"Everybody Gotta Have a Dream": Rap-centered Aspirations among Young Black Males Involved in Rap Music Production – A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Youth express diverse desires for their educational and occupational futures. Sometimes these aspirations are directed towards somewhat unconventional careers such as rapping and other types of involvement in rap music production. Although many studies have examined traditional educational and occupational aspirations, less is known about the factors that give rise to rap-centered aspirations and how individuals pursue them, particularly as they transition to early adulthood. Drawing on 54 semi- and unstructured interviews with 29 black young men involved in rap music production, I find that rap-centered aspirations are shaped by a range of factors, most notably feedback regarding one's rap skills, access to recording and production equipment, and the financial means to maintain involvement in rap music production while also ensuring personal and family economic stability. The young men in the study attached different meanings to their aspirations and sometimes recast their motivations for participating in rap music production in response to various social and economic factors.

Keywords

educational aspirations; occupational aspirations; rap music; black young men

Introduction

Youth express diverse desires for their educational and career futures (Eccles and Wigfield 2000; Harding 2010; Harris 2011; Mickelson 1990; Spenner and Featherman 1978). They consistently espouse optimistic attitudes about academics and often pair them with aspirations for professional occupations that require some type of college credential (Howard et al. 2011; Kao and Tienda 1998; Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Tyson 2002). Yet for certain youth, academic aspirations are juxtaposed with future plans that include more unconventional occupational pathways such as careers in professional athletics or rap music production (Brooks 2011; Harding 2010; Howard et al. 2011; MacLeod 2009; Singer and May 2011). The desires that youth hold regarding their future are consequential for near- and long-term outcomes and provide insight into how they construct meaning regarding mobility, attainment, and inequality (Beal and Crockett 2010; Brooks 2011;

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Harding 2010; MacLeod 2009). It is worthwhile to understand the factors that cultivate youth aspirations, especially when they center on unconventional educational and career pathways.

One such type of non-traditional occupation includes careers in rap music production. Rap music is one of the foundational elements of hip-hop, a group of related art forms that emerged from the cultural imagination of black and Afro-Caribbean youth in the Bronx, New York in the 1970s (Chang 2005; Rose 1994). In the years since, although popular among diverse audiences (Bennett 1999; Cutler 2008; Kitwana 2005; Schloss 2009), rap music has remained central to black youth culture and continues to provide interpretive contexts through which some youth make sense of their social world (Clay 2003; Lee 2010; Rose 1994; Stephens and Few 2007). In addition, the visibility of black male rappers in popular culture and the association of rappers, rap producers, and "hip-hop moguls" with social and economic mobility often frame rap music production as a viable career option for many black boys and young men (Harding 2010; Negus 1999; Rose 1994; Smith 2003). Previous studies have noted the prevalence of rap-centered aspirations among youth (Harding 2010; MacLeod 2009), and some accounts have explored the varied ways in which youth operationalize these aspirations in pursuit of rap stardom and commercial success (Harding 2010; Lee 2010; Neff 2009). Yet less is known about the factors that give rise to rap-centered aspirations and the degree to which individuals maintain these aspirations as they transition to early adulthood [notable exceptions include Lee (2010) and Harding (2010).

In this study, I draw from 54 semi- and unstructured interviews to explore how 29 black young men became involved in rap music production and how this involvement cultivated rap-centered aspirations. In its early stages, rap music production was practiced primarily by disc jockeys (DJs), who would mix pre-recorded music from popular Disco, Jazz, or Rock-N-Roll songs for audiences at club parties, breakdance cyphers, and graffiti tagging sessions (Rose 1994). The scope of rap music production has since expanded considerably, enabled by the advent and increasing sophistication of music synthesizers, drum machines, beat-making software suites, turntables, and other production mediums. In addition, music videos continue to be a popular expressive and promotional tool for performers, making hip-hop videography another core element of rap music production (Rose 1994). Given the many ways that individuals create rap music, I use the term "rap music production" to refer broadly to four activities: rapping, DJ-ing, audio engineering, and videography. Thus rap-centered aspirations are desires for career pathways in which any of these activities are prominently featured.

Determinants of Youth Educational and Career Aspirations

Youth express a range of attitudes about their educational and career futures. One type involves the level of educational attainment or type of career that they desire. These beliefs, typically conceptualized as aspirations, are shaped by a confluence of individual, interpersonal, and structural factors (Garg et al. 2002). First, previous findings suggest that aspirations develop in conjunction with myriad other attitudinal and personality dispositions (Eccles and Wigfield 2000; Spenner and Featherman 1978). These studies demonstrate, for

example, that youth who have high self-esteem and believe that they have some control over life events tend to also express high future aspirations (Bandura et al. 2001; Dubow et al. 2001; Reynolds and Baird 2010). Debates about the causal ordering of these relationships notwithstanding (Eccles and Wigfield 2000; Spenner and Featherman 1978), the finding that these psychosocial constructs are expressed vis-à-vis one another illustrates the multidimensional nature of youth beliefs and outlooks regarding their future.

Interpersonal relationships and interactions also bear on youth educational and career aspirations. Beginning with early social-psychological models of individual motivation and ambition (Lewin et al. 1944), extended in the status attainment canon (Haller and Portes 1973; Hauser 1972; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969), and re-visited in myriad studies since (see for example Tyson 2011 or MacLeod 2009), there is extensive evidence that youth aspirations are strongly influenced by "significant others" (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). These individuals include parents, peers, and other figures, such as teachers and community members, and often provide social and/or financial resources that are important for adolescent aspirations. Family socioeconomic (SES) background is widely regarded as the strongest indicator of adolescents' career and educational aspirations (Kao and Tienda 1998; Museus, Harper, and Nichols 2010; Strayhorn 2009). Moreover, studies show that family social networks are more instrumental determinants of labor market success than educational attainment and other factors (Mangino 2012; Royster 2003).

Finally, recent findings note that educational and career aspirations are shaped by the social structures and neighborhood contexts in which they develop and are expressed. There are racial differences both in the optimism and stability of future aspirations as well as in how youth adjust their aspirations in response to their structural environment. Relative to their different-race peers, black youth typically hold higher, but less stable, aspirations (Kao and Tienda 1998; MacLeod 2009) and are somewhat less affected by the ambitious desires that their parents hold for them (Cheng and Starks 2002). Neighborhood context is also important for youth aspirations. One study suggests that black male youth in urban neighborhoods tend to be more optimistic about their educational future than their counterparts in rural contexts but less optimistic than their suburban peers (Strayhorn 2009). One of the primary ways in which neighborhood context shapes aspirations is through the differential distribution of social and economic resources (MacLeod 2009; Strayhorn 2009). Citing the presence of multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural models, Harding (2010) suggests that youth from neighborhoods with high levels of educational and economic inequality express more variegated future aspirations than their counterparts from more socioeconomically homogenous contexts. The current study considers whether and how the above factors influence a group of young black men and their rap music aspirations.

Youth Identity and Rap-Centered Aspirations

Rap music and videos activate an array of social-cognitive cues among its consumers (Dixon, Zhang, and Conrad 2009; Hansen 1995), and present youth with cultural material that informs their meaning- and decision-making processes (Clay 2003; Cutler 2008; Pulido 2009; Robinson 2014). Consuming rap music media is often associated with attitudes about: intimate relationships that encourage men to always be the dominant partner (Beentjes and

Konig 2013); sexuality that suggest that some sexual behaviors are more socially acceptable than others (Stephens and Few 2007); and violence that fosters openness to relationship violence and violence against women (Johnson et al. 1995). Rap music media can also shape behavioral, stylistic, and linguistic norms among youth and can become a form of cultural capital that enables them to establish and police interpersonal boundaries (Clay 2003; Cutler 2008). Finally, rap music media can provide a common, although not homogenous, set of aesthetic and discursive tools that allow youth to share knowledge and create new modes of understanding regarding themselves and their social world (Stephens and Few 2007). Given the influence that rap music has in the lives of some youth, the familiarity that they have with rap music media, and the common association of rap music production with social and economic mobility (Rose 1994; Smith 2003), it is not surprising that many youth also integrate hip-hop culture and rap music in their future aspirations.

Harding (2010) refers to occupations that center on rap music production as "star careers," defined as well-paid professions for which entry and sustained success are both rare and sporadic. Star careers in rap music production resonate with youth, particularly black male youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, for many reasons. First, rap performers and producers embody familiar social and cultural frames (Harding 2010). The archetypical rapper is a black young man who was reared in a poor neighborhood context but eventually earned a substantial amount of money and notoriety due to his involvement in rap music production. In this way, rap music production represents an appealing mode of socioeconomic mobility for youth as well as a way to move them and their family members from precarious social and economic circumstances. Rap music production also presents an arena for some black youth to pursue the American dream narrative that informs much of their beliefs about mobility and attainment (Harris 2011; MacLeod 2009; Young 2004). Given these dynamics, many youth also develop career aspirations that center on rap music production.

Lee (2010) posits that young people pursue aspirations in progressive stages, beginning with general fandom in which they engage in standard consumption practices, such as listening to rap music and viewing rap music videos. Over time, some begin to write and perform their own music and/or songs as "wannabes." This practice is typically done in private as individuals build a repertoire of skills and gain the confidence to "go public." Going public includes participating in public performances such as open mic events, talent shows, and concerts, as well as recording and distributing music. As Harding (2010) notes, running the gamut of local performances and distributing music samples is done to develop a local following and generate buzz, with the ultimate goal of attracting the attention of mainstream industry gatekeepers.

This research demonstrates that rap-centered aspirations are prevalent among some black male youth and traces some of the ways in which these youth operationalize them in pursuit of social notoriety and substantial financial compensation. The present study extends these findings by turning a more expressed focus to the factors that cultivate these aspirations and by examining whether and how the salience of these factors changes as youth transition to early adulthood. To be sure, previous work in this area has identified some of the social and cultural material that youth reference when framing rap music production as both a desirable

and possible career avenue (Harding 2010; Lee 2010). The purpose of this study is to augment rather than discount these findings through an in-depth study of a particular sample of youth with rap-centered aspirations.

DATA AND METHODS

Participant Selection

Data for this project consist of 54 semi- and unstructured interviews with 29 black male adolescents and young adults living in three rural towns in northern Mississippi. In July 2010, I began to identify potential study participants by conducting informal interviews with the residents of two southern towns given the pseudonyms Rockport and Tate. I also searched Internet music pages seeking black young men who were at least 17 years of age and involved in rap music production. From an initial list of 16 potential participants, I was able to contact and gain consent from ten young men. Based on two waves of snowball sampling, the participant pool expanded from 10 to 29 young men; seven participants were from a third town that I refer to using the pseudonym Dieberville. Participants and other identifying formation, such as school names, have also been assigned pseudonyms (refer to the Appendix).

In addition to restricting the sample to participants who were at least 17 years old, I searched for individuals with varying levels of educational attainment and work experience. Thus in addition to spanning late adolescence and early adulthood, participants comprise a diverse set of educational and occupational attainment profiles. Next, although the producers, consumers, and performers of hip-hop culture and rap music now span many national contexts (Mitchell 2001), are increasingly racially/ethnically diverse (Cutler 2008; Pulido 2009; Schloss 2009), and continue to include girls and women (Love 2012; Neff 2009; Rose 1994), I focus on male adolescents and young men to engage a particular subgroup – black male youth who actively participate in rap music production – that is often depicted in antagonistic ways in normative discourse (see for example, Kitwana 2003).

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted formal, base interviews with each of the 29 participants and one follow-up interview with 25 of them. Data were collected from July 2010 to January 2012. Three of the follow-up interviews were informal, including conversations at a local rap concert where two of the participants were performing and a phone conversation with one participant while attempting to arrange logistics for an in-person, follow-up interview. Thirty-nine of the fifty-one formal, base and follow-up interviews took place in person at a location of the participant's choosing, often at their homes or in a music studio. When personal visits were not possible, I conducted phone, email, and video-chat interviews (12 total interviews). Formal interviews lasted between one and three hours and were captured using a digital voice recorder. The informal interviews were transcribed from memory within 24 hours of their occurrence.

I analyzed data drawing on elements of grounded theory using both computer-based and manual analytic procedures (Charmaz 2003; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1992). One

defining practice of a grounded theory approach is the development of codes and categories based on emergent patterns and themes in the data and integration of a priori categorizations when the data warrant. I adopted this approach beginning with the first stage of analysis which included multiple iterations of open coding during which I labeled each line of data with a descriptive code (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Saldaña 2012). These descriptive codes became the basis for meaning units, defined as blocks of text that convey a general descriptive or interpretive point. Following open coding, I re-read interview transcripts with a focus on grouping meaning units into larger thematic categories based on their theoretical and pragmatic relationships. Then, guided by the interview schedule, emergent patterns in the data, and coding/analysis memos, I grouped thematic categories into broader meta-themes aimed at making inferences about the data.

During analysis, I focused on two types of relationships: similarity and contiguity. The former assesses similarities and differences between two or more cases or categories and is typically determined by comparing and contrasting elements and themes (Maxwell and Miller 2008). Contiguous relationship types more directly account for the time order of events. I explored similarities and differences between categories and between participants primarily through the use of data matrices that cross-classified meaning units, thematic categories, meta-themes, and participant identifications. To assess contiguous relationships, I wrote and coded narrative profiles for many of the participants (Elliott 2005; Grbich 2012). These narrative profiles resembled participant life histories, including experiences in early adolescence as well as major life events like marriage and parenthood. Narrative profiles helped re-orient data that were not chronologically ordered such that correlated attributes were more evident. For example, interview data for Chris, the oldest respondent in the sample, demonstrated that fatherhood was a type of "turning point" in his life that ultimately pushed him to recast his participation in rap music production. I coded narrative profiles using the same process of open- and focused-coding used for interview transcripts and field notes. In all, eighteen of these profiles helped guide the analysis ["BF" refers to the interviewer].

RESULTS

Several themes emerged that illuminate key individuals, experiences, and social contexts that shaped how the sample participants framed their involvement in rap music production, their future participation, and determinants of the nature and scope of their success. Direct and indirect familial influences, peer interactions, and aspirational orientations are central to the career and educational dreams of this sample of black young men. Themes as well as representative quotes are provided in the following sections.

"Say this, nephew!" – Explicit Family Influences

Most of the participants began rapping between the ages of 13 and 16 years old in response to interactions with older male family members engaged in rap music production and in close proximity to peer-group members for whom rapping was a valued form of social exchange. These interactions often communicated affirming messages about the participants' rap potentiality – that is, their ability to translate their competencies in rap

music production into industry entry and success. Family influences manifested in two ways. First, family members imparted explicit messages about rapping and provided the young men with opportunities to write and record their own lyrics or to recite lyrics that had been pre-written for them. Other family members had a more indirect effect, transmitting implicit messages about the value of rap music production by embodying desirable aesthetic characteristics or exhibiting particular musicological skill. Eric, 18 years of age, started rapping when he was 14 years old and remembered an experience with some of his family members in a music studio that led to his early involvement in rap music production:

> I started off listening to my uncle, my dad, and my older cousins. I started listening to them, and I liked it…. I was just playing around at first, but one day my uncles was like, "Aye, say this, nephew!" They wrote me a verse out to say. I said it, and it inspired me. I was like, "You know, I like hearing myself on the music coming out these speakers. I like that. That sounds nice!" And I just went from there. (Eric: Base Interview)

By inviting him to the music studio and allowing him to participate in the production process, Eric's uncles facilitated his excitement about rapping and allowed him to gain hands-on experience with the techniques and skills associated with rap music production. Frequenting music production spaces with different family members also meant that participants were routinely placed in close proximity to recording equipment, which they often cited as a critical aspect of the development of rapping and production skills. Eric mentions another family member, his cousin Troy, when recounting his progression toward more sophisticated recording and producing capacities, eventually culminating with his first time in a "real studio" without the accompaniment of any of his uncles:

> I ain't really start doing albums and mixtapes until later on. 'Cause I been slowly progressing on my recording. I started off with a li'l Boombox, and then we got a computer at home. We had this li'l webcam and a mic came with it…. We used to play the music in the background and rap on the mic, so that was a step up for me. Then I started rapping out of my cousin [Troy] house. He had the same thing, but he had a real mic. So it just sounded better. So that was another step up. I came to Rockport, and it was like a big step. My first time ever getting in a real studio was when I came to Rockport. (Eric: Base Interview)

Providing hands-on experience with music production processes and direct access to recording equipment were not the only ways that family members transmitted explicit messages about rap music production. Family members also provided direct affirmations to participants about their futures. Twenty-two-year-old Steven remembered accompanying family members to music production spaces where they occasionally allowed him to rap. He also describes an additional function of these spaces – personal affirmation and socialization:

> BF: … What made you look up to [your uncle]?
>
> Steven: I needed that father figure in my life. I grew up around my cousins and my uncle. [My uncle] kept me up under his wing in the studio all the time. We would

talk, he'll make li'l jokes, and sometimes he let us rap. He used to tell us, "One day
y'all goin' take over music, and y'all can do it." (Base Interview)

When describing interactions at music studios and other places for rap music production,
most participants referenced an all-male ensemble of brothers, cousins, and uncles.
References to their fathers as present and active participants, however, were noticeably
absent from these conversations. Instead, participants focused on the ways in which being
able to interact with other male family members created opportunities for them to bond and
establish relationships. As Steven's response above illuminates, these interactions were
rooted in rap music production and often extended to other social domains. When I asked
Steven to be more specific about what he and his uncle discussed when they were together
in the studio, his response included, "girls and how to handle my money" as well as "how to
treat my family, like my momma and my sister." Eric and Steven exemplify a pattern
prevalent among six other participants (8 total) whereby family members provided them
with hands-on experience in rap music production processes by inviting them on their visits
to music studios. These experiences gave youth direct access to recording equipment and
allowed them to participate in the production process. Music production spaces also served
as spaces in which participants could interact with male family members who took time to
express personal affirmations and impart normative advice.

"I like that!" – Indirect Family Influences

In addition to providing hands-on experience in rap music production, direct access to
recording equipment, and explicit affirmations to participants, family members also
transmitted indirect messages about rap music production. These messages were often a
function of the aesthetic appeal of family members such as their perceived popularity, as
well as the sonic qualities of the music that they made. When 17-year-old Daniel spoke of
his early interest in rap music production, he referenced the social status of his cousins and
older brother, Lo:

I mean I used to see [Lo] clean all the time with the girls, rapping. That's how I
really started liking music. Everybody on my momma side [of the family] rapped.
Everybody. They call theyselves Crooked Thug Nation… and just seem like they
had that status, man. That's when I just started liking rap when I was like 13. I ain't
really get serious with it 'til I was like 15. (Daniel: Base Interview)

Like Steven and Eric, Daniel attributes his involvement in rap music production to the
influence of family members – in this case, his cousins as well as his older brother.
However, their influence on him was tacit and attached more to his perception of their
aesthetic profile, which included being "clean" (having style), getting girls, and having
(social) status, than to direct experiences with them in music production spaces or explicit
affirmations about rap music production. Ernie, 22 years of age, became interested in
rapping in response to implicit family influences and did not mention instances in which
they provided him with direct opportunities to participate in music production processes:

I knew my brother… I knew pretty much everybody young in my family rapped.
And I used to hear them rap, and I was like, "I like that." Then I heard my brother's
first song called "Do it Like This, Do it Like That," and I was like… "I'm feeling

that, I like that!" So, I would get this Boombox with the cassette in it with the mic already on it… I put a tape in there, and I would get another radio, put a beat on, and I'll rap. (Ernie: Base Interview)

Ernie gave particular weight to the music that his brother created when explaining his early motivation to hone his own rap skills. Ernie and Daniel illustrate a pattern prevalent among three other (5 total) participants: they attributed particular salience to the personal qualities of family members such as their perceived popularity or ability to produce phonically satisfying music – often tagging these qualities as central motivating factors in their involvement in rap music production.

"It started as a group thing." – Peer Interactions

Peer group members also played instrumental roles in participants' involvement in rap music production, serving two primary functions. First, participants typically collaborated with members of their primary friendship networks. In other instances, members of more socially distal peer groups served as the social backdrop and performance audience for both formal performances and freestyle (i.e., impromptu) rap "battles" (i.e., competitions) (for a discussion see Lee 2009). Twenty-one year old Tyrone began rapping with a group of friends at Tate High School when he was 16 years old. Initially, they would freestyle and participate in rap battles in informal school settings such as in the cafeteria during lunchtime. However, during Tyrone's senior year, these casual social exchanges led to the group's adoption of an official moniker, "The Fantastic Four," and more formal attempts to distribute their music. "It started out as a joke," remembered Tyrone, "[but once] everything started coming together, we decided to drop a song together." The group went on to release a mixtape with a compilation of their songs and soon began to purchase their own recording and production equipment. Twenty-two-year-old Nick told a similar story of group engagement as he remembered his earliest experiences rapping: "It started as a group thing. My friends were doing it, and I wanted to give it a try. We all lived in Dieberville and decided to form a group and start making our own music."

Youth who were in more distal social circles also had an impact on participants' early involvement in rap music production. Daniel, who had been enamored by his brother Lo's social status, had been rapping for about four years. At the time of his first interview, he was still transitioning to Tate High School after he and his mom moved there from another town in northern Mississippi. When discussing his adjustment to Tate, he referenced an occurrence on the schoolyard:

I came to Tate High School. It was my third day there… I'm just posted up [standing around], and these two girls start talking to me… I told them I rapped or whatever. They was like, "I bet you can't beat Crazy D. I bet you can't beat Crazy D!" I said, "Well, tell his *crazy* self to come on over here then." [Laughter] So he came, and we drew a big crowd, and I beat him. Of course I beat him. So, everybody else start [saying], "That's Daniel. Yeah, that boy can rap!" So they just telling me everybody [at Tate High School] can rap, and I started beating everybody. Now, you find anybody that say they want to rap at school, they goin' always come to me. (Daniel: Base Interview)

The scene that Daniel constructs frames other students on the schoolyard as a part of the social backdrop. That is, aside from the two girls that he explicitly mentioned and "Crazy D," his other peers become part of the physical environment that give structure to the social exchange. Those students also serve as the performance audience, bearing witness to and later lauding Daniel for his success.

In sum, the above black young men describe the importance of peer group members. Tyrone and Nick exemplify a pattern present among 14 other participants (16 total) of how rapping emerged as an extension of and catalyst for their primary friendship network. Group members would meet during school hours in informal spaces like the cafeteria and on the schoolyard as well as after school, often at the homes of one of the group members, to write rhymes and host freestyle battles. Daniel's story embodies elements of most of the participants' early experiences (25 total) whereby peers in distal social groups provided social support, served as the audience for formal and informal performances, and transmitted messages about the participants' rap potentiality. The impact of family and peer-group members was not mutually exclusive. Some participants cited both groups when remembering their early experiences rapping. For example, Daniel credited his brother Lo's social status with piquing his interest in rap music production, but also framed the scene with "Crazy D" as a formative moment that signaled to him that he had rap skills. In addition, Daniel often made references to rap music production as a collaborative effort. He knew of Tyrone and another participant, Derrick, and had spent time providing feedback on their music as well as writing and recording songs.

Two Aspirational Orientations

In addition to direct and indirect familial influences and peer group interactions, the study participants described two aspirational views that ultimately informed the nature and scope of their future involvement in rap music production.

"Going Far"

Many participants, whether they credited family influences or peer interactions as the chief catalyst for their involvement in rap music production, initially described rapping as a casual pursuit. However, as the young men gained access to more sophisticated recording equipment, more hands-on experience writing and reciting their own rhymes, and more positive feedback from their peers and family members, they began to frame rapping as a central part of their occupational and educational aspirations. Many participants maintained this outlook, which I refer to as a "going far" aspirational orientation, into early adulthood.

Frank, 25 years old at the time of his initial interview, began rapping with two of his friends from Tate High School when he was 15 years old. While together, the group performed in several states, garnering interest from a major hip-hop record label. The group eventually disbanded, though Frank continued his involvement in rap music production. He eventually expanded to video editing and audio engineering, which allowed him to earn enough money to quit his job at a local retail outlet. Frank's interviews took place during several email correspondences and phone conversations because he resided in Atlanta, Georgia, at the time of the study. He describes his aspirations:

> Right now my educational goals do not concern school at all. I would say they have
> to do with me better educating myself about the [hip-hop] industry. My career
> goals as of right now are just to become a go-to director/editor/videographer for
> mainstream artists, videos, shows or even independent movies. (Frank: Follow-up
> Interview)

Rap music production and video editing had come to fully occupy Frank's career and
educational goals. He had been briefly enrolled in a community college in northern
Mississippi after graduating from Tate High School, but had no immediate plans to re-enroll
there or in any other postsecondary program. Similarly, 26-year-old William considered rap
music production his primary educational and career goal. However, unlike Frank, he was
enrolled in a postsecondary education program, a for-profit college based in Florida, where
he was working towards a degree in recording engineering. William had recast his
educational aspirations of originally becoming a computer engineer to include his "stronger
points of producing and writing" rap music.

An additional characteristic of the "going far" orientation was a desire for social recognition
that went beyond the participants' audiences in northern Mississippi. Tyrone's response
below provides one example of this tendency:

> Man, I'm trying to go as far as it can take me. I'm tired of just making music and
> listening to it with my niggas… or my mom, you know, family members. I want
> my friends to be able to see me and my boys on TV, on stage, on these album
> covers, "in stores soon," that type shit. (Tyrone: Base Interview)

At the time of his interview, Tyrone's characterization of his early involvement in rap music
production as "a joke" had been replaced by a more deliberate desire for increased social
recognition. He appreciated the support from his family and friends but wanted exposure to
a larger audience. Other participants cited a desire to provide economic stability for family
members and to accomplish something to make them proud. Twenty-five-year-old Travis
had no college experience at the time of his interview:

> I'm trying to make a career out of [rap music production]. I'm trying to take care of
> my family. I want to be able to say "Momma, I made it," you know. She been in
> the struggle way too long… aunts, uncles, grandparents. We been in the struggle
> too long. My momma work too many jobs. I want to give her that big break where
> she ain't gotta work no more. (Travis: Base Interview)

Travis wanted to rectify his earlier experiences of socioeconomic insecurity by providing his
family with financial stability, and he considered rap music production one way to achieve
this goal.

Participants who subscribed to the "going far" orientation routinely referenced dedicating
substantial amounts of time and economic resources to music production. Cedric had spent
time traversing local hip-hop scenes in Memphis, Tennessee, selling mixtapes and trying to
expand his fan base beyond his small hometown of Rockport and its surrounding area. He
remembered purchasing recording equipment, renting recording time in music studios, and
buying t-shirts and other marketing materials to help build his "SIP" brand. He, like many of

the black young men in this study, believed that "making it" in the industry was a collaborative effort only attainable through hard work, sacrifice, and having "a lot of people in your corner." In sum, the 17 participants who expressed characteristics of a "going far" orientation at the time of their base interview had begun rapping as a casual pursuit but eventually centered rap music production in their educational and career aspirations. They committed time and economic resources to rap music production and expected recompense for those sacrifices in the form of social recognition and financial compensation.

"Just to be doing it"

In contrast, other participants continued to be involved in rap music production into early adulthood, but ascribed their involvement to a more modest "just to be doing it" orientation. These participants were typically pursuing other, more traditional, career and educational aspirations and were content engaging in rap music production as a mode of recreation with no expressed expectations of significant social or economic returns. These more modest aspirations were often remnants of an earlier time in which they, like their counterparts who subscribed to a "going far" orientation, had considered rap music production to be their primary educational and career objective and a means to both social notoriety and financial security. Cedric provides one example of this transition. He was 24 years old at the time of his initial interview in which he discussed the many economic investments that he had made to help bolster his prospects as an aspiring rapper. However, at the time of his follow-up interview nine months later, he expressed a more reserved outlook about his future involvement in rap music production:

> At first I had this real big dream that I was goin' be like "yeah, I'm a make millions. I'm a take care of my family, I'm a do this, I'm a do that." But now it's harder…'cause it ain't about talent no more. It's more…sell a fuckin' record. So… that's how I looked at it. "Okay, I'm a have to go on and pursue my career. Go back and pursue my career." And I think long-term, law is gonna be the next thing I want to do. (Cedric: Follow-up Interview)

For Cedric, although rap music production was appealing for its potential to bring social and economic rewards, the inconsistencies and uncertainties surrounding industry success had made it an untenable career choice. He also expressed concerns about frequent financial volatility, citing "life," "bills," and not having a "sponsor" as debilitating obstacles that had hindered his involvement in rap music production. As a result, Cedric separated his primary career aspirations from his involvement in rap music production, opting to return to school at a local community college and work toward a degree in criminal justice. Cedric illustrates another characteristic of participants subscribing to a "just to be doing it" orientation – he had some previous postsecondary experience. He had previously attended a local community college and an arts school based in Atlanta, Georgia, for one year following his high school graduation. For such young men, prior college experience appeared to both temper their zeal toward pursuing rap music full-time and encourage them to follow more traditional career paths.

Twenty-one year old Tony began rapping when he was 14 years old when he and some of his friends "formed one of the hottest (most popular) rap groups that ever walked through

Tate High School." He was enrolled at a local community college at the time of his base interview:

> I'm going to school now to be a diesel mechanic, and, I mean, after I get a job, I'm pretty sure I will keep rapping, but the rapping thing it's not really my main focus. I basically do this as a hobby. (Tony: Base Interview)

Like Cedric, Tony's participation in rap music production was completely distinct from his educational and career plans. However, that had not always been the case as evidenced by his expansive music portfolio:

> I've done a lot. I mean have my own mixtape, plenty of past performances, I'm on a few DJ mixtapes, and I have a music video, but that's it. (Tony: Follow-up Interview)

Still, he maintained that he didn't "really care about profiting money from [rap music production]." At the time of his base interview, he was focused on finishing a degree program "in the next year or two" and being able to earn significantly more money than he was working for two local fast food restaurants. Melvin, a 21-year-old living in Dieberville at the time of his base interview, echoed Tony's sentiments about financial compensation:

> We do a lot of tapes, and we ride around and listen to them. [The music] might not go, probably nowhere. Not outside the community. Not outside the 'hood… it's all local. We ain't trying to get rich off this. (Melvin: Base Interview)

Melvin was about three years removed from a time in which he had completely organized his life around his rap-centered aspirations. At the time of the interview, he was employed and had completed one year at a local community college; he had not been enrolled for almost two years due to family and financial concerns. Throughout his interview, Melvin wavered between a sense of nostalgia about his early experiences rapping and "doing shows" with his friends and a sense of satisfaction regarding his current future outlook, which included earning a degree in math and eventually becoming a teacher in his hometown.

Cedric, Tony, and Melvin demonstrate the extent to which the participants' rap aspirations did not develop as static constructs. They were more fluid, adapting to the structural circumstances and life experiences of the young men. Despite their responses and decisions, each participant maintained belief and confidence in their respective skills, talents, and rap potentiality. For example, 18-year-old Lamont initially describes rapping as a hobby but also recognizes the possibility of attaining some degree of success:

> It's a hobby for me, but I put so much passion and thoughts into my own music, I really believe I could make a living doing it. It wouldn't be my only option though. (Lamont: Base Interview)

The 12 participants subscribing to the "just to be doing it" orientation at the time of their base interview did not center rap music production in their educational or occupational aspirations. Instead, they opted for more traditional occupational routes; many were enrolled in postsecondary programs at the time of the study. These young men often recalled earlier times during which rap music production was a focal part of their educational and career

aspirations. Yet each eventually replaced those aspirations with more traditional career goals and now only tangentially engage in rap music production.

DISCUSSION

In this study, I draw on 54 semi- and unstructured interviews with 29 black young men with varying degrees of involvement in rap music production to explore factors that give rise to rap-centered aspirations. I also examine the extent to which these factors continue to be salient for the young men as they transition to early adulthood. Findings demonstrate that involvement in rap music production during early adolescence is an important precursor to the development of rap-centered aspirations (Clay 2003; Lee 2010; Rose 1994; Stephens and Few 2007). Beyond this, young people orient their aspirations in response to myriad social and economic factors, including interactions with family members and peers, access to and expertise with recording and production equipment, and the financial means to maintain involvement in rap music production while also ensuring personal and family well-being.

Consistent with previous findings, results from this study highlight the role that significant others play in the development and expression of educational and career aspirations (MacLeod 2009; Sewell et al 1969; Tyson 2011). Family members, friends, and other peers influence youth aspirations even when these aspirations are directed towards non-traditional vocational options. Thirteen of the twenty-nine participants referenced at least one family member who played a significant role in their early involvement in rap music production. Eight of these thirteen participants remembered receiving explicit messages including being allowed to record songs and being given personal affirmations about their future rap potentiality from brothers, uncles, and other male family members. The remaining five referenced family influences in more indirect terms and cited their perceptions of the social status and musicological skill of family members who were involved in rap music production. Friends and other peers were also important. Sixteen participants recounted that their earliest experiences in rap music production emerged as a peer-mediated recreational activity where friends served as group members and collaborators.

In addition to shaping participants' earliest involvement in rap music production, family and peer interactions also informed continued participation and the eventual development and expression of rap-centered aspirations in early adulthood. First, participants often cited hands-on experience and increased access to more sophisticated recording and production capabilities as a critical step in the overall development of their rap skills. Family members who were engaged in rap music production were key in these processes. Next, positive feedback about participants' rap potentiality played an instrumental role. Although this feedback stemmed both from participants' family members and friends, it was particularly impactful when it came from members of more distal social groups. Twenty-five of the twenty-nine study participants spoke of peer feedback from non-primary group peers in this way.

As some participants transitioned to early adulthood, they began to imbue their aspirations with different meaning and to recast their motivations for continued involvement in rap music production (Lee 2010). Initially, many participants became involved in rap music

production as a recreational activity. They would freestyle during informal school time such as during recess and school lunch as well as after school at various places in their neighborhoods. This casual involvement in rap music production was followed by a time in which participants made more expressed efforts to produce and disseminate music with the hope that it would eventually bring social notoriety and financial compensation. The transition to more serious educational and career pursuits involving rap music production was facilitated by access to recording equipment and positive feedback from family, friends, and other peers. At the time of the study, 17 participants framed their involvement in rap music production in this way. At a later point, participants transitioned from this "going far" orientation to a more modest outlook in which they remained involved in rap music production, but turned their primary aspirational foci to more traditional educational and career options. In this way, they became rap music hobbyists, largely participating for their own personal fulfillment. This transition was often a function of concerns about the economic volatility of devoting substantial amounts of time and personal resources to rap music production as well as significant life events such as fatherhood. At the time of the study, 12 participants expressed this "just to be doing it" orientation.

These findings echo and build upon previous work focusing on youth who express rap-centered aspirations. First, the finding that youth vacillate between varying degrees of commitment and seriousness to their rap-centered aspirations is similar to Lee's (2010) contention that the pursuit of rap dreams is comprised of successive stages, beginning with passive modes of rap media consumption and ultimately moving towards more serious involvement in rap music production. Similarly, Harding (2010) posits that some of the young men in his study expressed a great deal of confidence in their odds of becoming a successful rapper, while others, particularly those from middle class backgrounds, shifted toward other career pursuits as their understandings of the labor market expanded. Harding suggests that the remaining young men retained their rap-centered aspirations indefinitely, all holding to the anticipation, realistic or not, of future success. Findings from the present study offer a more dynamic portrait of rap-centered aspirations in which, at different time points and in response to various social and economic factors, individuals adopt varying ways of characterizing their involvement in rap music production.

CONCLUSION

Youth express a matrix of desires regarding their future (Eccles and Wigfield 2000; Harding 2010; Harris 2011; Mickelson 1990; Spenner and Featherman 1978). Sometimes these aspirations center on somewhat unconventional occupations, such as rapping, DJ-ing, and other types of involvement in rap music production (Harding 2010; Howard et al. 2011; MacLeod 2009). These beliefs are consequential for a range of outcomes and signal how young people understand their position in relation to other social actors and the opportunity structure (Strayhorn 2009; Young 2004). Although rap music is popular and broadly influential among youth from a range of social and economic backgrounds, the scripts derived from rap music media have a particularly strong cultural resonance among black male youth. This study offers an expanded account of how some youth become involved with and eventually construct aspirations around rap music production. The young black men in the study characterized their involvement in rap music production in a number of

ways, including as: an avenue to personal and family-group socioeconomic mobility; a recreational outlet unrelated to their educational or career future; and a context in which to establish and strengthen interpersonal relationships with friends and family members. These findings call for a more nuanced discussion of black youth in general and black young men, in particular, and the ways in which they integrate their involvement in rap music production into their everyday lives.

Acknowledgments

Appendix: Participant Characteristics

Participant	Participant Pseudonym	Age in years	Age in years (Follow-up Interview)	School Enrollment Status - Degree Status	Neighborhood
1	Anthony	22	22	Not Enrolled - BA Degree	Rockport
2	Cedric	24	25	Not Enrolled - No Degree	Rockport
3	Charles	22	23	Not Enrolled - BA Degree	Rockport
4	Chris	29	30	Enrolled - 4-Year University	Dieberville
5	Cliff	19	19	Never Enrolled	Rockport
6	Corey	19	19	Enrolled - Community College	Tate
7	Daniel	17	18	Enrolled - High School	Tate
8	Derrick	24	25	Never Enrolled	Tate
9	Eric	18	19	Enrolled - High School	Rockport
10	Ernie	22	N/A	Not Enrolled - No Degree	Dieberville
11	Frank	25	26	Not Enrolled - No Degree	Tate
12	Fred	24	N/A	Enrolled - Online Degree Program	Rockport
13	Jasper	18	N/A	Enrolled - High School	Rockport
14	Jeremy	20	20	Enrolled - Community College	Tate
15	Jonathan	18	18	Enrolled - High School	Dieberville
16	Joshua	21	21	Enrolled - 4-Year University	Rockport
17	Justin	22	22	Never Enrolled	Tate
18	Lamont	18	18	Enrolled - High School	Rockport
19	Marcus	24	24	Enrolled - 4-Year University	Dieberville
20	Melvin	21	21	Enrolled - Community College	Dieberville
21	Michael	21	21	Never Enrolled	Rockport
22	Nick	22	22	Enrolled - 4-Year University	Dieberville
23	Nikita	17	19	Never Enrolled	Rockport
24	Steven	22	N/A	Enrolled - 4-Year University	Rockport
25	Tony	21	23	Enrolled - Community College	Tate
26	Travis	25	25	Never Enrolled	Rockport
27	Tremaine	18	18	Enrolled - High School	Tate
28	Tyrone	21	22	Never Enrolled	Tate
29	William	26	27	Enrolled - Online Degree Program	Tate

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