MAKING IT, BUT STILL "WORKING TWICE AS HARD TO GET HALF AS FAR"

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I use findings from studies I conducted over a 22 year period with African Canadians about their educational and occupational/career aspirations, employment experiences and achievements, and their experiences with racism and discrimination. Using three themes – optimism, self-confidence, and working harder – that emerge through the years from the data, I discuss the experiences and achievements of seven individuals who participated in a follow-up study in 2006. All seven participants remained persuaded that their strategies of optimism, self-confidence and hard work made it possible for them to realize their aspirations.

> *You have to overcome [discrimination]. Not because it exists I am going to lay down and die and don't bother trying. I know that it exists... and I know what I have to do to overcome it. It calls for working hard (Michelle, 21 years, 1984).*

> *I am as optimistic.... maybe now I am more realistic and I think it is possible [to make it] but with a big BUT. But you have to take certain strategies to get there. It is not going to be easy..., but I can do it because I understand the hurdles and what you have to do to get over them (Michelle, 28 years, 1991).*

> *I wanted to make sure that I had everything that there was – nothing that the potential employer could look at to discount me. I heard the saying that Black people had to work twice as hard to get half as far. There was always that sense that you couldn't just be equal, you had to be better than (Michelle, 43 years, 2006).*

Initially interviewed in 1984 while in her third year at university, and again in 1991 and 2006, Michelle's reflections above are informed by her understanding of the "hurdles" that racism and discrimination posed for her in attaining the career to which she aspired. Yet despite these apparent hurdles, she was not deterred. In fact, she remained determined and, as she said in 1991, "optimistic," despite becoming "a little more realistic" with age. By 2006 – married with children, a house in the suburbs, a comfortable salary, and working in a large business firm in a downtown Toronto office tower – one would think that Michelle would have concluded that her strategy of determination and optimism had paid off and she had "made it." Racism was not the "hurdle" that she had feared. However, Michelle, like the seven (two males and four females) other participants in the follow-up study I conducted in 2006, maintained that race and racism were factors in their "struggles" to negotiate and attain their current jobs, and therefore something which mediated their opportunities and was a constant in their everyday lives (NFB, *Making It,* 2006).[1]

In this article, I use findings from the studies I conducted over a 22 year period with African Canadians about their educational and occupational/career aspirations, employment experiences and achievements, and their experiences with racism and discrimination.

The seven participants I reference in this article were among the 60 young people (ages 17 to 22) who I interviewed in 1984/85. I re-connected with 22 of them (then ages 24 to 29) seven years later (1991) to find out if they were "still optimistic that with self-confidence, determination and education, they would achieve their goals" (James 1993, p. 3). In this article, I examine primarily the experiences and comments of the seven 2006 participants, examining the consistencies and changes in their ideas over the years and noting the extent to which their aspirations were realized. In doing so, I draw on critical theories which hold that the social, educational, and employment opportunities to which individuals have or gain access, are not simply a result of racial, ethnic, class, gender or other differences, but are a consequence of social inequities that are structured and sustained through classism, racism, xenophobia and patriarchy which are inherent in society. As such, critical theorists call into question society's claims of meritocracy, equal opportunity, democracy, colorblindness and multiculturalism (see Hinchey, 2008; Porfilio & Malott 2011; Yosso, 2005). Within this framework, I discuss three themes – optimism, self-confidence, and working harder – that emerge from the data through the years.

OPTIMISM

Most of the participants (25/60 or 42%) in the 1984/85 study aspired to professional and white collar careers, such as medicine, law, business, teaching and social work. They were optimistic that, even in the face of racism, they would realize their career aspirations. And while race was generally perceived to be one "hurdle," gender, for females, was another. Sharon, for instance, stated in 1984/85, "Being a Black woman means that I have two strikes against me to start with, but that makes things challenging." So for many of the then youth, racism was taken to be a challenge by which they were invigorated or inspired to pursue their career goals – something which they carried into their 40s.

Seven years later, many of the 22 participants admitted that their optimism had waned somewhat, suggesting that the hurdles of racism and discrimination were not as easy to overcome as they had indicated in their earlier interviews. But they were not deterred from pursing their career goals, believing that the education and skills they had acquired would allow them to realize their ambitions. Accordingly, when we met Sharon in 2006, she had this to say:

> *When my kids were small, and I was still in the early part of my career, I worked extremely long hours– you know, I really wanted to do well, and I think it's because of that optimism too, that I am in my field. I really want… to succeed. But I have to say it's also because of… what was said when I was little. 'Well you know, you're representing Black people, you have to achieve. Your work will be examined under a microscope, whereas your colleagues' may not be.' And I don't know if I disagreed at that time, I don't think so. I think I just went ahead…. I think part of that is because of that sort of fear that if you don't do well, you're not going to represent your race well and they'll say 'Oh that Black, you know, they really can't do things the way that others can" (July 2006).*

The optimism of many of the participants seemed to be nurtured by their commitment to positively 'represent' their community, believing that their hard work would be evidence enough to challenge the stereotypes of Blacks as shiftless and incompetent. In Sharon's words, "I worked really, really hard because of that, and I wasn't being paid a whole lot of money." Interestingly, rather than rejecting this racialization and inherent essentialism, Sharon and her peers used it as inspiration, believing that through their attitudes and actions they would be seen as one among many Black individuals who capably apply themselves to their education and employment.

SELF-CONFIDENCE

Participants' optimism was maintained by the self-confidence they had cultivated. They believed that they had what it took, and were doing what was necessary, to surmount the hurdles and struggles that they had come to accept as part of their everyday life. Take Larry, for example, who had just started work as a tool and die maker when he was interviewed in 1984. He was optimistic and confident that he would become "a foreman at [his] shop;" and as he later added:

> *Another ten years I will have my own business even though there is discrimination, because I'm a hard worker... there is always going to be discrimination but there is always someone out there who is going to stand by your side. They don't necessarily have to be Black (Larry, 1984).*

As adolescents, participants held confidently to the idea that their education, hard work, skills and tenacity were sufficient to ensure they reached their goals; it was largely about their own agency and the recognition that they would receive from people who, as Larry said, would stand by them. However, by their late twenties, the participants started to suggest that they could not

achieve the opportunities they sought by themselves – they needed to work, as Sonia said in 1991, "in concert with other people of like minds because you can't take on the system by yourself even if you prove to be the brightest or best" (in James, 1993, p. 16). By 1991, then, participants were confessing their "naivety" and were shifting their focus from exclusively individual efforts to ones that addressed the system. Yet they remained confident that their knowledge and understanding of the system as well as their education and abilities were sufficient to enable their successes in a structure they accepted as "not perfect."

Larry, for example, in 2006 recalled going through "a lot of struggles when I took over as being a Black manager in the tool and dye business because, as far as I'm concerned, it's unheard of." He attributed this situation to the fact that, as he estimated, only about 1% of tool and dye workers were Black even though there were "a lot of tool and dye shops in the area." Larry went on to suggest that even though he was an example of an accomplished tool and die maker, and was now in a position to employ more Blacks in the business, systemic issues made it difficult for him to do so. He explained:

> *When I'm hiring, I find that if I hire a Black kid everybody around me says he's related to me… It runs all over the shop. If I hire somebody White, Chinese, Indian, they never say a word, it never comes out. Now, … basically it means that you're not able to bring your kids to see what you're doing to get a good life (July 2006).*

When asked how he handled such situations, Larry responded by saying: "I hire the best candidate for the job. Colour is not an issue. Racism to me is… there if you want it to be there." He also made the point that self-confidence – in other words, being "strong enough in mind and body, [and] basically speak up for yourself" – makes it possible to handle situations like that. He went on to say:

> *I believed in myself more than anything else. I believed that I could do it. And I also believed that colour was not going to stand in the way. And going back 22 years…, it's hard for a young kid, even a young Black kid, to think that way, because why wouldn't colour stand in the way? (July 2006).*

HARD WORK

When we talked with Larry in 1984, he had been working in the tool and dye company for about two years. At that time he pointed out that he was well qualified for the job and was working "harder" than his co-workers "to achieve what a White person will achieve" (in James, 1990, p. 87). This was also because he wanted to become a foreman, which he did by 2006, as noted above. Similarly, Michelle, whose comments are noted in the introduction, obtained the "financially rewarding" job she wished for in 1984 when she was first interviewed. She said then that she was looking for "a job in health administration that would pay me a salary where I could afford a nice house and a car… [and] not worry about making ends meet with every cheque, and I could pay all my bills" (in James, 1990, p. 63).

Michelle, too, worked harder than her white counterparts. And like many of the other participants, she attributed the idea of working hard to her parents. As Michelle put it:

> *My mom says that because you're Black you have to try twice as hard and you always have to beat them [Whites] by full percentages – you can't tie and you can't get lower. It has to be by a significant amount so that there would be no argument, because whenever… a White person and a Black person go for a job and have the same qualifications, ninety per cent of the time the White person will get it… (in James, 1990, p. 39).*

This parental schooling about the benefits of hard work as a means to counteract racism and discrimination, and participants' self-confidence, seemed to maintain their optimism even as they were faced with racism which, by their late twenties, they had experienced in their job searches and employment. For Michelle, it was her experience at one of her job interviews that seemed to have been the most memorable. She told us the same story in 2006, as she did in 1991. She recalled that as she sat alone in the lobby one Sunday morning waiting to be interviewed, the interviewer came, looked pass her, and seeing no one else asked: "Oh, are you Michelle?" with what Michelle read as a surprise that she was Black – because, as she proffered, she was not the person they had expected for the senior position to which she had applied, since her name, qualification (an MBA) and accent on the phone did not signal her skin colour (James, 1993, p. 10).

Looking back at her experiences fourteen years later, Michelle was convinced that her confidence and hard work had brought her to where she was. She remarked:

> *It is really scary embarking on a career not knowing what's going to happen. You hear things about barriers and qualified people who could not find jobs. I wanted to make*

sure that I had everything that there was – nothing that the potential employer could look at to discount me. I heard the saying that Black people had to work twice as hard to get half as far... For me that was a motivating factor. I felt that that saying had come about from real life experience and I wasn't willing to take the chance that it wasn't true. I wanted to cover my bases.... I have had some experience with that in the school system as well, where I felt that to be 'just as good as' didn't pay off for me. You always have to be better than... (Michelle, July 2006).

CONCLUSION

The sample of seven young people I interviewed 22 years after their first interview and 15 years after their second about their educational and employment experiences and their aspirations remained persuaded that their strategies of optimism, self-confidence and hard work made it possible for them to realize their aspirations. This is understandable, in part, since they were all employed in occupations from which they were gaining much satisfaction. In their 1991 interviews, they indicated that they were less naïve and more realistic about the impact that racism would have, and had had, on their employment opportunities and experiences. By 2006, they seemed to have come to an understanding that individual modeling of a good worker and citizen was not enough to change the system of racism and the structure of inequities that maintained them. They did not seem to have become cynical or disillusioned, but appeared strengthened by their accomplishments, confident in the necessity and usefulness of their strategies, and determined that they would be able to sidestep, if not surmount, racism . They refused to let the system make them fail.

NOTES

[1] A portion of this research was made into a video, *Making It,* Citizenshift, NFB, 2006.

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