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**College Students and Beliefs in the American Dream:
The Impact of Race, Class, and Gender**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Sociology and Anthropology

By

Maggie Marlow

Under the mentorship of Dr. April M. Schueths

Abstract

The concept of the American Dream and its promises of prosperity and social mobility, primarily through hard work, has been prevalent throughout modern U.S. history. However, what defines the American Dream has been arbitrary and varied, and research has shown that attitudes and beliefs surrounding the Dream have changed over time with shifts in the economic and political environments. The research for this thesis uses qualitative methods, specifically thematic analysis, to analyze 16 in-depth, one-on-one interviews to examine how students attending a predominantly white university in the Southeastern United States perceive the American Dream today while factoring in how those perceptions are affected by the social statuses of participants. Findings suggest that regardless of social location, most participants still believed the American Dream was attainable through hard work and determination, despite obstacles individuals faced, including intersecting statuses. Black students, compared with white students, however, were more likely to acknowledge the structural barriers involved in obtaining the Dream.

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College Students and Beliefs in the American Dream: The Impact of Race, Class, and Gender

Introduction

The American Dream is a prevalent concept in the United States and in American sociology. This concept has no fixed definition, as it varies between individual perceptions and transforms over time due to political, economic, and social climate changes (Chetty et al., 2017). Its implications of social mobility and financial prosperity through hard work affect the personal lives of the average U.S. citizen and newcomer. Researchers have encouraged more exploration of the American Dream as it relates to diverse populations (Hauhart, 2015; Zogby, 2008). It is therefore important for sociologists to further explore this concept in order to better define and understand it, especially in a Southern U.S. context where literature is sparse.

Framed by intersectionality theory, this study focuses on the social statuses of race, gender, and class and their perceived significance in relation to the American Dream according to college students at a public university in the Southeastern United States. Specifically, the research question for this study was as follows: How do intersecting identities, including race, class, and gender, shape the perceptions of the American Dream among students attending a predominantly white university in the Southeastern United States?

Literature review

What is the American Dream?

According to the literature across time, it is evident that the idea of the American Dream has evolved and changed and continues to do so since its coinage in 1931 by James Truslow Adams, an American writer and historian, in his 1931 book, *The Epic of America* (Wills, 2015). His original definition was, “a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Wills, 2015, p. 2).

Bruno (2020), provides a contemporary definition, “ the [American D]ream generally finds itself manifested in material or capital gains and/or achievements” (p. 5). However, this definition of the American Dream is limited. Mazelis (2022) suggests that some people believe that the Dream can be achieved through “non-material achievements,” such as happiness and spiritual fulfillment (p. 288).

The concept of meritocracy is prevalent throughout research on the American Dream (Lardier et al., 2019; Newman, 2016). Meritocracy, according to Littler (2017), “...involves the idea that whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for ‘talent’ to combine with ‘effort’ in order to ‘rise to the top’” (p. 1). This implies that no matter an individual’s background, race, class, or gender, hard work and determination can and will lead to success and social fulfillment in America. In other words, success is perceived to be a result of personal agency rather than external factors, such as family financial background (Newman, 2016).

Does the Dream exist?

Many people today do not believe in the existence of the American dream; Jilson (2016) states, “the past disappointments and defects, the rising inequality, the declining mobility, and the shrinking middle class have left many convinced that the American dream is no more” (p. 259). Some would even argue that the American Dream never existed in the first place; Bruno (2020) states that, “Many, including women, lacked the basic prerequisites necessary for success in early American society” (p. 4). And gender is an important factor when it comes to research on the American Dream; women’s perceptions of the American Dream are what Newman’s (2016) research focuses on; the concept of meritocracy and the effects of gender-based pay inequality on women’s ideas about the Dream are explored (Newman, 2016).

Gender

The “glass ceiling” is an important concept when it comes to comparing the experiences of women and men with the American Dream. This concept refers to the barrier that is said to prevent women from moving up in the workplace as far as their male counterparts (Powell & Butterfield, 1994). Powell and Butterfield (1994) studied specifically what kinds of decisions being made led to the creation of such a barrier to women. They found that while gender by itself actually worked as a benefit to women when being hired to top-paying positions, employment had the greatest impact on whether or not an applicant was promoted. This suggested that the women in their study may have accumulated less human capital than their male counterparts, making gender an indirect factor in creating the glass ceiling (Powell & Butterfield, 1994).

Newman (2016) finds that, “...women’s belief in meritocracy is significantly influenced by local variation in the gender pay gap, but men’s attitudes are not” (p.

1014). In other words, men tended to believe in meritocracy in America regardless of how their local wages compared to women's, while women's attitudes changed according to those pay gaps (Newman, 2016). This study was based on the perceptions of the Dream according to "...five nationally representative surveys of the adult American population conducted by the Pew Research Center over the 2008–12 period" (Newman, 2016, p. 1011). Newman's (2016) research included women from Black, Hispanic, and Asian backgrounds, and sampled from regions all across the United States. There was a gap in the literature when it came to men's perceptions of the American Dream, as well as non-binary individuals.' Still, additional research is needed on women's perspectives, especially in the U.S. Southern context.

Race

Race is another social factor that the literature has discussed in connection with perceptions of the American Dream. Stout and Le (2012) published an article that explores African Americans' perceptions of the Dream in relation to "positive symbols of progress" for their racial group, such as the election of Barack Obama as President (p. 1338). Their sample included individuals from all around the United States, both Black and white, using three separate surveys. They were able to compare Blacks' and whites' perceptions of the American Dream, and also test whether those symbols of progress increased enthusiasm for the Dream. They found that these signs of progress for Black Americans did seem to increase attitudes of optimism, especially when it came to Obama's presidency (Stout & Le, 2012).

Stout and Le were not the only researchers to explore Black versus white Americans' experiences with the Dream. Hochschild (1996) argued that Blacks and

whites, whether wealthy or poor, saw one another as barriers to their own achieving of the American Dream. And the “flaws” of the Dream are not limited to affecting only Black Americans; Hochschild states, “...many of the structural conditions that lead to unemployment among high school dropouts and insecurity among college graduates affect whites as well as Blacks” (p. 15).

The literature was lacking when it came to other races’ perceptions of the American Dream, as the discourse mainly focused on white and Black Americans. Additionally, the literature on race and the American Dream in the Southern context is missing.

Class

The literature did not seem to directly address the social identity of class in relation to the American Dream. However, it was indirectly explored in research on education as a path to success in the United States (Lardier et al., 2019). Lardier (2019) found that there was vastly unequal access to quality education as well as higher education in the United States.

Hanson and Zogby analyzed multiple public opinion polls in the United States from 1978 to 2008 in order to gather information about what Americans think about the American Dream. They found that a small, stable number of Americans consistently did not believe that achieving the Dream was possible for themselves (Hanson & Zogby, 2010). Furthermore, the definition of the Dream fluctuated between more material success and spiritual fulfillment over the years (Hanson & Zogby, 2010). Overall, hard work was recognized as the most important aspect of the path to achieving the American Dream (Hanson & Zogby, 2010). This hearkened back to the concept of meritocracy.

With so many gaps in the literature about perceptions of the American Dream, this research seeks to fill in missing information about U.S. Southern college students' perceptions of how race, class, and gender affect an individual's opportunities to achieve the Dream today.

Theory

This study was conducted using a lens influenced by the sociological theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw in 1991, and it explores the ways social identities such as race, class, and gender intersect and overlap to create unique experiences of oppression and privilege. The theory argues that an individual's experience and way of interacting with society cannot be understood through only examining one of their identities (Crenshaw, 1991). The interaction of multiple identities, and specifically how they reproduce disadvantage and inequality, is known as multiple jeopardy (Greenman & Xie, 2008).

To fully understand the theory of intersectionality, it is important to acknowledge structural inequality and what the term means. According to Sørensen (1996), structural inequality can be defined as a persistent pattern of economic, social and political disadvantage that is based on group membership (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.) and reinforced by social institutions, culture, and individual action.

One sphere of sociology that utilizes the concept of intersectionality which is relevant to this study is Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989). This sociological way of thinking acknowledges how Black women throughout history have been made victims to oppression due to the intersection of race, class, and gender (Collins, 1989). Collins

(1989) emphasizes how ordinary Black women have exhibited “everyday resistance” that has made a positive difference for generations of Black women to come (p. 745).

Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought are important when trying to understand the American Dream because the Dream, almost by definition, ignores these concepts, even though they affect the everyday lives, as well as life outcomes, of those in search of the Dream. While believers in the American Dream argue that it does not matter where one comes from – anyone, with hard work, can rise up in our society – Intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought counter argue that our identities, within a structural context, including class, gender, and race, are quintessential in determining just how far someone can succeed in the United States.

Methods

This honors thesis is part of a larger qualitative IRB-approved (H18237) study that included semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with adult college students attending a midsize, predominantly white public university in the southeastern United States. Participants were interviewed by Georgia Southern University faculty and student researchers in 2018 and were asked how social status (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) impacted people's pursuit of the American Dream. Additionally, demographic information was collected for each participant. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and identifiable information was removed from each transcript.

Positionality

The researcher for this study had her own experiences with intersectionality that shaped how the research was analyzed. She was a cisgender woman in her twenties who came from a white, lower-middle class background. Her family was predominantly

Protestant-Christian, but she herself identified as Catholic. She was a college student, like the participants, and was working towards her Bachelor of Science in sociology with an emphasis in social services and a minor in gerontology.

This research was eye-opening for the researcher in that she was able to take a closer look at what differences in perspective arise from others' experiences with social statuses. Many of the participants did not share the same social statuses as the researcher, and this allowed her to reflect on how her experiences and perceptions of the Dream may have been shaped by the intersection of her own race, class, and gender.

Participants

The typical participant in this study was African American, single, Protestant Christian, female, and heterosexual. For this study, sexuality was not explored as a factor affecting perceptions of the American Dream, because there were too few cases where sexuality was mentioned.

About 19 percent (3) of participants identified as white, while 25 percent (4) were mixed-race, and 50 percent (8) were either "Black" or "African American." Of those who identified their ages on the demographic survey, ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, with the average age being about 21. Nine out of the sixteen participants identified as single, and one indicated that they live with their partner. The rest of the participants did not specify their intimate relationship status.

It was important to note that, of those who specified their class, none of the participants identified themselves as lower-class individuals. Most participants identified as being middle-class, and very few identified as upper-class.

Ten of the sixteen participants identified themselves as being part of some sect of Protestant Christianity. One participant identified as spiritual, one as non-religious, and one as “other.” Eleven of the participants either identified as “straight” or “heterosexual.” One identified as lesbian, and the rest did not specify. 62.5 percent (10) of participants were female, and the remaining 37.5 percent (6) were male. There were no non-binary participants.

This study’s participants were all students at a single public university in the deep South of the United States. Their perceptions were likely influenced by southern culture and history surrounding race, class, and gender. In particular, it is important to note the South’s history of slavery and racial inequality and how such a history has affected racial relations and perceptions in the rural South where this particular university was located (Walker-DeVose et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Data for this thesis includes a thematic analysis of 16 transcripts from the larger study. Thematic analysis is a method of coding qualitative research, pioneered by psychologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). This method consists of carefully reading each transcript, and developing codes for emerging themes. These themes, ideally, will create patterns that give concrete meaning to the research. Some of the themes found in these particular interviews, which will be detailed more later in this thesis, included having a family as a measure of success, different types of racial inequality observed by the interviewees, and an emphasis on work ethic leading to success in America, among others. Codes were recorded in a codebook that could be referenced throughout the process, leading to larger themes.

Findings

This study resulted in three major themes related to the participants' perceptions of the American Dream: individual definitions of the Dream, acknowledgement of structural inequalities, and a make-your-way attitude. Acknowledging structural inequalities and the make-your-way attitude were connected in that the belief of making one's way arose from the participants realizing there were structural obstacles in place based on race, class, and gender, to which many of them responded with the belief that those faced with disadvantage must somehow work harder, work smarter, and make their way towards social mobility and success.

It was important to note that participants' race seemed to be related to their acknowledgement of unequal opportunities in the United States; the African American participants exhibited a greater sense of acknowledgement than did white students in the study. However, the make-your-way attitude was common across nearly all interview responses. Additionally, most participants of any race believed that the Dream was easier to achieve for minoritized individuals, lower social classes, and women today than it was throughout history.

Individual Definitions of the American Dream

The interviewees shared several ideas about the definition of the American Dream and how it can be achieved. Some common ideas voiced about the Dream were home ownership, family, material wealth, and the "white picket fence" stereotype. Some participants, such as John, an African American man who did not specify his age or class, stated that he did not "care for the white picket fence," and would rather live a more unconventional version of the American Dream. Though he did not elaborate about just

how unconventional his version of the Dream was, he added that he was already a father to one child, and that he desired more children in the future. Jessica, 24-year old a Black woman of average financial status, also mentioned the “white picket fence” stereotype, stating that she believed the phrase was commonly used by people to define the American Dream. She also noted that the intersection of her race and identity as a woman heavily impacted her personal definition of the Dream; she went on to express her desire to “prove” she was “smart” and “capable”.

Though much of how the participants defined the Dream involved material gains, other non-material ideas were also mentioned. For example, Hana, an 18 year-old mixed race woman of average financial status, identified happiness as a factor in achieving the American Dream. She described the Dream, if it exists, as a combination of happiness and immaterial fulfillment in combination with the aforementioned components of financial stability, having a family, and home ownership.

Several participants stated that each individual could define their own American Dream, and many described what the Dream looked like in their own minds. Though those aspects of stability, home ownership, and family were fairly common, there were a few individual differences. Sheila, a woman who did not specify her race, class, or age, for example, emphasized that her dream was to move around and travel, and not be tied down by a suburban lifestyle that many picture when thinking of the American Dream. John pictured a “faithful wife” in his personal Dream, and expressed his desire to remain faithful as well. It was remarkably common across the board for participants of all races, classes, and genders to desire marriage. Additionally, most participants of any race

mentioned their desire for a career that provided financial stability in regard to their definition of the Dream.

Acknowledgement of Structural Inequalities

It became clear quite early analyzing the data that the interviewees held a strong belief that hard work leads to success in the United States. This finding was not surprising, as this ideology has been prevalent throughout American culture since the birth of the country. Most participants stated that they did believe in the possibility of social mobility in our society. One interviewee, Adaoma, who did not specify her age or class directly, stated that while some fault a broken system for their lack of success, opportunities come from “stepping out of your comfort zone” and “working hard for it”. Her perception of the Dream was influenced by her Black Nigerian heritage, and she described how her family immigrated to the States from a “third-world” country. She stated that she grew up in a suburban, predominantly white neighborhood and that she had access to some resources that others of her skin color may not have. In particular, she described how the quality of education she and her brothers received may be better than that of schools in lower-income neighborhoods. She described a conversation in which she and her brother observed how young folks from other, lower-income schools “drop out...half [of] the time.” Other participants also emphasized the importance of a good education. Kennedy, a white participant, pointed out that she believed a college education had become the “standard” in the United States, and that getting a degree was an important step in achieving social mobility.

Adaoma was not the only person who attributed success and the American Dream to hard work. For example, John communicated that while he acknowledged unequal

opportunities that people of different races, classes, and genders may face, hard work could be the key to success for those born into disadvantaged situations, stating that one could go “from the hood to the mansion.” John elaborated that he believed women were at a disadvantage in the workplace, making the American Dream harder to achieve for them. Furthermore, he acknowledged that, as an African American man, he felt that he had to “ignore parts of [his] culture” in order to assimilate into the “so-called dominant culture,” referring to white expectations and white privilege. He gave the example of how he “wouldn’t necessarily be able to play [his] favorite music in the office,” while his white coworkers, on the other hand, could do so.

However, many of the interviewees of all races, classes, and genders expressed their beliefs that there are systemic inequalities that make the American Dream much less likely for some people. Most of the participants acknowledged unequal opportunities between whites and nonwhites, men and women, cisgender individuals and transgender individuals, lower income folks and upper class individuals, and heterosexuals and LGB+ people. It was important to note that nonwhite participants were more likely to have personal experience with these unequal opportunities and tended to acknowledge structural inequalities more often than their white counterparts; however, this was not always the case. Kennedy, a white woman, went as far as stating that she was not sure if the idea of the American Dream was still a relevant concept, at least for her and those dealing with overwhelming disadvantage. She described how social mobility was almost impossible for many who do not fit into the categories of wealthy, male, and white. For example, she described how she felt that many women do twice the work that men do, because they “have something to prove” in our society. On the other hand, Kennedy

pointed out that she herself benefitted from the privilege that comes with being white rather than a minoritized individual. She cited racial stereotypes as a barrier to social mobility for Black and Latina individuals.

The Southern setting of the university at which the study was conducted seemed to have an effect on how the participants viewed structural inequalities. For example, one participant named Alex, a Black man of 19 years old who did not specify his class, described how racial and class-related stereotypes were especially prominent in the South where he grew up. He in part attributed this to the history of slavery, the Civil War, and Jim Crow laws.

There were different responses when it came to how the interviewees felt we as a society should “deal” with these inequalities; some, such as Adaoma, believed that those with disadvantage, especially racial minorities, should simply “work twice as hard”, and should not “allow” racism or discrimination to affect their personal success. Others, like Kennedy, expressed that they were not confident that all people have the ability to overcome discriminatory obstacles, despite how hard they try. Another participant, Jessica, stated what she believed the Dream required of her: she emphasized that she felt that she had to prove herself as a Black woman. She used the phrase “constant struggle” to describe how it felt to try to attain respect and validation from her peers.

Overwhelmingly, most participants believed they could overcome the obstacles set before them. For example, Adaoma described how she had observed people with initially low opportunities move away to a new area in search of more success. She stressed that individuals must somehow create their own opportunities in spite of poor conditions that they may be born into. A 24-year old African American student who did

not specify her class, Tyra, shared the anecdote of her own grandfather, who had overcome racism and become the mayor of his town. She cited this as evidence that social mobility in the United States was possible.

Make-your-way attitude

This phenomenon in the research led to a pattern of a make-your-way attitude. The overwhelming majority of interviewees held a strong belief that they could make their own way to success through hard work and determination, despite the disadvantages they faced due to their social identities and how they intersected. Though there is a stereotype of young people being lazy and unwilling to work, these college students highly valued work ethic. Leigh, a nursing student who identified as white, stated that in her own profession, hard work was more important than initial circumstances and identities. She even argued that women have the advantage in the field of nursing as opposed to men. Meanwhile, Eva, a mixed-race participant of Asian and African American descent, stated that while white privilege exists, people of color could “work twice as hard” in order to achieve social mobility and thus the American Dream. Marcus, a 25 year-old Hispanic and African American man, described social mobility as a “choice” and a matter of “whether you want to or don’t”. Meanwhile, Deena, a 24 year-old African American and Asian woman who identified as upper-class, stated, “If you work hard, you will move up [in society].”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to fill gaps in the literature about college students’ perceptions of the American Dream in relation to race, class, and gender. Three major themes were found: individual definitions of the Dream, acknowledgement of structural inequalities,

and a “make-your-way” attitude. Interview content varied based on the participant’s background, and responses were affected mainly by the respondents’ race and gender. African American participants exhibited more knowledge of racial injustices, and women participants detailed their own experience with sexism and misogyny. However, most of the participants, with very few exceptions, still believed that the American Dream was attainable through hard work and determination, despite obstacles individuals faced due to their intersecting statuses.

When compared to the literature, this study showed some similarities and differences. For example, Lardier et al. (2019) found that education was seen as the path to success. This study supported that sentiment, with many of the participants emphasizing the importance of quality education and higher education as the key to social mobility.

The literature emphasized the impact of the gender pay gap in relation to the American Dream (Newman, 2016). However, the participants of this study mostly did not discuss the topic of the gender pay gap. And while “positive symbols of progress,” such as Barack Obama being elected as the first Black president, were cited in the research of Stout and Le (2012) as influencing Black Americans’ perspectives on the Dream, hard work and determination (the make-your-way attitude) were favored over such symbols. The exception to this was Tyra, who told the anecdote of her grandfather becoming mayor as a Black man.

These findings help us to understand how college students today may view the American Dream, which may inform the field of sociology how aware college-educated young people are about issues concerning race, class, and gender inequality. It appeared,

in this study in the Deep South at a public university, that the ideas of meritocracy and social mobility largely persist in the minds of college students.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this research. The interviews were done in 2018, five years prior to the thematic analysis for this thesis, and changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as economic, political, and societal changes may affect a more recent and updated study.

This study was also relatively small, with only 16 transcripts analyzed from the larger study. There was a lack of diversity in the participants, as most were Black and middle class.

Future research possibilities might include more of a diversity in race, class, and gender. Specifically, it would be intriguing to study a group of folks who have less education than those individuals of this project. It may be helpful to also ask more detailed questions about how inequalities based on social statuses can be addressed in our society.

This study informed the sociology community on how college students at a public university in the South view the American Dream, and revealed how meritocracy is perpetuated in the minds of young folks in the modern era. It demonstrated how hard work is still heavily valued, and how social mobility is still believed to be possible, even for minoritized and disadvantaged groups.

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