

**Research Project / Dissertation**  
**Timothy Goodly**

**Unfolding the Roadmap to Success: An Ethnographic and Grounded Theory**  
**Study of Agency and Environmental Factors Related to African American**  
**Male Upper Mobility**

**Research Question**

- What are the agency and environmental factors that have contributed to the success of African American males in today's corporate workplace?
- How do these environmental factors contribute to the success of African American males?
- How are these agency factors developed, nurtured and sustained in African American males through their formative years and throughout their working careers?

**Rationale**

Over the past few years, I have spent a considerable amount of time reflecting upon my life, recalling key events that I believe have shaped my current values, aspirations, and concerns. As an African American male who came from a socioeconomic background that is referred to as 'disadvantaged' in common vernacular, I have achieved a considerable amount of workplace success in terms of the traditional measures – education, promotions, work experience, and wage attainment. After having had this "success" pointed out to me repeatedly by friends and work colleagues, I have become increasingly interested in gaining a better understanding of the circumstances and factors that have contributed to my ability to climb several rungs up the corporate ladder. Having often been the lone African American (and usually only person of color) in many executive settings and workplace meetings, I have often experienced inner feelings akin to Du Bois's (1969) double consciousness – trying to amplify my uniqueness while still focusing my energy on mainstream norms and expectations. Thus, my interest has blossomed into a larger quest to discover the determinants of success for other African American males in the corporate workplace.

What factors have contributed to their advancement in their chosen professions? Thus, the aims of my research are to not only identify and examine the agency and environmental factors that contribute to the success of African American men, but to also uncover, build on, or develop theories on how these factors contribute to the success of African American men.

The study of African American men in today's society reveals a dichotomous scenario. On the one hand, African men are some of the most admired men in America: Colin Powell, Tiger Woods, Bill Cosby, Michael Jordan, and Barack Obama represent a small fraction of African men who are celebrated and emulated by American citizens. On the other hand, past and more recent studies suggest that African American men in the United States are becoming increasingly more disconnected from the mainstream society. Despite the efforts of Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty to address the limited job opportunities and widespread deprivation of black men, a panel discussion hosted by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in 1985 concluded at that time that young black men in America were an "endangered species" (Washington Post, June 2, 2006), a dire prediction that current data on African American men does not refute. In a recent study published by the NY Times (March 20, 2006) revealed that the share of young black men without jobs has steadily climbed, with the exception of a slight pause during the economic peak of the late 1990's. In 2000, 65 percent of black male high school dropouts in their 20's were jobless – that is not able to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated. By 2004, the percent of similarly situated black men had increased to 72. Moreover, incarceration rates of black men grew throughout the 1990's and have continued during the past few years. By their mid-30's, 6 in 10 black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison. The study also revealed that half of all black men in the inner cities do not finish high school. Despite these seeming insurmountable odds, black men are still optimistic about the future prospects of other black men. According to a recent a nation-wide recent poll of African American men, 9 in 10 black men would tell their sons they could become anything they want to in life (Washington Post, June 4, 2006). In the same poll, 6 in 10 black men maintained that their collective problems owe more to what they have failed to do themselves rather than "what white people have done to blacks" (p. 11).

According to LaVecchia (1998), federal projections indicate that by the middle of the next century, half of our population will be made up of people we currently consider minorities. What role will the changing U.S. demographics have on the upward mobile prospects of African American men? My recent literature review on this topic suggests that African American men face an uphill battle. As they seek advancement in today's workplace, African American men face both systematic and informal promotional challenges (Smith, 2005; Wilson, et. al., 1999), are more vulnerable to downward mobility (McBriar and Wilson, 2004), occupy racialized job functions (Collins, 1993), experience a widening black-white wage gap (Grodsky and Pager, 2001), do not receive the same wage benefits commensurate with education (Elman and O'Rand, 2004), look directly into an impenetrable glass ceiling (Maume, 2004), and face increasing workplace discrimination (Wooten and James, 2004). Despite the dim outlook foreshadowed by these findings, some African American men are striving in the corporate world and others are successfully navigating through the tides and currents that are part of their daily corporate life. My research seeks to contribute to the limited theories in this area by proposing a new model that identifies and defines the agency and environmental factors that contribute to the upward mobility of African American men.

Based on my qualitative interviews with 15 prominent African American executives, I have developed a model that suggests that African American men are largely influenced by family members, role models, positive images, and mentors throughout the course of their lives. The confluence of these four environmental factors serve to not only develop and nurture key character strengths in young African men, but they also provide vital nutrition to African American men as they develop and enhance new strengths and talents. My model suggests that during early life, these environmental factors build self-confidence, encourage self-development, create early wins, and buffer African American male children from early setbacks during their adolescent period. In time, these same African American males develop key character strengths (self-regulation, bravery, love of learning, resilience). Through academic success, job success, and on-going environmental influences, these African American men develop and enhance additional character strengths (meaningfulness, gratitude, altruism) which serve to strengthen and augment their previously developed character strengths. While continued research and more interviews will further shape and enhance this model, varied literature on self-efficacy lends support to my model. Based largely on the

work of Bandura (1977), self-efficacy theory suggests that “people’s beliefs in their capabilities to produce desired effects by their own actions” (p. vii) are the most important determinants of the behaviors people chose to engage in and the extent to which they persevere when faced with challenges (Maddux, 2002). Grounded in social cognitive theory – an approach to understanding human cognition, action, motivation, and emotion that assumes we are all active shapers of rather than passive reactors to our environments (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Barone, Maddux, & Snyder, 1997; Maddux, 2002), self-efficacy development is influenced by two interacting factors – personal agency and responsive environments. Personal agency development begins in infancy and moves from the perception of casual relationships between events, to an understanding that actions produce results, to the recognition that one can produce actions that cause results (Bandura, 1997; Maddux, 2002). Social environments that are responsive to a child’s attempts at control also facilitate the development of the child’s self-efficacy beliefs. Hence, parents and others aid the child’s personal agency development by responding to their actions – which encourage exploration and enhances their sense of agency. As Maddux (2002) notes, efficacy beliefs and personal agency are developed throughout our life span as we continually integrate information from personal experiences, vicarious experiences, imaginal experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional stress. Through additional research, I hope to elaborate and enhance on the contributions my model’s agency and environmental factors make to the upper mobility of African American men.

## **Methods**

The complete methodology for this research project is being determined at this time. To date, the researcher has conducted interviews with 15 prominent African American men in various professions across the country. Interviewees include a former mayor of a large U.S. city, a COO of a Fortune 100 Company, a CFO of a Fortune 500 Company, former military officers, self-employed executives, and various other executives in both the private and public sectors. The questions included inquiries into the interviewees’ major life events, major learning, greatest success, greatest failure, role models, positive images, and advice to young African American men. The interview responses were then coded and labeled. The original model was developed based on the researchers own adolescent, academic, and work experience. Further steps toward theory refinement may include an ethnographic account of the

researcher's experiences, expanded interviews with original participants, interviews with new participants, and the development of a quantitative survey based on the revised model.

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