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Abstract

The social success skills valued and ultimately acquired by youth during their formative years can be better understood by examining the social spaces, processes, and interactions that are related to their personal aspirations and related media experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, I conducted a year-long multi-case study about two Black male high school students' thoughts on social success, their aspirations, their social experiences, and their experiences with media. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. I collected data through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations. I performed analyses by using the hermeneutic cycle which requires one to repeatedly read text, write reflections, and interpret data (Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2008). Findings suggest that my participants' aspirations held influence over the type of media content with which they chose to engage. Additionally, their thoughts about social success were influenced by their family members' personal life experiences and the skills their family members valued. Moreover, their sociocultural contexts influenced their evolving thoughts on social success while their media served as resources to help them process their thoughts about social success and help them pursue their goals.

Keywords

Media, Success, Social Success, Social Instruction, Youth, Social Success Skills, Teen, Case Study, Phenomenological, Phenomenology

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A Phenomenological Multi-Case Study About Social Success Skills, Aspirations, and Related Media Experiences

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The social success skills valued and ultimately acquired by youth during their formative years can be better understood by examining the social spaces, processes, and interactions that are related to their personal aspirations and related media experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, I conducted a year-long multi-case study about two Black male high school students' thoughts on social success, their aspirations, their social experiences, and their experiences with media. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling. I collected data through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations. I performed analyses by using the hermeneutic cycle which requires one to repeatedly read text, write reflections, and interpret data (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2008). Findings suggest that my participants' aspirations held influence over the type of media content with which they chose to engage. Additionally, their thoughts about social success were influenced by their family members' personal life experiences and the skills their family members valued. Moreover, their sociocultural contexts influenced their evolving thoughts on social success while their media served as resources to help them process their thoughts about social success and help them pursue their goals. Keywords: Media, Success, Social Success, Social Instruction, Youth, Social Success Skills, Teen, Case Study, Phenomenological, Phenomenology

Fifteen-year-old Mathieu DuBois¹ and I were seated in his family's den during one of many semi-structured interviews conducted throughout this study. Mathieu had been excitedly explaining to me how much he enjoyed the diversity of his suburban neighborhood, Rockdale. Yet, when I asked him if any of his classmates also lived in his neighborhood the tone of the conversation changed. With a frown on his face, he informed me that most of his classmates lived outside of his neighborhood and that several of them had made negative comments about Rockdale. I asked him to elaborate on their comments and he provided a conversation he had during his freshman year with several White classmates at his predominantly White high school as an example:

...sometimes I eat lunch with my friends at school, and like last year, some of the guys would be like "aw man, Rockdale's a bad place." And I'm just like "Why?"... Every time there's a majority, like, there's a good, like, Black population in this town, they would say "yeah there are police cars everywhere." I'm just like, "You can't really say that."
(Mathieu, Interview, May, 2011)

As our conversation continued, Mathieu struggled to comprehend why "Black" neighborhoods were considered "bad" and "poor." He disliked the stigmas that were associated with Black communities and he wished that some of his classmates would not automatically assume that Rockdale needed to be constantly patrolled by police.

¹ The names of all participants and locations are replaced with pseudonyms.

Research has shown that the negative traits Mathieu's friends associated with Rockdale are similar to the reactions numerous other similar communities experience (boyd, 2014; Wells, 2009). Residents from neighborhoods that are associated with Black and Latino groups are often stereotyped as delinquents who are unable or uninterested in developing the social skills and traits needed for social success (Rothstein, 2004; Wells, 2009). Furthermore, these negative reactions can be associated with some communities such as Rockdale simply because they were perceived as Black neighborhoods even if the majority of their population was White. Mathieu stated that his classmates were mistaken about the ethnic makeup of his neighborhood: "[Rockdale] isn't even a majority Black town, it's just a very diverse place."

The importance of social skills and traits has been discussed for many years. Dewey (1909) introduced the term "social intelligence" and initially defined it as "the power of observing and comprehending social situations" (p. 51). Thorndike (1920) popularized the term and further defined it as "the ability to understand and manage men and women, boys and girls—to act wisely in human relations" (p. 228). Interpersonal intelligence (Gardner, 2004), intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner, 2004), emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), non-cognitive skills (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001), and grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007) are examples of additional terms that have been used to describe the social skills that are deemed necessary for success. I use the term "social success skills" as an umbrella term to cover these skills and all other skills that are needed to achieve social success.

Past studies have explored how various negative societal stereotypes across the world unfairly over-represent non-White and lower socioeconomic students as individuals who lack the social success skills needed to achieve professional, academic, and social success (Wald & Losen, 2003; Warikoo, 2005; Youdell, 2003). Additionally, several scholars have concluded that some Whites and individuals from higher socioeconomic communities believe that these stereotypes are true and often rationalize the persistence of the inequalities in various societies with explanations influenced by their beliefs in these societal stereotypes (DiTomaso, 2013; Ispa-Landa, 2013; Wells, 2009; Wald & Losen, 2003; Youdell, 2003). Research also reveals that many Whites and higher earning teachers, students, employers, and employees tolerate and further perpetuate these social inequalities and beliefs in these stereotypes by displaying favoritism towards individuals from within their groups. (DiTomaso, 2013; Ispa-Landa, 2013; Wells, 2009).

Furthermore, media also plays a role in teaching and perpetuating the harmful cultural stereotypes present in our society (Bogle, 2001; Brown, 2001; Burrell, 2010; Fisch, 2004; Lehman, 2007; Strömberg, 2003). When minority children consistently see members from their community represented as individuals who constantly underperform when compared to an idealistic middle class White majority, this can lead them to assume that these represented realities are the norm (Rothstein, 2004). The positive and negative self-identities individuals from different cultural groups have are influenced by the unbalanced representations of various cultures within numerous forms of media content (Berry & Asamen, 2002; Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Stack & Kelly, 2006). Whites and individuals from high income families are often thought of as the archetypes of social success in American society and media often depicts them with the potential for continued social success. In contrast, non-Whites and members of lower income families are often considered unsuccessful and are regularly portrayed in media as less able to attain social success. I believe that the social narratives present in media content serve as models of behaviors viewers can learn from (Vikaros & Degand, 2010). However, I am not arguing that media consumers are helpless victims easily controlled by media content. Each individual has her or his own personal concerns, dispositions, personalities and past experiences that can influence how he/she actively processes media content. Nonetheless, the possibility that each person might identify with certain media characters better than others

because of perceived physical and cultural similarities is still likely (Taylor, 2003; Wilson, 2008).

My objective for this study is to offer findings that can have broad theoretical implications for research on achievement gaps in racially stratified societies. We need to further examine the existing social contexts surrounding media's and societies' roles in the development of social success skills so that we can begin to understand how the definitions of social success used by minority groups are devalued while the definitions of social success used by dominant groups assist them in maintaining the inequalities that currently exist (Dyke & Murphy, 2006; Nunn, 2014). I acknowledge the researchers' perspectives provided in previous studies about youth, media, social instructional processes, and social success skills but I would also like to further the conversations about these topics by including the voices of the youth we often study. Studies that include youth perspectives do exist (boyd, 2014; Fisherkeller, 2002; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Warikoo, 2005). Yet, I was unable to find studies that followed the everyday lived experiences of youth while also exploring the roles their media experiences and social interactions played in the development of their social success skills. A closer look at the sociocultural processes that are present when individuals form their understandings of social success is needed so that we can explore how they are influenced by social factors. The findings from this study are intended for educational media producers, parents, and educators who wish to better understand how the youth in their care are influenced by their surroundings.

With the above goals in mind, I conducted an in-depth 12-month study on Black teenage male students' social lives and their related media experiences. The participants and I often discussed their personal definitions of social success and success, overall. Their personal thoughts about these topics were important because we need to understand the factors that play a role in how they determine and assess the social skills they need to develop in order to be viewed as successful in their communities. We examined the various ways their experiences with media played a role in their ability to acquire social success skills. We also explored the many ways they think about and respond to their experiences with their media. I collected data on a wide range of media experiences but I focused mainly on the experiences that were related to my participants' personal and professional aspirations.

I will now provide a review of the existing literature on social success skills as well as a literature review on media's role in children's lives. Afterwards, I briefly explain the theoretical framework used for this study. Then, I discuss my roles throughout this study and the experiences that inspired me to investigate this topic. Next, I reveal the applied methodology used during my investigations, data collections, and data analyses. Finally, I report the main results from this study, discuss my conclusions, elaborate on this study's limitation, and provide suggestions for future research on this topic.

Review of the Literature

The term, "social success skills," covers skills and traits that have been studied for numerous decades and shown to increase an individual's potential for success in society (Alonso, 2006; Blanden, Gregg, & Macmillan, 2007; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001; Mueller & Plug, 2006; Postlewaite & Silverman, 2006; Tyler, 2003). Examples include "perseverance, self-confidence, communication skills, social responsibility and the ability to work with others and resolve conflicts" (Rothstein, 2004, p. 7). Also included is "a wide array of individual traits of mainly a psychological, social, and behavioral nature, not directly reflecting formal, academic, or technical knowledge or skills. These include interpersonal skills, prosocial behavior, discipline, effort, leadership, and responsibility, among many others" (Alonso, 2006, p. 1). When students' social success skills

are developed along with their academic skills, their potential for academic success greatly increases (Marzano, 1988; Rothstein, 2004). Studies show that social success skill levels are high in students who do not drop out of high school and in top performing employees (Rothstein, 2004).

However, the majority of past studies about social success skills do not incorporate the perspectives of employees, young students, and minority groups. Those studies often utilize definitions of social success skills that have been predefined by individuals outside of these groups. Loomis, Baker, and Proctor's (1949) study rigidly defined it as "the number of times an individual was chosen by his classmates on the basis of their desire to *live with him*" (p. 316). Nissenbaum (2012) referred to it broadly as the "ability to create and maintain personal connections with the people in his/her lives" (p. 22). Moreover, surveys, such as the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991), the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002), and the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1999), are often used to assess students' social success skills (Hoza, Waschbusch, Pelham, Molina, & Milich, 2000; Life, 2013; Norvilitis & Reid, 2012; Sillanpää, Suominen, Rautava & Aromaa, 2011; Tournaki, 2003). Unfortunately, these approaches lack the flexibility needed to allow for insight into how different perspectives, environments, and cultures can influence an individual's personal understanding of social success. A general common understanding of social success can be shared by different individuals and various cultures since the term "social" implies interactions with outside individuals and/or groups but variations on the definition should also be allowed. We need more studies that allow individuals to explain their personal understandings of social success so that we can take into account the unique ideas and skills they develop in their social contexts. I want to know how their social and media experiences help them persevere in their social milieus. I am also interested in learning how those experiences and settings influenced their aspirations.

Furthermore, differences between average academic achievement levels for individuals from various cultural groups are influenced by the varying levels of expectations some teachers have for students from different cultural groups (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Louie, 2006; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006; Montgomery, 2000; Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002; Rothstein, 2004). Research has shown that negative stereotypes perpetuated about African American males influence educational settings where some teachers describe their African American male students' learning abilities as "undesirable, intolerable, [and] far from ideal" (Youdell, 2003, p 18). These teachers do not believe that these students have social success skills. They assume that Black male students cannot develop those skills and that they are not interested in acquiring them. Instead of viewing African American students as children ready to learn, these teachers see them as delinquents (Wald & Losen, 2003; Youdell, 2003).

These negative perceptions are influenced by broader discourses about young people, in particular African American males, who are routinely depicted through pathologizing lenses (Burrell, 2010; Rothwell, 2014). When comparing the treatment received by Black and White students who exhibit what was perceived by authority figures as equal levels of anti-social behavior in the classroom and in the workplace, Alonso's (2006) study revealed that Blacks were penalized on a much larger scale. Multiple reports also show that although Blacks are arrested more often for drug related crimes, a higher percentage of Whites used and sold drugs (Rothwell, 2014). Moreover, ensuring that Black students develop the necessary social success skills and academic skills required to successfully graduate from college does not eliminate the inequality that exists in the American workforce. Racial discrimination in our labor markets continues to cause higher levels of unemployment, underemployment, and lower wages for Black college graduates versus White college graduates (Jones & Schmitt, 2014).

An increasing number of media producers, scholars and researchers are acknowledging and researching multiple ways that various forms of media can influence children's social

development (boyd, 2014; Burrell, 2010; Calvert, 2008; Fisch, 2004; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kirkorian, Wartella & Anderson, 2008; Montgomery, 2000). Digital media, such as video games, computers, and cellular phones, are easily accessible and their interactive features “are likely to have a more profound impact on how children grow and learn, what they value and ultimately who they become than any medium that has come before” (Montgomery, 2001, p. 635). Nevertheless, non-digital forms of older media, such as television, novels, radio, magazines and comic books, continue to be major influences in children’s lives (Ashcraft, 2009; Cherland, 2008; Fisch, 2004; Koss & Teale, 2009). The societal messages children learn from their media influence the social success skills they develop. Those messages can often compete or complement their own personal values, their family’s values, and the values present in their cultural and ethnic environs (boyd, 2014). Yet, studies that explore the intersections between media, social instruction, social inequality, social success skills, and social interactions, while also including youth in the conversation are nonexistent.

In response to the unequal treatment and cultural stereotypes found in media, many educators, socially conscious media producers and researchers support the development and inclusion of culturally relevant pro-social content within media (Fisch, 2004; Louie, 2006; Rideout, 2005; Singer, 2002). Media content perpetuating stereotypes that distort the images of various cultural groups continue to be the focus of media studies research agendas (Lehman, 2007; Singer, 2002). Media content often includes simplified representations of characters and content that can be easily understood by children. Producers need to understand how this can further support the teaching and spreading of stereotypes to children if extra attention is not given to the content during production (Lehman, 2007; Singer, 2002). Fortunately, there are examples of media content that combat racism and their social aspects can positively influence the social development of students of all cultures (Fisch, 2004; Fisherkeller, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

I use a present day interpretation of Heidegger’s (1962) version of hermeneutical phenomenology as the theoretical framework for this study. Our definitions and interpretations of phenomenology are always evolving (Spiegelberg, 1960; van Manen, 2010), but it is generally understood that phenomenology is a discipline that aims to “focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them” (Langdrige, 2007, p. 4). I specifically chose hermeneutical phenomenology for this study because I want to “unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories” (Kafle, 2011, p. 186).

Phenomenological studies require a researcher “to enter the world of individuals and to understand their perspectives” (Slavin, 2007, p. 147). Each participant’s distinct contributions can provide us with a clearer understanding of media’s role as a social instruction tool. Their perspectives can also help us understand how various social and individual factors might influence their experiences and their responses to those experiences.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is appropriate for this study because of its focus “on subjective experience of individuals and groups” (Kafle, 2011, p. 186). The subjective nature of each of my participants’ responses is important because the memories they have of their experiences hold a tremendous amount of influence over their personal social development (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). McMillan (2008) wrote: “the meaning of the experience to each participant is what constitutes reality” (p. 291). People’s interpretations of an experience have the potential to shape how they believe the world sees them, how they see the world, and how they determine and value the skills they think they need for social success.

Background of Researcher

Hermeneutical Phenomenology is also especially suitable for my study because it supports the philosophy that we are all a part of this world and therefore our biases, personal histories, and presuppositions cannot be fully bracketed and suspended during the data collection and analysis phases (Fouquier, 2009; Heidegger, 1962; Kafle, 2011; Laverly, 2008). I also believe in this philosophy and I have chosen to make my influences apparent by providing a brief description of my personal experiences and beliefs about social success skills, media, inequality and education in the following paragraphs.

I am a Haitian American academic who has worked in various educational environments. My educational colleagues and I have had discussions about the roles of social success skills in the classroom. We understood that social success skills instruction was not always included in educational environments; however, we occasionally discussed the existing disconnects between the directions provided by some educational leaders, research reports, and instructional guides on social success skills development. We often found that personal and social factors in the classroom often made it difficult for these instructions to fit in various cases. The directions provided were sometimes impractical or biased when attempts were made to apply them in certain academic social contexts. I personally believed that this was due to existing social issues related to racism, prejudicial beliefs, and a lack of understanding about various cultures. The instructions for how to best promote social success skills development in students were often inspired by the same societal messages that promote the ideas that White cultures are ideal for social advancement and that a person's financial success was automatically directly proportional to his/her individual efforts. I believe that studying students' discussions about their experiences can reveal nuanced details that help us evolve our instructional methods so that we can be better prepared to adapt to their circumstances and be better prepared for an increasingly multi-ethnic population.

I am also an experienced educational media developer. I produced my own educational entertainment media brands *Coomacka Island* and *Anyoné*. I also acquired experience working on established entertainment related media brands while employed at *Sesame Workshop*. I accumulated several years of experience using different multimedia production tools and also spent much time developing an understanding of the art processes involved when creating content that appeals to children. Additionally, I gained a better understanding of the theories used to create effective educational tools and curriculums while enrolled in the Instructional Technology and Media program at Columbia University's Teachers College. As an educational media producer, my wish is that the experiences in this study can be seen as detailed testimonials that provoke thought and conversation between educational media producers, subject matter experts, and researchers who want to ensure the effectiveness of their products.

Methods

I designed this research as a multi-case study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) with two primary participants. This allowed me to gather and analyze more information over a longer period of time and at a more in-depth level than would have been possible if I had chosen to work with a larger focal group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Bonner, 2010; McMillan, 2008). Case studies are additionally appropriate for my investigations because they help challenge generalizations made about larger groups by providing detailed insight into the lived realities of individuals (Bonner, 2010; Mogra, 2014).

Participants

I used purposeful sampling (McMillan, 2008), as recommended for phenomenological studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2002), to select the participants for this study. I searched for individuals who could articulate the details of their social experiences and their experiences with media, who would share details about their experiences, and who were willing to partake in the study for 12 months. Participants were recruited via several channels (e.g., visits to afterschool programs, presentations to non-profit cultural enrichment programs, discussions with community members at fundraising events for the Haitian earthquake relief efforts, and my personal network of friends). I informed my recruits that there were no financial incentives and that all identifiers (e.g., names, schools, neighborhoods) would be disguised in the data and presentation of the results. My participants also understood that they could withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

I also designed my study to allow for supplementary data from “critical others” (Bonner, 2010) so that the phenomenological data about my primary participants could be further enriched with additional perspectives from key individuals in their lives. The responses I received from their parents, siblings, and friends provided me with additional perspectives about my primary participants’ experiences. As the study progressed, network sampling (McMillan, 2008) was used to select participants for the focus group sessions and collaborative group media experiences (e.g., multiplayer games, book clubs, and movie screenings).

Furthermore, I specifically chose to work with high school teenagers, as opposed to younger students, because they had some form of freedom over their media choices. They were entering young adulthood and often had the freedom to opt in and out of some of their parent’s media experiences. Nonetheless, as teenagers, they were not yet as independent as older adults and had the potential to be influenced by peers, parents, and other social influences. Additionally, they were nearing their undergraduate years and would be expected to select college majors soon. As a result, the teens were attempting to form concrete ideas about the professional careers they might wish to pursue after they graduated from college. This was an important factor in our discussions about social success.

Final selection considerations included reflections on my experiences during the recruiting phase. I thought about the logistics involved in conducting a year-long study that would involve numerous data collection sessions with teenage students. I took into account the varying levels of interest the different teens I met with showed about my study as well as their ability and willingness to articulate their experiences. I factored in my assumptions about their parents’ comfort levels and how that would factor into my ability to continue meeting with them for a year. Finally at the end, I selected two teenage boys with contrasting backgrounds. They both lived in racially diverse towns; however, the historical reasons for the racial diversity in each area were different as were the social and physical makeup of their neighborhoods.

Namir Toussaint was the first focal participant. He was the oldest sibling in his family and he lived in an urban New York City neighborhood that had previously been majority-Black until it experienced a drop in its Black population and an increase in its White population. Namir was a 14-year-old Haitian-American high school freshman living in Kush, an urban New York City neighborhood. He lived in an apartment with his mother, Ms. Toussaint, his 9-year-old brother, Nate, his mother’s fiancé, Mr. Grant, and his 2-year-old half-sister (Mr. Grant’s daughter), Tiana. Namir and Nate’s biological father, Mr. Toussaint, did not live with the family because he had been deported back to Haiti several years prior to the start of this study. Interviews and focus group sessions were often conducted in the living room. We also sat at a dining table near the kitchen whenever the living room was occupied.

Mathieu Dubois was the second participant; his family lived in a suburban New York neighborhood that had previously been majority-White until it experienced a drop in its White

population and an increase in its Black population. Mathieu was a 15-year-old Haitian-American high school sophomore and he was the youngest child in his immediate family. He lived with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. DuBois, his older sister, Elise, and his slightly older brother, Mustafa. His oldest sibling, Rene, lived alone in a New York City apartment. Rene was in his late 20s, Elise was in her mid-20s, and Mustafa was in his mid-teenage years. Interviews and focus group sessions were often conducted in the family den room. We also used the living room when the family den room was occupied.

Data Collection

My research methods were approved by the Columbia University Teachers College's Institutional Review Board. I used audio recorded semi-structured interviews, audio recorded focus group sessions, and audio recorded observations throughout this study. Observations and interviews were appropriate because they are "the primary means of data collection in case studies" (McMillan, 2008). Semi-structured interviews are the specific forms of interviews most commonly used for phenomenological studies (McMillan, 2008). The first sets of semi-structured interviews were guided by an initial set of introductory questions (e.g., How would you define success? How would you define *social* success? What are your favorite forms of media?). We also discussed contextual details about their home, neighborhood, family, and schools. Subsequent interviews became more focused on their media experiences and social experiences. The lengths of each interview with my participants ranged between 1½ and 2½ hours. I conducted 12 interviews with each participant. I also conducted six observation sessions with each primary participant. Observations lasted between 1½ and 2 hours. I observed them engaging in their favorite media experiences (e.g., playing video games, viewing movies, and watching soccer matches) and conducted focus group sessions to discuss their experiences, aspirations and thoughts about social success in detail. Focus groups are an effective method for gathering data about products (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; McMillan, 2008) so I used these sessions to learn more about my participants' media products. Moreover, focus group sessions provide supportive environments that enable participants to freely express themselves (Iwasaki & Mactavish, 2005; Krueger & Casey, 2000). I conducted three 1-hour focus group sessions for each case study. The primary participants were always kept separate throughout the study. They did not take part in each other's focus group sessions. Each focus group session consisted of the primary participant and his family and friends. The number of participants in each focus group session ranged between 5 and 7.

Data Analysis

Hermeneutic Phenomenology is a "research methodology aimed at producing rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively" (Smith, 1997, p. 80). The data collected and the resulting product created during the analysis of this data are both textual content (Smith, 1997). van Manen (2010) states that the final text should be "a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful" (p. 36). With this in mind, I strove to transform the collected textual data into a final textual product that would provide the reader with contextually rich perspectives about the phenomenon of social success skills development.

I performed analyses after each data collection session with my participants by using the hermeneutic cycle which requires one to repeatedly read text, write reflections, and interpret (Kafle, 2011; Laverty, 2008). I transcribed the interviews, reflected on the data, and wrote notes about my thoughts. For example, I wrote the following notes after reflecting on the section of

the transcript where Mathieu describes his classmate's thoughts about his neighborhood:

Mathieu seemed really down when he started talking about what some of his classmates thought about [Rockdale]. I wonder how much he really likes the school. I'll have to ask him next time. It's still early in the study so I'm assuming it will take me some time to better understand how he feels about the school. I'm hoping I'll get a better sense eventually. I'm curious about this area's demographics though. It would be interesting to see if he is really right when he says his area is not majority Black. I can see that it's not all Black when I drive through the neighborhood but I wouldn't be surprised if it was majority Black. I see White and Black people but for some reason, it just seems like there are more Black people in this area. I wonder where the Asians and Hispanics are? I don't think I saw any yet. Mathieu might have been thinking that Rockdale was just diverse but there was no way for him to know for sure. I'm going to check the Census data for the recorded numbers. I'm also curious about the crime statistics for this area and how it compares to the crime in his classmates' majority White neighborhoods.

(Reflections, May, 2011)

After reviewing the census numbers, I learned that Mathieu was correct because Blacks were not the majority racial group in his neighborhood. Yet, I also learned that the Black under-18 population was larger than the under-18 population for all other racial groups. This realization inspired additional reflection notes and new questions for my follow-up sessions with Mathieu.

During the analysis phase of this project, I repeatedly listened to the audio recordings of the interview, focus group, and observation sessions while cross-checking their transcriptions. I also asked my participants to verify my interpretations of the transcripts in follow up sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). I used the results of these analyses to produce and inspire additional questions and decisions about the directions the study would take in each progressive session (Seidman, 2006; Stake, 2005). For example, Mathieu's interest in soccer and video games led to observations of FIFA video games he played with his friends. These observation sessions, in turn, led to focus group discussions of the games.

This approach provided me with the flexibility I needed so that I could adjust to my participants' evolving interests, social interactions, and experiences with various forms of media throughout the 12 months of the study (Merriam, 2002). The data compiled from these qualitative questions were not weighed using a strict frequency metric because I was not overly concerned with the number of times a particular response appeared in the data. Instead, I allowed their responses to lead me on an investigative journey.

Initially, I highlighted all of my participants' descriptions about social success and social success skills in the data transcripts. These data points were placed into a separate document and reviewed to determine where similarities and differences existed between the focal participants' descriptions and the descriptions provided by the family members and friends who also participated. Furthermore, I organized them chronologically to examine how my participants' thoughts might have evolved during this study. Their thoughts about these topics revealed the social traits, social skills, and social experiences they valued in their lives.

Next, I analyzed data considering their aspirations and goals by (a) highlighting portions of the transcripts that included discussions about these topics, (b) re-reading those entries and any related field notes, and (c) writing down my reflections. The field notes were important during my reflections because they provided me with contextual details that could not be captured in the transcripts (e.g., Namir's mother walked into the living room several times during the session so I think this may be why he paused and stuttered while explaining

his future goals). I then compiled all of this textual data into a separate document and reflected on how the academic goals, professional aspirations, and social desires they discussed throughout the study were related to their definitions of social success. The results from my analysis of these qualitative data sources were then summarized and provided further context by gathering related quantitative data (e.g., Census data, real estate data, school data).

Afterwards, I analyzed the data about my participants' media experiences and social interactions to determine how these experiences were influenced by their aspirations and vice versa. I highlighted discussions about these experiences in the transcripts, transferred them into a separate document, and searched for patterns in the data that showed how these experiences had the potential to either support or hinder their ability to achieve the academic, professional, or social goals they had previously communicated. I also reviewed these experiences to determine what role they played, if any, in how my participants' developed their social success skills. Data triangulation was used to evaluate the validity of the interpretations I made from the potential patterns. I triangulated the data presented by (a) incorporating the various perspectives I received from my participants as well as the perspectives of their family and friends, (b) cross-checking the comments made in interviews by reviewing the related data captured during the focus group sessions and observations, (c) personally interfacing with the media my participants discussed so that I could develop a procedural understanding of the experiences they discussed during the various sessions, and (d) re-reading the transcripts, field notes, and reflection notes to ensure my portrayal of their experiences and the quotations provided were contextually accurate. The final version of the rich textual results produced from my interpretations and analyses are presented in the following section.

Results

This section illustrates my participants' responses and experiences. The results are not meant to be generalized to entire populations of other Black males in similar situations. They are provided so that we can gain a better understanding and sampling of the idiosyncratic factors that can directly and indirectly influence the development of an individual's social success skills.

I will first establish my participants' social contexts by providing details about their neighborhoods and school options. These contextual details are offered so that the circumstances surrounding the development of their social success skills can be understood. Next, I allow each participant to offer us his personal definitions of social success. Their definitions are further supplemented with specific examples from their experiences. Afterwards, I include a discussion about their personal aspirations. Lastly, I provide a snapshot of their media experiences while also examining the social circumstances that are associated with those experiences.

Namir's Context

Namir's family members were residents of Kush, a socioeconomically diverse urban neighborhood in New York City. Household incomes in Kush ranged between lower middle income (\$53,120 – \$66,400) and average middle income (\$66,400 - \$199,200) (New York City Council, 2013). This residential area once had a majority-Black population during prior decades until many Whites moved in and large numbers of Blacks moved out. Comparisons between the 2000 Census data and the 2010 Census data for Kush's residents revealed a 31% drop in the number of Blacks living in the area (see Table 1). The Black population was still the majority but there had also been an 82% increase in Whites.

Table 1. Kush Census Population by Race/Ethnicity (2000 & 2010)

Race/Ethnicity	2000		2010		Change over time	
	population	%	population	%	population	%
Total	52,927	100	50,431	100	-2,496	-4.7
White	9,959	18.8	18,161	36.0	8,202	82.4
Black	34,564	65.3	23,713	47.0	-10,851	-31.4
American Indian	233	0.4	243	0.5	10	4.3
Asian	1,894	3.6	3,085	6.1	1,191	62.9
NPI*	43	0.1	13	0.0	-30	-69.8
Other	3,885	7.3	2,756	5.5	-1,129	-29.1
Multiracial	2,349	4.4	2,460	4.9	111	4.7

*NPI = Native Pacific Islander

Kush was one of multiple neighborhoods situated in the Luxor Public School District. The school district was comprised of 18 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and 14 high schools (School Digger, 2012). During the 2003-2004 academic school year (data prior to the 2003-2004 school year was not available), the total K-12 student enrollment population was 20,779 (New York State Education Department, 2007). The enrollment numbers gradually increased to 21,734 students during the 2009-2010 year (see Table 2).

Table 2. Luxor Public School District Student's Racial Population (2003-2010)

Race	2003-04		2009-10		Change over time	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Total	20,779	100.0	21,743	100.0	964	4.6
AI/AN*	132	1.0	120	1.0	-12	-9.1
Black	13,632	66.0	13,163	61.0	-469	-3.4
Hispanic or Latino	3,330	16.0	3,246	15.0	-84	-2.5
AA/H/PI**	2,254	11.0	3,511	16.0	1257	55.8
White	1,431	7.0	1,703	8.0	272	19.0
Multiracial	n/a	n/a	0	0		

*AI/AN = American Indian / Alaska Native

**AA/H/PI = Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

According to the 2010 census, Kush's population for all residents under 18 years old was 8,274 (see Table 3). This number was much lower than the 2010 count of 21,734 students for the Luxor Public School District (see Table 2) because the district also included children from neighborhoods outside of the 1.5 square miles that covered Kush. As a result, true comparisons cannot be made between this school district's students and the under 18 population in Kush because Kush's under 18 population was only a fraction of the total number of students in the Luxor Public School District.

Table 3. 2010 Kush Population (under 18)

Race/Ethnicity	population	%
Total	8,274	100
White	1,994	24.1
Black	4,450	53.8
American Indian	45	0.5

Asian	361	4.4
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	1	0.0
Other	725	8.8
Multiracial	698	8.4

Kush and its surrounding neighborhoods offered residents 30 non-public school options (New York State Education Department, 2012). Parents who wished to send their children to local non-public schools could choose between 15 elementary schools, five K-12 schools, one middle school, one junior high school, five junior-senior high schools, and three senior high schools. The student populations within each of the schools included local residents as well as children from outside neighborhoods.

Namir was one year older than most of his classmates because he was left back during his elementary grade years. He attended a public junior high school and was initially set on attending a public high school but Ms. Toussaint chose to enroll him in a private school. She stated, "He wanted to get into the schools he wanted to get into because his friends were going there and I knew it wouldn't be a good thing." She felt that his friends were a bad influence because they were all performing poorly in school and she wanted Namir to become more serious about his academic career.

Namir was a freshman at Saint Auguste Academy (S.A.A.) during this study. S.A.A. was one of the three private Catholic senior co-ed high schools in the local area around Kush (New York State Education Department, 2012). His commute to school was a short 5-minute walk. The students at his school belonged to families with socioeconomic backgrounds ranging between lower middle income (\$53,120 – \$66,400) and upper middle income levels (> \$199,200) (New York City Council, 2013). The Toussaint family's household income placed them in the average middle income level (\$66,400 - \$199,200) along with the majority of Namir's classmates (New York City Council, 2013). Yet, the racial breakdown of S.A.A.'s majority Black student population (over 80%) did not reflect the racial diversity found in Kush.

Mathieu's Context

Mathieu's family resided in Rockdale, a uniformly upper middle income (> \$199,200) suburban neighborhood outside of New York City (New York City Council, 2013). This neighborhood had a majority-White population during the decades preceding this study until many non-White families moved in and large numbers of White families moved out. The 2010 census revealed that the White population is still the majority but the total number of Whites since 2000 dropped almost 25% (see Table 4). The largest population increase occurred among Blacks as their numbers surged by an additional 4,365 (+ 72%). The largest percentage change (+86%) was found in the number of individuals who now identified themselves as "Other."

Table 4. Rockdale Census Population by Race/Ethnicity (2000 & 2010)

Race/Ethnicity	2000		2010		Change over time	
	population	%	population	%	population	%
Total Population:	31,604	100	32,135	100	531	1.7
White	22,175	70.2	16,680	51.9	-5,495	-24.8
Black	6,094	19.3	10,459	32.6	4,365	71.6
American Indian	85	0.3	110	0.3	25	29.2
Asian	1,157	3.7	1,398	4.4	241	20.9
NPI*	6	0.0	5	0.0	-1	-16.7
Other	1,225	3.9	2,279	7.1	1,054	86.0
Multiracial	862	2.7	1,204	3.8	342	39.7

*NPI = Native Pacific Islander

The public school district within the 4 square miles of Rockdale included seven elementary schools, one middle school and one senior high school. Changes in the racial breakdown of the students that attended the neighboring K-12 public schools between 2000-2010 reflected the decreasing population of Whites and the increasing population of non-Whites shown in the census population data for that time period (see Table 5). Nevertheless, the changes seen in the student population were more dramatic. The Rockdale public school district had previously been predominantly White until the White student population dropped by more than 50%. In contrast, the Black students' population increased by 76% and the Hispanic students' population increased by 100%.

Table 5. Rockdale Public School Students Racial Population (10 year difference)

Race/Ethnicity	1999-00		2009-10		Change over time	
	population	%	population	%	population	%
Total	5319	100	5244	100	-75	-1
AI/AN/AA/PI*	254	5	n/a	n/a		
American Indian or Alaska Native	n/a	n/a	7	0		
Black	1304	25	2294	44	990	76
Hispanic or Latino	534	10	1069	20	535	100
Asian/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	n/a	n/a	218	4		
White	3227	61	1561	30	-1666	-52
Multiracial	n/a	n/a	95	2		

*AI/AN/AA/PI = American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian American, Pacific Islander

The number of Whites living in Mathieu's neighborhood was higher than the number of Blacks in 2010 (see Table 4); however, Black students outnumbered White students in Rockdale's public school system. This inconsistency inspired me to explore Rockdale's 2010 Census population data to determine if the number of school age residents would reflect this. Table 6 reveals that in 2010 Blacks did make up the majority of Rockdale's under-18 population.

Table 6. 2010 Rockdale Population (under 18)

Race	population	%
Total	7,801	100
Black	3,201	41.0
White	3,067	39.3
American Indian	32	0.4
Asian	303	3.9
NH/PI*	2	0.0
Other	667	8.6
Multiracial	529	6.8

*NH/PI = Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Furthermore, Rockdale's 2010 public school population of 5,244 students only accounted for 67% of the neighborhood's under-18 population. We can safely assume that some of the remaining 33% that were not enrolled in the public school system were not yet of age. It is also possible that a percentage were high school dropouts. Additionally, several more would

not be counted in the public school population if they were enrolled in private schools but there was only one non-public school in Rockdale. It was a Catholic elementary school with a total enrollment of 431 students. This school's population included residents from within the neighborhood as well as students who resided outside of the neighborhood.

Mr. and Mrs. DuBois informed me that they had initially enrolled their eldest son, Rene, in public schools. They later chose to enroll all of their children in private schools once they learned that Rene had been exposed to other classmates with knives. "Yeah, so what choices did I have?... I'm not going to let my kids [be in danger] ... it's a sacrifice ... If I could ... I would find another [less expensive] way to do it." Mathieu and his brother Mustafa were among the 33% of Rockdale's school age residents who were not enrolled in its public school district. Nevertheless, since there were no non-public high schools in Rockdale, they attended Saint Yves Preparatory High School (S.Y.P.), an all-male private Catholic high school in a neighboring town. Mrs. DuBois dropped them off at school on her way to work each morning. The DuBois family's upper middle income (> \$199,200) (New York City Council, 2013) socioeconomic status was consistent with the majority of students' families at S.Y.P. Nonetheless, the racial breakdown of their schools' majority White student population (over 80%) did not reflect the racial diversity found in Rockdale.

Namir Defines Social Success

Namir believed that successful people are individuals who "get paid for what they want to do." The phrase "get paid" can literally mean "to receive payment for services rendered," but he was instead referring to the informal slang definition of this phrase which means "to make large sums of money." I did not find it surprising that Namir's criteria for success included a financial requisite because success is often portrayed in terms of monetary worth. Yet, he also believed that financial wealth was not always necessary to achieve *social* success. He explained that social success could apply to non-financial objectives and he believed that an individual's own measure for success was dependent on attaining whatever individual goals they had set for themselves. "Accomplishing what I want to do" was his personal definition for what he would view as success for himself. Attaining "whatever your goal is" was how he similarly defined it for all other individuals. Furthermore, he was adamant about his expectation that one should have completed his objectives before being considered a success. Lastly, he also commented that socially successful individuals are "... friendly, nice ... charismatic" and he felt that social success skills were necessary "... so you can get a raise from your boss. You need to have a good relationship with people from your job ... and in school."

Namir listed basketball players, comedians, and actors as the most successful individuals he sees in his media because of their ability to make large sums of money while working at, what he viewed as, exciting jobs. He enjoyed comedian/actor Dave Chappelle's cable television show, *Chappelle Show*. He also liked viewing comedian/actor Kevin Hart's stand-up comedy films, *I'm a Grown Little Big Man*, *Seriously Funny*, and *Laugh at My Pain*. Namir especially appreciated the additional content shown before the *Laugh at My Pain* stand-up comedy film because it provided him with a better understanding of Kevin Hart's long journey towards becoming a famous comedian. Unfortunately, finding examples of successful individuals in his life proved to be much more difficult for him. He was open to the idea that individuals in his inner circle of friends and family might be successful. However, he felt that he could not say with certainty that they were successful because they were not rich and they appeared to have not yet reached their own ultimate goals.

Mathieu Defines Social Success

Mathieu described socially successful individuals as “people who can just live their life...and not get in trouble, and provide for their children ... be able to have friends and just enjoy [their life].” I asked him for his thoughts on different aspects of social success at various other times during this study and his descriptions often included one’s ability to amass financial wealth. Similar to Namir, Mathieu’s responses incorporated aspects that were not limited to monetary gains. He held a holistic view of an individual’s social success that frequently involved not only having the means to live comfortably, but also having the ability to experience happiness in your life with others. This was a sentiment shared by his siblings.

Mathieu believed that media’s portrayal of businesspeople and professional athletes made them appear as the most successful professionals. He listed them as successful because he assumed that they all received large salaries. Their business suits, financial acumen, and personal possessions were among the things Mathieu listed as additional reasons he felt that the media portrayed businesspeople as most successful. Professional athlete’s salaries were readily available online for him to reference and they were also often discussed by sports commentators during the various sports shows he watched with his family and friends. Mathieu also explained that his *FIFA* video games provided details about players’ salaries. Likewise, Bill Gates and Warren Buffet were among the businessmen shown in the media that he admired for their successes. He stated: “People like Bill Gates, Warren Buffet [are successful] ... in general ... I know these are pretty good guys.” He referenced their philanthropy as examples of goodwill.

Conversely, Mathieu did not have a positive view of all businesspeople. He differentiated the successes they had achieved in their professional lives with how they conducted themselves in society and in the media. He specifically stated his disgust with Donald Trump because of his role in the “birther, birth certificate” scandal involving President Obama. Nonetheless, he was impressed with, what he perceived as, the President’s ability to turn the situation into a joke: “He’s [President Obama is] a pretty funny guy, with the birth video ... I think it was good that he took it lightly, cause knowing how Donald Trump talks a lot of crap, I would have fired back at him.” Although the media presented Donald Trump as a successful businessman, Mathieu did not consider him a socially successful individual because he was also portrayed as someone who repeatedly gets into unnecessary and troublesome quarrels.

Namir’s Future Aspirations

Namir was struggling academically at S.A.A. but he planned to attend college after he graduated. He was curious about college life and he was unsure about what to expect:

Me: Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Namir: I’ll be in college.

Me: What are you going to be doing when you’re there?

Namir: I’ll find out when I get there.

Me: What do you think you want to do? Like, major in?

Namir: I don’t know yet. That’s, that’s ... that’s what I’m trying to figure out.

(Namir, Interview, May, 2011)

Although Ms. Toussaint expressed that she wanted to see Namir succeed academically, she could not act as a direct resource about the college experience. Ms. Toussaint had initially planned to go to college after she graduated from high school but she became pregnant with

Namir and decided to cancel her college plans. She has been gainfully employed for over a decade in the retail fashion industry but this was not always her goal:

Me: ... when you [immigrated] here and you were 12, you knew you wanted to do fashion? From when you were younger?

Ms. Toussaint: No, no, I wanted to ... I think I, my friend, she always wanted to be a doctor and she accomplished that. And I wanted to be a lawyer, and I didn't do it. I guess it's because I got pregnant at such an early age. So I didn't want to go to college and stuff [inaudible] to do all that? Cause that's really what I really wanted to do, but I didn't—I guess it's because I was young, and I would say, “oh this is what I want to do.” You know, when you're in Haiti everybody wants to be a doctor, everybody wants to be a lawyer. So those are the things I really wanted to do.

Me: How old were you when you got pregnant?

Ms. Toussaint: I got pregnant at 17.

(Ms Toussaint, Interview, March, 2012)

Ms. Toussaint did not transfer the expectations she previously had for herself onto Namir and she also did not insist that he choose any one specific industry to work in. She was mainly concerned with his current academic career. She often reminded him about the sacrifices she made to ensure that he was enrolled in S.A.A. and she requested that he improve his grades as a show of appreciation. Mr. Grant had also been gainfully employed for several years as an engineer but he was also unable to act as a first-hand resource about college life experiences because his highest level of formal education was high school. This was also the case for Mr. Toussaint since he did not live with Namir and his highest level of formal education was also high school.

Namir and I also discussed his future professional goals. He stated: “Maybe I could be a good comedian because I make people laugh.” He did not view himself as a class clown, but he liked to entertain his classmates with jokes. Namir enjoyed studying comedy performances by Dave Chappelle and Kevin Hart to determine what made them successful entertainers. He attributed part of their success to their ability to narrate believable and relatable scenarios: “They tell jokes that make people laugh, like life stories, not like ... corny jokes.”

Namir also showed interest in becoming a sound engineer/producer but he said he was not confident in his musical abilities: “I don't think I could make beats.” He clarified further by expressing his frustration over his lack of knowledge about the production process: “I tried before but ... it doesn't come out right. Maybe it's because I don't know what I'm doing.” Interestingly, he once had the opportunity to work in a music studio with his older cousin, Marcus. He discussed the day he spent assisting Marcus with various errands:

It was next to Madison Square Garden. Yeah, a few blocks away. And he made me go to that, uh...healthy shop. Wholefoods. And he made me get some ... some, oil thing that he put in a spray bottle, and sprayed around the office, and sprayed around the studio. And, like, he made me get them food. Do all of that. (Namir, Discussion during Observation Session, September, 2011)

At the end of that day, Namir was excited to learn that he would be invited back as an intern for the studio. He waited for a callback but he never had a chance to return to the studio:

I was supposed to go to my cousin's music studio every Saturday. He just never called. He doesn't call anymore. And every time I call, he just doesn't pick up

his phone. So I only went that one weekend and I never went again.
(Namir, Discussion during Observation Session, September, 2011)

Namir appreciated the one day he spent in the studio but he repeatedly told me in additional sessions throughout the study that he did not understand why he was never invited back.

Although Namir had not officially chosen a future profession yet, he was confident that hand coordination was an important skill all professionals needed. He said: “You gotta know how to use your hands...if you don't know how to use your hands you can't do anything.” He provided examples of why it was needed in the two professions he showed most interest in: “If you're going to be a producer you have to know how to use the buttons. You gotta know what you're doing.” Additionally, he believed that as a comedian “...you need to be able to make [hand] motions.” He referred to the gestures made by comedians during their stand up shows as important parts of their comedy routines because they were used to communicate with the audience.

Namir assumed that a college education was not necessary to become a comedian or sound engineer. He supposed that Dave Chappelle had not gone to college: “I think he's just one of those funny guys off the streets.” But he stated that he was unsure about Kevin Hart's education level: “[Kevin Hart] said he [went to high school] in one of his jokes but I don't know about college.” He was also unsure about his cousin Marcus' education level, but he assumed that some sound engineers did have college degrees.

In contrast, we also discussed professions that Namir believed did require a college education. Namir provided the presidency of the United States as an example: “You have to have a certain degree, diploma, something. You have to go to school for a certain amount of years. And you have to have ... whatever qualifies you to be president.”

Mathieu's Future Aspirations

Mathieu achieved high academic marks at S.Y.P. and he planned to attend college. He had numerous discussions with his siblings and parents about college and they were each able to provide him with first-hand accounts of their experiences. Both Mr. and Mrs. DuBois had graduate degrees. Elise had an undergraduate degree from a state university and Rene had an undergraduate degree from an Ivy League university. Mathieu stated that his older cousin, Abel, was an additional immediate resource for him about college life. Furthermore, he viewed his cousin as an example of success because Abel was enrolled in an Ivy League university, at the time of this study, and he consistently achieved high academic marks at that university.

Mrs. DuBois was especially vocal about her desire to provide her children with high quality education. I asked her why she chose S.Y.P. for her children and she stated, “The school name. When you mention it, I think it's worth it.” She felt that the school was a major reason why Rene had been accepted to an Ivy League university and she expected that it would improve Mathieu and Mustafa's chances of also enrolling in a top tier university. She was extra appreciative of the S.Y.P. student experience because her nephew, Abel, was also an S.Y.P. alum and he was currently enrolled in an Ivy League institution. The DuBois family also attributed the social success that S.Y.P. students achieved to the fraternity-like social community the school provided. Mrs. DuBois stated: “They say, from [Saint Yves], it's like ... a brotherhood.” The family informed me that its alumni network often assisted each other academically and professionally. Rene further confirmed this with a real world example: “That's the thing that Chris, my last boss, told me. He was like, *yeah we're both [S.Y.P.] men. We gotta look out for each other.* He was all about that.”

Mathieu and I also discussed the professions he considered pursuing and he expressed a desire to become a professional soccer athlete. He spent a great deal of time playing soccer

for his high school soccer team and local town soccer club. He did not have an immediate resource in his family to speak to about life as a professional athlete but he had recently been acquainted with several extremely talented players at a soccer summer camp during the time of this study. Mathieu told me that one individual in particular, Ricardo, was the best soccer player he had ever competed against. Although Ricardo was only one year older than Mathieu, he played for a semi-professional American soccer club with older competitors:

He [Ricardo] played for the senior team and he scored the winning goal ... And we played against him. It was so ... he's so good. It was incredible because, he was, like, he literally looked like he just woke up and started crossing us up.
(Mathieu, Interview, February, 2012)

Mathieu informed me that he would always remember playing against Ricardo because it was an inspirational experience.

Mathieu also stated that he was interested in a sports-related medical career: "I'd probably be a health trainer, or somewhere around sports medicine. If I can't make it as a [professional soccer] player, then I would do that." Mr. DuBois was influential over Mathieu's evolving thoughts concerning a future in the health field. Mathieu often discussed various medical topics with his father. They often spoke about the situations Mr. DuBois experienced as a manager at a local hospital. Mr. DuBois also helped Mathieu think through several non-technical related aspects of the health industry. They often discussed Mathieu's concerns about how his future social life could be affected by a health career because he was opposed to the idea of pursuing any career that might ruin his ideas of an enjoyable social life.

Furthermore, Mathieu was also concerned about the student loan debt many medical students accumulate while in school. His father was currently still paying back his student loans from medical school but Elise, Mustafa, and Mathieu often recognized their mother and Rene as important influences over their understanding of how one's ability to control their economics can lead to a better quality of life in the future. Mathieu and Mustafa saw student loan debt as an obstacle they wanted to avoid and all three siblings admired Rene's disciplined approach to eliminating the student loan debt he had accumulated. The following focus group session transcript includes details from a discussion we had concerning Rene and the approach he took when tackling his student loan debt:

Elise: most people, even if they have like, any sort of debt, like, they don't pay it off that quickly. You know what I mean. It's just like, you know. He's worked at companies where, where they've been good to him with bonuses and all that stuff ... raises. So anytime that would happen, he would just use that money, instead of going on a trip, or he'd just wipe it off that way which is something that ... I'm gonna want to do.

Me: So, but, how did you guys hear about that. Did Rene just let you know?

Elise: That what?

Me: That he was paying off his debt.

Elise: Yeah, like sometimes he, uh, we'll talk and he—

Mustafa: --yeah, my mom's really interested.

Elise: and it's just that my mom--because he's barely home so--whatever conversation they have is--

Mustafa: --it's about what he's doing.

Elise: It's about what he's doing, and, he told me to my face, he was like, "I have one more, once I get this bonus I'm going to just wipe off my loan and I'll be done," know what I'm saying?

Me: That's impressive.

Elise: Yeah, right?... Some sacrifices—because—sometimes, it's like if I'm getting a \$5000 bonus, that's gonna be hard to just ...

[Everyone laughing]

Elise: You know what I mean?

Mustafa: Elise is gonna be like “I'm going shopping!”

Elise: Or something, like, I don't know. That's difficult!

Mathieu: But Rene's not that kind of guy.

Mustafa: Yeah.

Elise: He's just like, “I have my TV, I'm good.”

Me: He's always been like that?

Mathieu: Yeah, he doesn't really care.

(Focus Group Session, November, 2011)

The conversation continued with an explanation of the financial freedom Rene now had because of the discipline he chose to display when paying back his student loans. They explained that he was now able to take vacation trips to various destinations, purchase products for the family as gifts, and buy himself items he enjoyed (e.g., video games and movies). Later in the study, Mathieu reiterated his concern about the student loan debt that students often carry after school:

It sucks. It's like you'll be paying back loans into your 40s ... I just don't want to ever be in that situation. Rene ... the fact that he's already done paying his [loans] is actually, is pretty cool. Because he doesn't even have to worry about it until he buys a house or something. (Mathieu, April, 2012)

Mathieu informed me that he planned to search and apply for college scholarships that could help him offset the need for student loans.

A Brief Snapshot of Namir's Media Experiences

Namir enjoyed watching comedy films because he was interested in becoming a comedian but the majority of his media time revolved around video games. He often visited *YouTube* channels to learn about video games that were slated for release in the near future. The channel he frequented most often during the time of this study was hosted by a popular video game promoter named Chris Smoove. Namir informed me that “Chris Smoove is a guy who makes, like, videos ... basketball, *Call of Duty* ... he has somebody make intros for him and then he does his own gameplay. He edits stuff.” Chris Smoove created narrative video montages of his gaming accomplishments by combining game scenes from popular games like *Grand Theft Auto IV* with captured video recordings of his own gameplay sessions. The videos were primarily used to introduce players to features that would be available in new games.

Namir first learned of Chris Smoove while researching about the *NBA 2K11* videogame:

I know about him because when I wanted to get *NBA 2K11*, I was watching *My Player* videos, and I, like, copied off of him. Like, I was trying to make [*My Player*] better. Trying to make my person like him ... when I first got it.

(Namir, Observation session, September, 2011)

My Player is a game mode introduced in *NBA 2K11* that allowed players to create avatars (referred to as *My Player*) of themselves. Their avatar (*My Player*) starts off with various skills

and attributes that could be improved over time. Namir stated: “They have like different player styles, like, 3 point specialist, um ... scoring, passing-first, athletic.” He also revealed that he initially struggled with the *My Player* game mode. “When I first got *NBA 2K11*, it was hard. So I kept on messing up and going to the D-League.” The NBA Development League (D-League) is a minor league basketball organization. Namir eventually improved after spending countless hours playing and became an expert at the game. In addition to becoming an NBA player and winning championship games, Namir also unlocked bonus game features that allowed him to become a member of Michael Jordan’s group of elite players in the league, collect multiple pairs of Jordan sneakers, and pick up sports endorsements deals.

Namir had various opinions and assumptions about the game and its producers. When *NBA 2K12* promotions began, he viewed Chris Smoove’s videos to learn about the new features that would be introduced and expected that *NBA 2K11*’s limitations (e.g., a basketball career without an end goal) would be resolved in the new version of the game:

My person is on the Bulls and he averages, he averages almost 30 points a game...I wanted to get 2K12 because there’s more features, cause in 2K11 there was um, there was like, there was no point to *My Player*... You make your own player, you take him to the NBA...you could do 30 seasons and there’s no retirement or Hall of Fame. But in 2K12 there’s uh, you can retire, you can go in the Hall of Fame. The goal is to get into the Hall of Fame.
(Namir, Observation session, January, 2012)

Namir also assumed that during development, the game producers were thinking “I want it to be the best game ... I want to make money.” Additionally, he believed that the games producers had successfully targeted “kids, teenagers, and basketball fans” as their gaming audience. He supposed that the game developers were also basketball fans.

A Brief Snapshot of Mathieu’s Media Experiences

Mathieu’s interests in soccer influenced his daily routines and as a result, it also influenced the type of media content he consumed each day. Mathieu stated:

...mostly I go to soccer websites, [soccer] news, and grassroots sites [for] training tips, because I’m trying to go as far as I can with it [soccer]. So I need to—in order to help me get better—I go on these sites to get extra tips [from] the pros, who sometimes have blogs and give tips. (Interview, June, 2011)

He spent a great deal of time learning about soccer game rules, soccer game strategies, the makeup of soccer teams in numerous professional leagues, and players’ salaries. Mathieu also said that he learned more about professional soccer players by watching the matches aired on television: “Like, every...Saturday, Sunday, I watched a lot of soccer, and then during the week there would be old games going on. I would be watching and I’d be on the internet ... searching about these things.” In addition to the time he spent between the television soccer matches and various soccer related internet sites, he also played soccer video games.

Mathieu and I also discussed the racist treatment some Black professional soccer players have received from international soccer fans. In one instance “they kept on throwing bananas at one of the players and calling him monkey.” The player he spoke of was Brazilian professional soccer player, Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior. We viewed several YouTube videos of the incident and we also read several online articles about the controversy. Mathieu had not

personally experienced a racial incident during the soccer matches he played in and he confessed that he was unsure how he would react if he were to ever experience one.

Unfortunately, the list of perpetrators who have performed racist acts against professional soccer players in the past was not limited to fans in the stadium. Coaches and television sports announcers have also been guilty offenders. Wall (2008) writes:

Black English football players were racially abused while playing in a “friendly” against the Spanish national team (whose coach had earlier referred to the Arsenal player Thierry Henry as “a black shit”); TV pundit Ron Atkinson, thinking his microphone was turned off, called the French football star Marcel Desailly “a fucking lazy nigger” live on air. (p. 1033)

Generally, the racism present in professional soccer is widely recognized and these incidents are not uncommon. Müller, van Zoonen, and de Roode (2008) wrote: “Nowadays the problem of racism is increasingly regarded as an intrinsic aspect of contemporary soccer cultures. To effectively eradicate racism, soccer culture as a whole will need to be transformed” (p. 23). Interestingly, an effort to combat racism was visibly present in the *FIFA* soccer video games Mathieu played. I observed many “SAY NO TO RACISM” signs along the stadium walls of his *FIFA* video games during our observation sessions. I asked Mathieu if they were based off of actual signs posted in the stadium and he responded: “It is a real thing, with *FIFA* ... They’re trying to stop racism ... because there’s still stadiums, like ... especially like places in Europe where [racist things happen].” The “SAY NO TO RACISM” message was also prominently displayed in the game’s newsfeed menu. Selecting it displayed the following message: “Football clubs around the world have united in a joint effort to say no to racism.”

Discussion

My participants’ thoughts about social success were influenced by their family members’ personal life experiences and the skills their family members valued and displayed as they worked to achieve their own personal goals. These results add to earlier findings from previous studies about student experiences and the roles parents play in their children’s social development (Brooks, 2012; Friend, 2009; Taylor & Clayton, 2004). Brooks (2012) wrote: “The high values families placed on education translated into high values students placed on education. With the assumption that these values encouraged academic achievement and success, students converted these values into behaviors that attributed to their success” (p. 135). Mathieu and Namir referred to their family members’ academic and professional experiences during our discussions about social success. Mathieu’s immediate social circle had examples of individuals who graduated from college, have professional careers, and enjoy an active social life outside of their work hours. Namir’s immediate social circle also had direct examples of professionals with careers and social lives outside of work but it does not include college graduates. As a result, Mathieu included specific details from his family member’s experiences (e.g., financial aid, social life, college majors) in his responses to my questions about college while Namir’s responses to my questions about college were less detailed and did not include examples from individuals in his life. Although both participants displayed an eagerness to attend college, Mathieu had an edge because he had a better understanding of what to expect. For example, in addition to knowing that he will need to responsibly balance his social life with his academic life while in college, he also had an understanding of the financial consequences of student loans after college.

Additionally, Namir and Mathieu’s personal aspirations were major influencers over the type of media content with which they chose to engage. Namir frequently viewed comedy

skits because he was interested in becoming a comedian. Mathieu engaged in many soccer-related experiences because he wanted to be a professional soccer athlete.

Yet, the amount of time they spent engaging in media activities that relate to their current ambitions was not identical. Mathieu's life was consumed with soccer-related activities. Namir spent more time with video game-related activities than comedy-related or music production-related activities. This difference may be due to multiple factors such as the availability of consistent opportunities, availability of mentorship or positive peer resources, or individual personalities and motivations.

Moreover, I believe that the varying levels of consistency found within my participants' social environments and extra-curricular activities also influenced their thoughts concerning the viability of their future professional career options. Fredricks et al.'s (2002) study supports this belief by suggesting that consistent participation in activities are beneficial because it has the potential to strengthen identity formation in youth. If Mathieu and Namir were able to comfortably view themselves as an apprentice or aspirant in the specific professional domain they were interested in (e.g., soccer player, music studio intern), it might improve their ability to determine if they can become a future professional in that specific field (e.g., professional soccer, sound engineering). If they are given the opportunity to regularly participate in an activity for an extended period of time, it may provide them with numerous experiences (good and bad) that they can personally reflect on when assessing their abilities.

I cannot say for certain that Namir would have become more confident in his ability to become a sound engineer if he had participated in a regularly scheduled internship. However, I do believe that his uncertainty concerning why he was never called back did not help his confidence. An opportunity to repeatedly participate in an internship at a music studio could increase the chances that Namir would learn more about what is expected of a sound engineer, and with that knowledge, make a better assessment of his chances. Past studies support the notion that young adults are more likely to acquire a skillset when they repeatedly participate in an activity for an extended period of time (Hansen & Larson, 2007; Larson & Verma, 1999) Unlike Namir, Mathieu was able to consistently participate in an activity. He attended soccer practices and participated in numerous soccer matches. A professional career as a soccer athlete is not guaranteed for Mathieu, but I do believe that he will develop an informed understanding of the skills needed to become a professional athlete.

Additionally, other than not having consistently participated in an activity related to their long term goals, there are other reasons (other than a loss of interest and the setting of new goals) why an individual might have more difficulty achieving long term academic, financial, or professional goals they set for themselves. These reasons could include early pregnancy (as was the case for Ms. Toussaint and her childhood dream to become a lawyer), medical needs, financial instability, or cultural mismatch with authority figures (Bell, 2014).

Likewise, the fracturing of family units due to the deportation of one or more family members has also been a distracting obstacle for students who were trying to achieve their academic goals (Rodriguez & Hagan, 2004). Unfortunately, Namir lived through the traumatic experience of having his father unexpectedly removed from his life through deportation. I cannot definitively conclude that this tragic experience was directly related to the academic struggles he was experiencing because Namir did not explicitly state this. Nevertheless, previous studies have detailed the burdens deportation imposes on young students and their parents (Hagan, Castro, & Rodriguez, 2009; Lonegan, 2007).

Of course, this does not mean that all students who experience setbacks are automatically destined to fail. Several studies have explored the role resilience plays in the lives of students who have faced various forms of adversity (Hanson & Kim, 2007; Ming, 2011). Strong family support systems (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Ming, 2011), positive cultural expectations (Theron & Theron, 2013), supportive authority figures, community members and

role models (Dass-Brailsford, 2005), and childhood intervention programs and activities (Reynolds, 1998) are all positively linked to the development of resilience in youth.

I posit that media can also act as a tool to help youth become more resilient. My participants often use their media as information resources, but I believe they can also be used as sources of inspiration. Their media provides them with examples of success along with narratives of how various individuals achieve success (e.g., professional comedians and soccer athletes). In the film, *Laugh at My Pain*, Kevin Hart takes his viewers on a trip through the various social communities that are an important part of his professional journey as a comedian. In addition to his family's home, he also includes footage of his old Philadelphia neighborhood and his former high school. Kevin Hart explains how he develops his stand-up comedy routines and he also discusses the mistakes he had to overcome in order to become successful. The descriptions are further enriched by interviews from his managers and associates. Similarly, Mathieu enjoys using his media to learn more about the professional soccer players he watches. He follows multiple professional soccer athletes online by visiting their websites. He also enjoys learning more about the sport and receiving tips directly from the players' web blogs. Additionally, he appreciates learning about the adversity many of the non-White professional players face and their different individual responses to discrimination. He hears about the various ways teams have banded together to stand up against the racism their teammates often face and he likes the anti-racism messages in his soccer video games. Knowledge of the racism that exists can potentially help him become better prepared to face it if he ever experiences it in the future. The narratives about players who confront racism may also send a powerful anti-racism message to viewers of all ages that can potentially inspire them to band together whenever they see racists acts perpetrated.

Our lives are guided by the things (e.g., physical, psychological, ideological) we are told hold the most importance to us, our families, and the society in which we live. Those things that hold the most importance often define the levels of success achieved when one attains them. The pursuit of those things represents the pursuit of success and this pursuit is an ongoing conversation that appears in multiple forms throughout our lives. Namir and Mathieu are aware of a pursuit for social success that is occurring around them and they also observe it in their media. Media producers display a continuing effort to create more successful products with each newly released version of their merchandise. The commonality between all of these pursuits is that there is a driving force motivating us to strive for social success. But that is where the similarities often end. Cultures, belief systems, organizations, and individual personalities all influence success, what is defined as success, and the ability to achieve success. The differences among them also influence value judgments made about individuals within the same group as well as those outside of their group. I believe those value judgments play a role in determining what messages our students and their families receive about their ability to attain social success.

Limitations and Future Research

I collected a large amount of data about this interdisciplinary topic but I was unable to pursue and discuss every aspect of my participants' lives. I focused on the data that was most relevant to their thoughts about social success skills and media. I pursued leads into other areas when they were immediately relevant to my participants' personal experiences and aspirations.

Furthermore, my participants engaged with a large number of media products. I was unable to discuss all of their media products. Once I determined which products and experiences are most relevant to their aspirations, I chose to focus on those products and experiences. Additionally, my data was limited to what I was able to observe first-hand and what my participants chose to reveal to me during the interviews, focus group sessions, and

informal conversations. An additional limitation to this study is that there is only one researcher. As a result, the analysis and results produced from this study are formed by one individual.

The results of this study are not generalizable but an in-depth analysis of additional participants would yield more testimonials and narratives about how specific aspects of an individual's life can directly and indirectly play a role in the development of social success skills. Every new perspective presented in future studies might reveal unique aspects and contributions while also providing additional views from a variety of young students. Incorporating female focal participants into future studies would also yield interesting results. I assume that there may be some similarities found between new female high school participants from future studies and the male high school participants from this study; however, there may also be important gender-specific differences that could be introduced and explored in-depth.

Lastly, it would be interesting to conduct a media study that focuses on the lived experiences of students who have experienced the removal of a parent from their homes through deportation. This study would specifically examine how immigrants and deportees are portrayed in the participants' media experiences (if at all), compare it to their real life experiences, and examine the participants' perspectives on those differences and similarities.

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