals could you afford to hire if you had to fill every possible position you had to available?
2. As of today, could you use additional employees? If yes, how many?
3. As of today, would you say that business is going well, fairly, or poor? Please explain why.

Based on the participants' response to the aforementioned question, I coded their responses into three categories: *capable (C)*, *limited capability (LC)*, and *incapable (IC)*. The *capable* category refers to individuals who have many positions available (more than twenty), can afford to fill them, and whose businesses provide relatively stable and steady contracted work. Four men fit into this category: Matthew, Mark, Abe, and Phillip. The *limited capability* category refers to individuals who provide or have access to a moderate number of available positions (10 to 20) and/or limited capital or connections to employ or assist additional (potential) employees. Two men fit into this category: Tim and John. The *incapable* category refers to individuals who have no available positions to offer themselves and who have fewer resources to offer to assist young men in accessing opportunities. In my judgment, four men fit into this category: James, Paul, Peter, and Solomon.

The individuals in the limited capability and incapable categories faced many difficulties that prevented them from hiring additional employees or helping significant numbers of young men, despite the possible need to do so. Solomon's story is extremely telling in this regard:

The major problems right now is the economy and discrimination. If you compare a common cold to having work here and there, then my business got a whooping cough. Yesterday was the first day I had work in a week. When I started, I was making \$40,000 a year. Within two years, I was making \$400,000 a year. By 2001, I was making damn near a million dollars a year. I've done work for Phillip Morris and AT&T. Then, in 2001, everybody put Muslims under the gun, and I'm Muslim. I had a six figure contract with VCU. One day I went in to do a job and a guy come telling me that I have to leave because I had "All praise due to Allah" on some of my equipment. He gon' say, "Come and get your equipment and get from down here. We don't want that mess out here." I'm going to file a suit against them. Right now the only folks that sustain me are the black churches around here.

Solomon added that Virginia had a history of discriminating against black contractors.

Once in the United States, they had 30 percent set aside, mandatory, for minority contractors. A few years back, the State of Virginia used to spend 3 to 4 percent of their dollars with minority contractors. Today they spend less than 1 percent of their dollars with minority contractors. What's going on here? You go to Washington, D.C., it's 16 percent. North Carolina, 16 percent. Maryland, 16 percent. In 1989, some white contractors took the City of Richmond all the way to the Supreme Court, because they said the city was discriminating against them. When it went to the Supreme Court, this justice, I think her name is O'Connor, she say you can't have quotas unless you do an in-depth study proving that discrimination is really happening. Well, Richmond put together this cheap board to do the study and they said discrimination wasn't happening. But do you see how it works? Everybody else comes to this country and they get work and government work to started. And we don't even get our damn forty acres and mule.

The case Solomon cited is the *City of Richmond v. J.A. Croson Company (1989)*. In 1983, the Richmond City Council adopted the Minority Business Utilization Plan. The Plan required the city's prime contractors to subcontract at least 30 percent of the dollar amount of each contract to one or more minority-owned businesses. In coming to this decision, the city council cited statistical evidence that showed prima facie discrimination. They noted, "...while the general population of Richmond was 50 percent African American, only 0.67 percent of the city's prime construction contracts had been awarded to minority businesses in the five-year period from 1978 to 1983" (Hamm 2004, p. 4). The evidence before the Council established that a variety of state and local contractor associations had little or no minority business membership. One councilmember asserted, "...the general conduct of the construction industry in this area, the

state, and around the nation, is one in which race discrimination and exclusion on the basis of race is widespread” (Hamm 2004, p. 4). Subsequently, J.A. Croson Company, a white-owned plumbing and heating contractor, filed a lawsuit against the city. Croson’s lawyer argued that the plan was unconstitutional. The district and circuit courts upheld the plan. However, in a 5-4 decision the Supreme Court ruled that the plan was unconstitutional. Undoubtedly, this ruling has had paralyzing effects on the stability of the black contracting businesses, not only in the city of Richmond, but across the country.

Solomon added that the discrimination black contractors face is only exacerbated by the problems created by the stagnating economy. While Solomon, as well as other men in the *incapable category*, cite discrimination for their struggles, the men in the *capable category* seemed to find innovative ways to mitigate the effects of discrimination on their businesses.

Mark, 54, a heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (HVAC) contractor is a striking example in this regard.

At first, I couldn’t get any contracts. I am bright skinned. Look at me, I’m damn near white, but I still wasn’t light enough to get any work. Here in Virginia, Niggas don’t get fed. You know what I mean? So, I gave my business a white sounding name. Nobody knew that a black man was running things. When I would show up to do the jobs, people use to think I was just the worker. Sometimes, I would have my wife friend secure the contracts for me.

Others, primarily those in the *limited capability category* noted that they simply did not have much space or need for additional employees. Paul, for example, was an independent street vendor, therefore, he did not require much assistance. However, he did not completely discount his ability to be of assistance.

I can’t necessarily help them to find a job. But, I can teach them to create their own jobs, something they can control and be proud of because it is theirs. I do motivational speaking and hold entrepreneurship workshops. So I teach the young brothers to do for self. They shouldn’t have to work for anybody else, when they can do for themselves.

John explained that although he did not have much space at his business, his work as an instructor gave him the ability to provide meaningful assistance in other ways.

I teach down at the barber college in Petersburg. Sometimes, I can offer some of my students a chair at my shop, but I can only do so much because I don't have that many chairs to offer. But I can hook them up with gigs at other shops in the area. I done hooked a lot of a cats up that way.

Willingness to Assist—

Although these men's ability to provide meaningful assistance varies, this does not mean that those who are in a position to do so will do so, or that those who may have difficulty doing so will not try to do so. In these cases, ability and willingness are not mutually exclusive. An examination of the following questions determined the participants' willingness to provide job-linking assistance:

1. Do you feel that it is your obligation to help young black men that you see struggling?

Please, explain why or why not.

2. How likely are you to provide job assistance to a young black man who had poor grades and/or test scores in high school? Likely or unlikely? Please explain.
3. How likely are you to provide job assistance to a young black man who had a criminal record? Likely or unlikely? Please explain.

This line of questioning allows me to extrapolate whether or not each participant is willing or unwilling to provide assistance, but also how likely and potential reasons for why or why not. That is, these questions allow me draw out the characteristics that affect these choices. Of the ten participants, six believed that it was their *obligation* to provide job-linking assistance.

Among those who saw it as their obligation to assist, the most common reasons cited were related to community failure, the role of adults in society, and the intervention of someone in their lives during their youth. These men's observations resonated with the "It takes a village to raise a child" theme common within African American culture. Paul, for instance, asserted, "I believe that all adults are responsible for the youth, even if it is not their child. We all have to do

our parts.” Phillip contended, “...we all have a stake in one another’s success.” John both blamed and held the black community responsible for failing to do enough to help young black men who struggle.

The black community had a big job to do and they failed. People are too selfish these day to step up when they see people hurting. I grew up in a close neighborhood, so it ain’t even a question for me. You got to help the little homies. I get sick and tired of visiting them in prison or at the cemetery. It wouldn’t be this way if people gave a damn. So I gotta pick up the slack for what they ain’t doing.

Similarly, James also believed that the black community failed to meet its obligation. Moreover, he found the black community to be partially culpable for the problems that young black men face.

These young men face so much negativity in their neighborhoods and its holding them back. They are treated like monsters, so they become monsters. And most of these people that criticize them aren’t doing much with their lives either. What kind of message are they sending? I don’t have a choice but to help, because not too many other people are going to do it.

It is noteworthy to point out that James was a student of Abe’s. James considers Abe as being one of his greatest influences and reasons for his success. He worked for Abe as prep cook for two years, before deciding to go to culinary school. Upon completion of culinary school, James returned to work for Abe as a *sous* chef. Abe also provided James with financial assistance to open his catering company. For James, the assistance he received from Abe provided, in his view, even more incentive for him to help someone else in need.

For those men who did not believe that they had an obligation to provide young black men with assistance, there was a consensus that young black men did not want their help. Peter argued, “...I can’t help them. How can I help them and they don’t even want to help themselves. I’m not trying to waste my time.” Despite the praise that James showered on Abe for his assistance, Abe indicated that he doesn’t believe that he has an obligation to provide assistance. More importantly, he believes that any help he attempted to provide might not have an effect on the trajectories of young black men. He claims, “...their influence comes from Tupac, Fifty

Cents, and Jay-Z. Unless I go out and get a record deal, there is very little I can do to change the way these kids are.”

In terms of how the men interpret grades and test scores, Tim was the sole participant who found these factors to be significant in his decisions about whether to provide assistance. He believes that grades and test scores are a measure of an applicant’s responsibility and drive. Additionally, he finds that they are an indicator of the applicant’s competitive spirit, a quality he seemed to value a great deal.

A problem with black people is that they set the bar too low. When things get tough, they just give up, especially these young men today. The problem with this is that they can’t compete. In today’s capitalist society, you must be competitive. Educational success is a sign of someone who is competitive and on track to be successful. As a businessman, I can’t afford to give someone a job that lacks the brain and common sense to do it.

The general view of the other participants was that grades and test scores do not predict how productive an individual will be in the workplace. Phillip, for example, argued, “...You’ll find plenty of people that did not do well in school, but they will work themselves to the bone for you.” Paul presents a similar argument that grades are not the tell-tale sign of potential, declaring, “Tell Einstein that grades matter. Tell Bill Gates that grades matter. Hell, tell George Bush that grades matter.”

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, none of the men believed that a criminal record should be grounds for exclusion from the labor market. Each man asserted the belief that everybody deserves a second chance. Likewise, each man believed that if a young black man with a record can display a change in behavior, then they would have no problem providing assistance, notwithstanding those who reported that they would deny assistance for other character reasons. James contended, “...A person’s past means very little to me. It’s all about what that person plans to do today and the days to follow. And you never know what someone can become if you

never give them a shot.” Paul and Mark felt a particular need to assist those with criminal records, because they both served time in prison. Mark explained:

I served a year in prison for assault in 1988. At the time, I couldn't find a job and I was depressed. I started smoking crack cocaine and abusing alcohol. One day when I was high and drunk, I got into a fight with this guy and beat him up real bad. I would have been in jail longer but that was my first and only offense. I also agreed to enter rehab while in prison. I been clean for 19 years. I know somebody can turn they life around. I'm living proof.

With few exceptions, this set of black men appear willing to offer job-linking support to the young black men who have such a need. The issue, then, is not whether this set of men are willing to provide assistance. Instead, the issue is whether they can offer assistance in increasingly difficult economic times and whether they sense that their assistance is welcomed and worth their time.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This exploratory study sought to determine how well-positioned older black men perceive younger black men and how these perceptions affect their willingness to provide job-linking support. Overwhelmingly, the set of older black men I studied had negative impressions regarding young black men's character. The majority viewed young black men as being disrespectful, untrustworthy, and lacking in initiative. As one might expect, these beliefs had implications for the way these men perceived the future prospects of young black; many saw young black men's futures as bleaker than they felt their own had been. However, the election of Barack Obama gave many of these men a sense of hope that young black men's fortunes could change, though they did not seem to know how Obama's election would actually translate to character improvements among young black men. Perhaps, like many Americans, of various backgrounds, Obama's election represents change more than it may effect change.

Yet, many of the men who participated in this study, as my advisors wisely predicted, faced complex problems of their own, which precluded their ability to offer any meaningful

assistance to their younger counterparts. Discrimination and a failing economy placed these men's businesses, and in the case of non-business owners, their influence, in jeopardy. Without the certainty that their (and their friends') businesses will stay afloat, there is no reason to presume that they will be able to continue to provide viable options to help young black men with employment difficulties.

Notwithstanding these difficulties nor the negative dispositions that these men held towards younger black men, they still seemed willing to provide assistance, and several saw this task as an obligation. While some asserted that their aid was not obligatory and doubted its potential effectiveness, even this set of men still appeared ready to provide assistance. Neither poor academic performance nor criminal records hindered the men's willingness to provide assistance, which directly contradicts one of the hypotheses of this study. While it was not surprising that older black men held negative views of their younger peers, like those held by many in American society, their willingness to extend themselves was in evidence, even when they downplayed whether their help was wanted or effective. In some ways, their helpful actions contradicted their stated misgivings.

This study, though small and preliminary in many ways, suggests that some of sociologist Sandra Smith's assertions about the willingness of poor blacks to help other blacks may not hold for blacks who are not poor. At the same time, these businessmen and community leaders are not nearly as powerful, influential, or as able to hire as they would need to be in order to significantly assist many young black men. The black community faces a conundrum: mainstream employers tend to reject young black men, while black business owners are more often willing to take a chance on young black men, but have few opportunities to offer. The implications of this study are that helping older black businessmen and other black leaders to

manage during difficult economic times may be an important indirect investment for young black men, many of whom, whether they know it or not, are desperately in need of older men's sponsorship.

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