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“I’m a Keep Rising. I’m a Keep Going Forward, Regardless”: Exploring Black Men’s Resilience Amid Sociostructural Challenges and Stressors

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Abstract

A growing number of health and social science research findings document Black men’s adversities, but far less is known about their strengths. The purpose of this study was to explore resilience among low-income, urban, Black men. Semistructured interviews produced rich narratives, which uncovered numerous sociostructural stressors in men’s lives, such as racism, incarceration, and unemployment. Most men were resilient despite these challenges, however, and described five main forms of resilience: (a) perseverance; (b) a commitment to learning from hardship; (c) reflecting and refocusing to address difficulties; (d) creating a supportive environment; and (e) drawing support from religion/spirituality. Analysis of men’s challenge and resilience narratives revealed the need to understand and promote low-income, urban, Black men’s resilience via a broader ecosocial perspective which acknowledges the importance of social and community-level protective factors to support individual men’s efforts to survive and thrive amid their adversities.

Keywords

African Americans; interviews; semistructured; men’s health; resilience; social issues

The evidence is irrefutable that Black¹ men in the United States face numerous and significant adversities. In recent years, various national reports have described Black men as disadvantaged, left behind, endangered, invisible, and/or in crisis (Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2008; Mincy, 2006; National Urban League, 2007; Western, 2007). When compared with men in other racial/ethnic groups, Black men are disproportionately represented among those who drop out of high school (United States Department of Commerce, 2008), are unemployed (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics

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¹Throughout this article, we use the terms *African American* and *Black* interchangeably.

[BLS], 2009), are poor (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009), or have been incarcerated (Cooper, Sabol, & West, 2009). The average 2008 unemployment rate for Black men over age 20 was more than twice the rate for White men in the same age category (10.2% vs. 4.9%; BLS, 2009). Moreover, between 2000 and 2008, Black men were 6.5 and 3.3 times more likely to be incarcerated than White men and men of all races and ethnicities, respectively (Cooper et al.).

The health status of Black men in the United States is equally troubling. Black men have the highest mortality rate of any gender/racial/ethnic group in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], National Center for Health Statistics, 2009), and higher overall age-adjusted cancer (CDC & National Cancer Institute, 2009) and hypertension rates (CDC, Division of Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention, 2009) than men of other races/ethnicities. In 2006, the rate of new HIV infection for Black men was six times higher than the rate for non-Hispanic White men, and almost three times higher than the rate for Hispanic/Latino men (CDC, 2010). Furthermore, homicide rates among young Black men aged 10 to 24 are almost three times higher than the rates for Latinos and nearly 20 times greater than the rates for non-Hispanic White men in the same age category (CDC, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2009).

The roots of Black men's poor social and health outcomes are complex, and influenced by a confluence of social and structural (sociostructural) challenges. In this article, we define sociostructural challenges broadly, to include challenges inherent in men's social environments (Abdou et al., 2010). Examples of sociostructural challenges include poverty; men's socialization and pressure to project strength, dominance, and aggression (Edelman et al., 2006; Mincy, 2006; Western, 2007); and interpersonal and institutional racism, and the way racism shapes discriminatory education, employment, and incarceration policies (Williams, 2003; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2008). Despite the gravity of these stressors, a small but important body of evidence is beginning to document Black men's resilience in the face of this unique combination of sociostructural challenges (Brown, 2008; Utsey, Bolden, Lanier, & Williams, 2007; Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook, & Stanard, 2008).

Researchers and practitioners do not agree on a single definition of resilience. Early seminal resilience researchers examined the traits of individuals (Werner, 1989), whereas more recently, researchers have explored resilience as a dynamic interaction between individuals and their social and cultural environment (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Richardson, 2002). Although researchers continue to debate about how to understand and apply the concept (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), resilience typically refers to "good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p. 228). Scholarship on resilience reflects an important paradigm shift from deficits to strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), but significant gaps in the application and study of resilience remain. A growing body of psychological research includes descriptions of resilience among different populations (Fergus & Zimmerman; Luthar & Cicchetti; Masten). Other disciplines, including public health and consequent prevention and health-promotion strategies, have focused more on addressing risk factors and vulnerabilities to disease, and less on fostering the strengths or other conditions that support healthy behaviors (Abdou et al., 2010; Davis, Cook, & Cohen, 2005; Wexler, DiFulvio, & Burke, 2009). Several resilience scholars have also cited an urgent need to better understand resilience among African Americans specifically, whose experiences remain understudied relative to Whites (Abdou et al.; Arrington & Wilson, 2000; Brown, 2008; Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Miller, 1999; Utsey et al., 2007). Such research is necessary to develop a "culturally congruent and empirically sound model of risk and resilience" (Utsey et al., 2007, p. 76) that acknowledges the structural and pervasive (e.g., racist) nature of African Americans' stressors and

incorporates protective factors specific to African American life and culture (Utsey et al., 2007).

In addition to the limited amount of research on African Americans, Brown (2008) has noted that the existing inquiries infer resilience in African Americans by measuring singular psychological or health outcomes, such as well-being or religiosity, and thus give only a partial picture of resilience. Despite evidence that resilience can be developed at any point over the life course (Werner, 1989, 1994), samples of African American children, adolescents (Barrow, Armstrong, Vargo, & Boothroyd, 2007), and college students (Brown; Utsey et al., 2008) dominate current research findings. Fewer reports describe the experiences of Black adults in general (Abdou et al., 2010), or Black men in particular (Alim et al., 2008; Utsey et al., 2007). In light of the extensive nature of Black men's sociostructural challenges and the gaps in the research to identify their strengths, we conducted semistructured interviews with Black men in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to document the nature of men's stressors and challenges, and understand men's resilience in the context of those challenges.

Methods

In this article we focus on individual semistructured interviews conducted with 30 men who were part of a larger study, Represent: The Health and Sexual Experiences of Black Men Study. Trained recruiters approached Black men from randomly selected venues in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, that were in United States Census block sites with a Black population of at least 50%. The study's recruitment postcards invited men to participate in a confidential study about the "health and sexual experiences of Black men." Prospective participants were screened by phone to determine whether they met the study's eligibility criteria of identifying as Black or African American, being between the ages of 18 and 44 years, and reporting heterosexual vaginal intercourse during the previous 2 months. Participants received a \$50 cash incentive. The Institutional Review Board at the primary author's institution approved all study procedures.

A semistructured interview guide included questions designed to attain rich narratives about the men's lives. The following five specific interview questions elicited responses about men's resilience: (a) How would you describe what life is like for you as a Black man?; (b) What are some of the expectations that people have for you to be and/or not be as a Black man?; (c) What is it like to live with these expectations?; (d) How do you feel when you do not meet those expectations?; and (e) How does your religion or spirituality help (and/or fail to help or support) you during stressful times?

Two Black men trained in interviewing techniques conducted the face-to-face, digitally recorded, individual interviews, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. After the interviews, participants completed a brief self-administered questionnaire that included questions about demographics. Interviews were transcribed and edited to remove identifiers. After multiple readings, the transcripts were imported into a qualitative data analysis computer software package for coding. We analyzed the data via two strategies derived from grounded theory: coding and analytical memos (Charmaz, 2006). Coding progressed in two stages, open and selective coding (Charmaz; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We discussed any differences in coding until we reached agreement. We wrote analytical notes throughout all phases of coding to highlight key questions about relationships in the data and to refine codes. We assessed the quality or trustworthiness of our analyses via four criteria that are described in detail in Bowleg, Lucas, and Tschann (2004): prolonged engagement with the data, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Merrick, 1999).

Results

Analysis was based on in-depth interviews with 30 Black men who ranged in age from 18 to 44 years ($M = 31.47$, $SD = 8.41$). The sample was predominantly lower income; half of the men ($n = 15$) reported annual incomes below \$9,999. Many ($n = 21$, 67%) of the participants had some college training, a high school diploma, or a general equivalency diploma; more than half of the sample ($n = 16$, 53%) were unemployed; and 33% ($n = 10$) of the men reported previous histories of incarceration. Below we describe the major themes of the analysis, including an overview of men's general sociostructural stressors, and five different forms of resilience identified by participants. With the exception of some minor edits to improve clarity, all quotes are provided verbatim. We use pseudonyms to protect participants' confidentiality.

Sociostructural Challenges: "Every Day Feels Like a Different Struggle"

It was common for interviewees to describe their lives as "hard," "challenging," or "tough." When asked what life was like for him as a Black man, Scott said, "A constant struggle.... [There is] always a constant oppressor." James noted similarly that "every day feels like a different struggle." Analysis of the participants' narratives indicated that their lives were hard because of four interrelated sociostructural challenges that are described in more detail throughout the results section: (a) racial microaggressions; (b) incarceration; (c) unemployment and the subsequent stress of supporting their families without sufficient finances; and (d) enduring the stress of the streets (Bowleg, Teti, Malebranche, & Tschann, 2011).

Racial microaggressions are everyday insults, indignities, and demeaning messages sent to people of color (Sue et al., 2007). Participants' most commonly cited microaggression was the experience of having others, particularly White people, perceive them as "worthless," "unintelligent," "criminals," and/or "drug users." Erik captured the sentiments of many participants when he said it was hard for him and other Black men "to be taken seriously," because people expected him to "[d]o nothin' with my life.... Go to jail like everybody else.... Want nothin' for my future.... Be a lowlife." Scott summarized the stress imposed by these microaggressions, calling the low societal expectations "a noose around [his] neck."

In contrast to low societal expectations, the participants described high and sometimes burdensome familial financial caretaking expectations. As Terrance put it, he felt pressure to "bring home the bacon, fry it, and feed it too." The interviewees often described struggling to support their families financially, particularly in light of their incarceration histories. For example, Rob explained that he could not secure employment because of a 13-year-old conviction. Karl, who also disclosed a history of incarceration, explained that his family's expectations were "trying.... You can't expect me to take care of my family with no employment."

In addition to racial microaggressions, incarceration, and unemployment-related stressors, interviewees described the stress of the streets. "The streets" denotes both a living environment and a culture or code of behavior among low-income, inner-city Black youth that is "organized around a desperate search for respect that governs public social relations, especially violence" (Anderson, 1999, pp. 9–10). Ronald described the streets as "drugs, cops, violence ...no playgrounds in the vicinity," an upbringing that required him to "be hard" and "fight" to earn respect in his community, and to support and defend his family. Sean said he was "the streets," explaining that he was shot six different times growing up amid drugs and violence. Malcom defined the essence of Black men's struggles as "having

to deal with the streets or with the people of the streets,” saying that violence killed most Black youth before their 13th birthday.

Resilience

Despite the overwhelming presence of these sociostructural challenges in men’s lives, the participants described resilience that could be categorized into five major categories: (a) perseverance; (b) a commitment to learning and growing from hardship; (c) reflecting and refocusing to address difficulties; (d) creating their own supportive environment; and (e) drawing support from religion/spirituality.

Perseverance: “Keep goin’, keep goin’, I keep goin’”—Many participants provided examples of persevering despite challenges. Common perseverance strategies included a commitment to “keep goin’,” trying harder, and refusing to quit. Participants often invoked images of motion to describe how they pursued their goals, explaining emphatically that they would not fail if they kept moving or kept going. For example, Sean said that his persistence protected him from getting “stuck in neutral”:

[There are] two strikes against me: I’m Black, and I’m [an] ex-felon. So you settle like, “Okay, you can’t make it further than what we [society] allow you to.” And me myself, I can’t get stuck in that. You know, I can’t get stuck in that, ‘cause [there is] so much out here for me as a Black man, so much.... Basically, if I apply for [a] job an’ they shut the door, I just go apply for another one better than that one. For instance, I went on three interviews in one day.... Keep goin’, keep goin’. I keep goin’.

Ronald also explained the importance of “moving in the right direction” to overcome the perils of “the streets” and to avoid embodying negative stereotypes of Black men as “troublemakers” or “drug dealers.” Although Ronald spoke openly about “running the streets,” he also described taking positive steps, such as working for a local politician. In describing his personal philosophy, he said, “Always step forward.... Don’t stay idle, because if you stay idle you’re stuck.” Likewise, Kareem focused on “moving [forward]” to avoid becoming “one of them statistics [of Black men] out there: dead, in jail, sellin’ drugs.”

For some men, persisting and pushing to reach their goals despite constant adversities had negative psychological consequences. For example, Terrance equated life to a “prize fight.” He said that the “first smack was done by the doctor,” and that he was still “taking the beatin’” while struggling to support his family financially. He explained:

I cannot fail. I have the feeling that if I’m like a, uh—what do you call them, little gerbil on the wheel. If I keep it movin’, I won’t fall. I’m constantly jugglin’, an’ if I drop one ball, it’s gonna create havoc.... I’m always, I won’t say anxious, but I have anxiety. I move into the next project; completin’ the one I’m on, but always goin’ to the next project.

Terrance’s use of the image of a gerbil on the wheel connotes physical exhaustion, which Terrance believed was necessary to keep him from “falling” despite the havoc and anxiety that his ongoing efforts produced. Likewise, Ricky said that he “[kept] moving on” to manage his “very racist” work environment, but he added that he “did not have any choice,” suggesting that “moving on” was not necessarily how he wanted to confront this challenge. He said that sometimes he “lost hope” trying to reach the positive expectations he set for himself, because of the lack of educational and employment opportunities in his environment: “You can strive for ’em [positive goals and expectations] and strive for ’em, but the more you strive for ’em in the environment that you’re in, it just seems like it just hold you back.”

Zach described his efforts to support his family financially as “difficult” and “frustrating.” His criminal record thwarted his job prospects and made it challenging for him to “re[integrate] himself back into the community.” Nonetheless, he summarized the sentiments of many participants when he insisted, “On a daily basis it’s a struggle, you know? But I haven’t given up, and I’ll never give up.”

Learn new skills and grow from hardship: “Intelligence, ambitions ...it’s just part of the key”—Pursuing formal (e.g., via a university or other educational or vocational training) or informal (e.g., gaining new skills or insights) education was another strategy that participants used to prevail over adverse circumstances. Erik, Kareem, and Sean commented on the importance of getting an education to escape the streets. Erik said his goal was to go to college, to “stay educated an’ go do life the right way,” vs. “[going] to jail like everybody else.” Kareem described supporting his family financially as his main stressor, but said that a high school diploma and/or a college degree were key to “avoiding the trap of what’s goin’ on out there [in the streets].” Despite his violent upbringing on the streets, Sean said that he initiated his own learning to avoid getting “stuck” or “settling for less” than he was worth:

I try to learn different things. Like, computer-wise. I bought a computer [and I] don’t even know how to work it. But I guarantee you, eventually I will. You know? [I] just, just book smart myself.... Intelligence, ambitions ...it’s just part of the key.

Greg and Paul made sure to convert their personal challenges into learning experiences. Despite Greg’s financial stress, he said his struggles could be helpful learning experiences: “The more trials an’ tribulations [I have] ...The more I learn.... I think, it, it’s a good thing.” Likewise, Paul, who described struggling to make sense of the negative societal expectations for him as a Black man “to be a criminal, to be violent, to be a womanizer, to be a drug user, to not take care o’ my kids, to, um, have bad credit, to not have a job,” said it was important not to “miss an opportunity [to use a problem] as a learning experience for the next time somethin’ comes up.”

Reflect and refocus: “You gotta take time to see who you are”—Taking the time to reflect on difficult situations was a common way for participants to perceive that they could overcome their challenges effectively, or refocus their efforts if necessary. Dave explained his process of reflection, planning, and self-improvement:

If it’s something as small as being late to appointments, you know, I’ll have a personal check-and-balance system. Whether it just be just reflecting durin’ the course of a day, or in the morning to remind myself to improve on that ...[or] whether it be planning, to adjust to whatever my personal expectations are, [or] seeking out folks who may do better at certain things, to ask them for their guidance in certain areas.

Echoing Dave’s approach, Donovan, who described his life as a Black man as “an uphill battle every day,” recounted that he also reflected and sought out resources to make positive changes when confronted with difficult situations such as racist work or school environments, or general social expectations for Black men to be “failures”:

I try not to beat myself up too much, you know, and I don’t try to pass the buck.... I try to, you know, take a step back, and assess the situation.... “What [is it] exactly that I need to make change about? ...What can I do to fix myself, or what is it that you on the outside see about me that you think I can fix?”

For James, reflection and meditation were important and healthy alternatives to negative coping mechanisms that he believed many of his peers used:

Sometimes I mean, [I] just sit down an' meditate. You know what I mean? As for a Black man, like, a lotta these Black youth wanna just hang out with their friends. And, I mean, have sex an' smoke [marijuana]. But you gotta rest your mind an' meditate. You gotta know who you are. You know what I mean? You gotta take time to see what you wanna do in life.

After reflecting on problems and/or how to solve them, many of the participants reported being open and willing to “refocus” and try various approaches to succeed if their current strategy was not working. Rasheed explained that he tried to think “logical[ly] about everything,” and would not hesitate to “use a different approach” if he was not meeting his goals to excel in college and secure a lucrative job. Similarly, Cory—who said that he was frustrated by negative societal stereotypes for Black men to be criminals, citing an example of “[walking] into a store to go shoppin’ an’ people followin’ me aroun’” for fear he would rob them—explained that he would “regroup if he did not meet his goals”:

If I’m workin’ my plan, an’ my plan is not workin’, then there’s somethin’ wrong with my plan. Or, somethin’ wrong with me. Either way, I have to regroup ... recalibrate, or refocus ...because the goal hasn’t changed.

Create positive environments: Garnering support from community, family, and self—Although the challenges around them were numerous, several interviewees described taking the initiative to create their own healthy or supportive environments. For example, Paul and Sean accomplished this by surrounding themselves with affirming people. Paul explained,

I’m not really into the, uh, “street stuff,” so the challenge is to find [a] way to make the community I live in more positive, an’ try to find like-minded people who want to do positive things with their time, as opposed to negative things.

Sean’s strategy involved avoiding negativity: “I don’t surround myself around a whole bunch of negative people, you know? I was always taught [that] if you want to build buildings, you surround yourself by a person that builds buildings.”

Other men garnered inspiring advice from others. A few participants, who described being raised by their mothers or grandmothers, recounted how these role models provided lifelong encouraging advice, which they remembered and summoned to deal with difficult times. For example, Ronald commented that he was raised to believe that “you can be anything you want to be.... Do whatever you want to do ...go wherever you want to go.” Likewise, Rasheed’s mother had warned him that anything he wanted to do would be a struggle, but taught him that he could “overpass” and “overcome” any difficulties. Last, Scott also described how his mother had raised him to “defeat the naysayers” by encouraging him to focus on himself, and not the negativity around him.

Other participants did not have and could not find positive sources of community or familial support. For these men, relying on themselves was the key to creating an environment in which they could successfully support themselves and their families. Dave elaborated on his motto: “One of my personal themes is to live life on [my] own terms. I think I’ve developed a certain level of self-esteem, and a personal constitution and a world view that, I really don’t recognize other folks’ expectations.” Both Malcom and Lamont alluded to the necessity of living and solving problems on their own terms so as to survive. Malcom identified various daily struggles, including engaging in violence and needing to “hustle” to make money. He even described how his stress led him to a suicide attempt. Still, he maintained that he was “determined to survive in life and beat the odds.” He explained, “It’s about me ...I’m not here to please you. I’m here to please me and my kid.” He stressed, “If I’m worried about ... what [people] think about me, then I might as well dig my own grave

and bury myself.” Lamont also described having to hustle and sell drugs for money. Similarly, he explained the importance of living on his own terms: “You can’t tell me what to do. Let me do me.”

Religion and/or spirituality: “Fuel to overcome obstacles”—Participants’ reliance on religion or spirituality to gather strength to overcome adversities was a common strategy. Although some men referred to the support of a specific institutionalized religion or a specific God or higher power, many discussed their faith generally or in terms of their spirituality. No matter how they defined it, religion/spirituality served as emotional support and guidance, a source of stress relief and comfort, and a way for participants to accept and then address their challenges. Dave called spirituality the “fuel to overcome [his] obstacles,” which he identified as various stressful and difficult life experiences. Likewise, one of the strategies that Justin identified for dealing with racist remarks was “support from prayer.” Tony also said he prayed to manage a number of different challenges, including unemployment:

I definitely pray, you know, when I’m down, when I lose a family member or somethin’. I pray, an’ that definitely helps me through it. I even have prayed for a job before and got a job, like, almost that next week. So, I think it does help, bein’ that, you know, I believe in God an’, you know, when something goes wrong, I, I pray and, it might help me feel better, or help me think it’s getting better.

Others described how they imagined God to be with them as they faced struggles. Scott, who described life as a Black man as being “caged in with no outlets and no one to turn to,” put it this way: “I street walk with God every day now.” Wayne, who faced various everyday challenges including police harassment and an intense pressure to financially support his family and his community, described God as his only source of support during difficult times: “The only person I got is God, because these people [his friends, family and neighbors] ain’t going to love me.” Wayne defined prayer as stress relief, noting, “Every time I pray I feel better. Any time I make [the formal prayer of Islam], I always feel better. My head feel clear, stress go away, and everything.” Despite the isolation and despair he described feeling at times, Wayne said that God’s support was one of the supports that helped him to overcome any barriers and “keep rising.... Keep going forward regardless.” Likewise, Jamie, who still mourned his younger brother’s murder, said, “[My religious background] keeps me on the positive side,” and maintained, “Regardless of how the situation is ...I keep trying to do something positive.... I still try to stay positive.... Try to stay a positive person.”

Several participants explained that their religion/spirituality helped them to manage or overcome their adversities by helping them to understand that “everything happens for a reason,” and/or that their difficulties were “God’s will.” And as a result, God would help them through their struggles. For example, Rob, who cited a number of worries related to managing the pressure to find work to support his family—including the fact that his grandfather committed suicide because of the very same pressures—called religion a “strong point.” He stated adamantly, “If you believe and you trust [in God], I mean things can work out, for real.” Tommy also explained how he “gave” his problems to God for a resolution:

If I didn’t accomplish somethin’ that I was supposed to have accomplished or somebody expected me to do somethin’—you know what I did? I just gave it to God. I just said, “Well, you knew all about it.” And you know what? An’ then it all worked out for itself.

For these men, turning to God was a way to accept and manage challenges that were too overwhelming for them to make sense of by themselves.

Discussion

Given the dearth of resilience research that has been focused on describing the experiences of African American adult men, we explored the nature of both adversity and resilience among a sample of Black men in Philadelphia. Participants' narratives revealed that four related types of sociostructural challenges or stressors were prevalent in the men's lives: (a) racial microaggressions, (b) incarceration, (c) difficulty securing viable employment, and (d) the stress of surviving the streets. Most men were resilient despite these barriers, and described five main forms of resilience: (a) perseverance, (b) a commitment to learning and growing from hardship, (c) reflecting and refocusing to address difficulties, (d) creating a supportive environment, and (e) drawing support from religion and/or spirituality.

There is no consensus in the resilience literature about how to define resilience (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), but most often, resilience is described as the process in which individuals display "good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p. 228). According to this definition, resilience is a two-part construct which includes (a) a serious threat, and (b) a positive outcome. One of the most common criticisms of this approach to understanding and promoting resilience is that it is predicated on the assumption that both threats and successful outcomes are individual and universal experiences, across diverse cultures, races/ethnicities, and income levels (Glantz & Sloboda, 1999; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Ungar, 2008). Consistent with these critiques, our participants' narratives supported the perspective that both serious threats and good outcomes are contextually and culturally specific experiences (Ungar, 2008).

The participants in this study did identify serious threats to their well-being. For instance, Scott said that the racial microaggressions that he endured felt like "a noose around his neck." Much of the resilience literature for adults defines serious threats or adversities as one-time traumatic events, however, like sexual or physical assaults (Alim et al., 2008). In this study, participants' challenges were significant because of their chronic and ubiquitous nature, and not necessarily their extreme severity. For example, the types of racist experiences that the participants typically described in their interview narratives were not acute events. Rather, like Erik's frustration that White people expected him to "do nothin' with [his] life," they were predominantly mundane, everyday, unrelenting acts of disrespect (Sue et al., 2007). Ongoing stressors that result from entrenched structural factors, like racism and poverty, are not easily captured or understood through resilience models that define adversity by isolated threats alone. According to the participants' narratives, however, daily sociostructural stressors such as microaggressions or unemployment represented the majority of the challenges faced by low-income, urban, Black men.

In addition, some of the participants' responses indicated that despite their efforts, they could not achieve "good" outcomes. For example, Ricky explained that the lack of educational and employment resources in his environment led him to lose hope. Terrance equated his efforts at finding employment to running on a gerbil wheel. For other participants, like Sean, who just kept going despite numerous job rejections, resilience was more like a coping strategy to keep men afloat. Comments and experiences such as these add to existing critical discussions about how certain sociostructural stressors, such as those described by men in this sample, make it very challenging for some disadvantaged individuals to be resilient (Brown, 2008; Garcia-Coll et al., 1996; Glantz & Sloboda, 1999; Secombe, 2002; Utsey et al., 2007). Indeed, the participants showed an impressive and inspiring resolve to succeed through their perseverance, their commitment to learning and growing from their experiences, and by reflecting and refocusing on their experiences to meet their goals. However, if low-income Black men live in a system in which racism and

other social factors largely determine and restrict their lives, it will remain challenging for individuals to achieve “good” outcomes.

Thus, our findings bolster a small but significant body of research from which findings support a broader ecosocial model of resilience. From an ecosocial perspective it is recognized that understanding and promoting resilience requires acknowledging the relationships between risk and protective factors at the individual, community, and social levels (Seccombe, 2002; Ungar, 2008; Waller, 2001). The underlying premise of this perspective is that communities need to “change the odds” for marginalized populations such as low-income urban Black men, instead of trying to understand how men can “beat the odds,” or overcome their sociostructural challenges (Seccombe, 2002, p. 384). To this end, Ungar (2008) outlined a two-part model of resilience that differs widely from traditional, individually focused definitions of resilience. According to Ungar (2008), resilience is both (a) the “capacity of individuals to navigate their way to health-sustaining resources,” and (b) “a condition of the individual’s family, community and culture to provide these resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways” (p. 225). Consistent with other research findings that cite religiosity and group support (i.e., from family or community) as culturally specific coping processes that facilitate resilience among African Americans in general (Barrow et al., 2007; Miller, 1999; Utsey et al., 2007), the current participants’ reliance on supportive communities wherever they could find or create them, and on religion/spirituality, also suggest that an ecosocial model of resilience might be the best way to understand and foster resilience among low-income urban Black men.

Our research was subject to several limitations. First, the sampling and qualitative methods that we used do not allow for generalization beyond the study’s sample. Second, our sample was predominantly low-income, unemployed, and living in an urban environment plagued by violence. Having a more socioeconomically diverse sample would have allowed us to explore in greater depth whether the challenges of middle- and upper-class Black men and their resilience strategies are similar to those of our sample. Finally, because our research was exploratory, our interview guide did not include specific questions about resilience. Instead we analyzed interview transcripts focused more broadly on men’s health and social experiences to explore their experiences of resilience. If we had asked men directly about resilience and what it meant to them, we would likely have learned of additional challenges and resilience strategies.

Despite these limitations, our findings have important implications for research, policy, and practice. In the future, researchers should employ multiple methods to build upon these findings. Additional qualitative, exploratory inquiries could provide a deeper understanding of the complex nature of Black men’s stressors, including how and from where/whom they derive their resilience (Ungar, 2003). Such research findings could inform revised theoretical models of resilience better matched to Black men’s experiences as individuals and as members of families, communities, and social systems that might both support and limit men’s efforts. Quantitative research could be conducted to test or revise resilience models and examine the relationships between resilience and multiple social and health outcomes among Black men. Researchers should also focus on understanding Black men’s strengths across the lifespan, to explore the fluid nature of resilience in response to the changing nature of men’s life stressors over time, to expand our knowledge about the development of resilience from youth to adulthood, and to identify opportunities for intervention.

Policy changes are also crucial to interrupt the cycle of incarceration, unemployment, violence, and frustration that the men described in their narratives, and enhance men’s capacity to experience healthy and positive outcomes. Areas of policy action that merit

increased consideration based on our findings include, among others: examining and responding to the racial/ethnic disparities in rates of arrest and incarceration (Human Rights Watch, 2008); revising laws like “three strikes” or habitual offender laws that impose mandatory harsh penalties and lengthy incarcerations for multiple crimes; and supporting rehabilitation and employment opportunities for low-income Black men with past histories of incarceration.

Possible programmatic solutions include health and social service programs that are grounded in a strengths-based approach vs. a framework that focuses solely on Black men’s risks and vulnerabilities. Such programs might include family- and community-centered social support or training initiatives for men. For example, in Philadelphia (the site of this study), the National Comprehensive Center for Fathers (NCCF, 2010) is an example of a network of programs designed to facilitate men’s empowerment and cultivate men’s strengths. The NCCF helps men to improve their parenting skills, and gain the knowledge and ability to succeed in a number of a job-related tasks including job application completion, professional writing skills, and interviewing skills. Similarly, 100 Black Men (100BM) is an example of another strengths-based health and social service model. The Philadelphia-based 100BM is one of 100 chapters across the United States that include mentoring, education, and health and wellness programs focused on improving the quality of life of men and their families and communities.

Many of the men in this study demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to improving their lives. Like Wayne, they were determined to “keep rising ...keep going forward, regardless” of the nature of their structural and often unchangeable challenges. To understand and foster resilience among low-income African American urban men, however, policies, communities, and health and social service programs need to match men’s individual efforts. This will help create a resilience-promoting environment that nurtures men’s assets and makes it possible for men’s efforts to result in positive and healthy outcomes.

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