

# THE AMERICAN DREAM: DISCOURSES OF EQUALITY AND ACHIEVABILITY FOR BLACK AMERICANS

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## **Abstract**

What is the meaning of the American Dream for educated black Americans? How do perceptions of the equality and the achievability of the American Dream among educated black Americans correlate with the dominant discourse on the subject? This research project determines the dominant discourses of perceived equality and opportunity on the American Dream for educated black Americans, taking into account the current context and historical context of black Americans. Throughout history, the American Dream has been central to the American value system and has helped to define the essence of American culture. While the literature on the American Dream suggests that subgroups of the black American population have their own unique perspectives on what constitutes the American Dream, this study has found that educated black Americans generally share both the classic definition and desire of the American Dream. The individuals in this study related overall distrust in the American Dream and view it as an institutionalized concept, and were skeptical about the American Dream's existence and accessibility for black Americans today. While literature on the topic suggests that President Obama is a symbol equality and of power for the black community, this study shows that black Americans view the President as a symbol of black elevation rather than power, and as a symbol of assimilation rather than one of change; there was also a gender gap in these beliefs. While the findings in this study should not be overgeneralized, the results speak to the overall discourse of inequality in America and can act as a stepping-stone to further research on the inaccessibility of the American Dream for black Americans.

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## Introduction

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

— *“Harlem”* by Langston Hughes

Clearly illustrated in the classic American success story of the self-made man are the ideals that we have historically considered most distinctly “American”: rugged individualism, equality of opportunity, laissez-faire capitalism, social mobility, the gospel of work, self-reliance, material acquisitiveness, thrift, ambition, hard work, perseverance, and honesty (Hearn 1977, 4). The American Dream’s overarching narrative is that hard work leads to tangible results. But what if you found yourself living in a society where hard work did not offer benefits, where opportunities were limited, and where progress was always just out of reach? This is the reality of the American Dream for many black Americans. It is essential to study the phenomenon that supposedly defines this nation’s identity—most importantly, to understand any exclusions of a population from this national experience that appears fundamental to American identity, and to consider if the sense of self has changed over time for subgroups in the American population. What is the meaning of the American Dream for educated black Americans? How do perceptions of the equality and the achievability of the American Dream among educated black Americans correlate with the dominant discourse on the subject?

The classic conception of the American Dream consists of having a home, a family, an education, and a sustainable source of income. The American Dream’s overarching narrative is that no matter who you are, hard work leads to tangible results. The key puzzle that sets the stage for this research project was the following paradoxical finding in the literature: that even in 2008 after black Americans were disproportionately impacted by the mortgage and housing crises, they were still more positive that racial equality in America would soon be reached (Stout and Le 2012). In 2008, some referred to the state of the economy as the “Second Great Depression,” and others as the “Great Recession.” Black Americans were disproportionately more likely to lose their homes in the mortgage crisis.

Despite this economically oppressive time, particularly for black Americans, optimism about racial equality surged within the black community. The academic discourse regarded President Obama's victory as a personal triumph for the black community, and as proof or renewal of their faith in the American Dream (Brooks 2012). I decided to conduct interviews to see how individuals could help me to unpack the nuances behind this phenomenon.

Much literature on the topic of the American Dream claims that the Dream for black Americans is fairly similar to that of all Americans (Huttman 1991). Homeownership and education have historically been the most desired aspects of the classic American Dream for black Americans (*ibid.*). Using several surveys conducted between 1987 and 2010, one study shows that blacks are much more optimistic about the American Dream after Barack Obama's election in spite of their worsening economic status (Stout and Le 2012). The study's findings suggest that the existence of symbols of equality are a better gauge of perceptions toward the American Dream for blacks than objective economic indicators; it is important, in other words, to take into account the context of the black community's success through indicators that are not as straightforward and chartable as economic success. Beliefs in the un-achievability of the American Dream may be attributed to lack of black representation at high levels of government, rather than solely based on differences in socioeconomic standing (*ibid.*).

Throughout history, black Americans have represented higher percentages of low socioeconomic indicators, and 2008 was a time when many black Americans felt the worst of their historic economic suppression (*ibid.*). In 2008, some referred to the state of the economy as the "Second Great Depression." While levels of unemployment increased across America during this period, blacks were almost twice as likely as whites to be unemployed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008 Report, and blacks were much more likely than whites to lose their homes in the mortgage crisis (*ibid.*). Despite this economically oppressive time, optimism existed within the black community. Barack Obama's 2008 election marked a significant step in what many black Americans call the long road to freedom. A survey conducted in 2005 revealed that 82 percent of blacks believed they were "unlikely to soon achieve racial equality" (Huttman 1991). After Obama's election, only 45 percent held that belief (*ibid.*). Many black people regarded his victory as a personal triumph, and as proof or renewal of their faith in the American Dream (Brooks 2012; Stout and Le 2012).

Many claim that the historically oppressive economic factors are the reason black Americans tend to be more skeptical of the American Dream



overall (Cohen-Marks and Stout 2011; Shlay 2006). However, Stout and Le (2012) argue that the belief in the achievability of the American Dream may not have as much to do with these economic indicators as previously believed. They have found that even as blacks made economic progress during the 1990s, they were still less likely to believe in the American Dream than their white counterparts. Furthermore, blacks with the highest socioeconomic status were the most skeptical of this American ideal (Stout and Le 2012). I propose that this result suggests that economic success may be a weak predictor of optimism in the American Dream for blacks. Perhaps those with individual success do not feel that they can adequately represent a population, whereas people of other ethnicities with economic success feel comfortable asserting themselves as living proof of the American Dream's realization. Black Americans' communal understanding remains strong according to several studies (Brooks 2012). In one survey, 70 percent of African Americans agreed that their well-being was tied to that of other black people (ibid.).

Unambiguous indicators such as economic success or possession of a college diploma have been conflated to represent achievability of the American Dream and have been used to evaluate it statistically. This study offers a philosophical examination of the weaknesses of this kind of objective, statistical analysis when discussing the dreams, goals, and perceptions of success of a population often clumped together and labeled unsuccessful. Individual stories are necessary to add a third dimension to the topic for a more complete understanding of equality, or the lack thereof, in America. Through interviews and analysis of existing literature, this research explores what it means to be a black American in today's world. This study shows that there is not just one answer, but rather several answers, to what it means to be an educated black American confronting sometimes-irrational dimension of American identity.

## Literature Review

The self-made man from rags-to-riches represents the emphasis on individuality inherent in the American Dream. Without acceptance and social integration of diversity, America is a nativist society. With more acceptance of diversity, America is a pluralistic society.

### *Classical Nativists*

Nativism: "a favored status for certain established inhabitants of a nation as compared to claims of newcomers or immigrants" (Huntington 2004, 24). Classical nativists such as Samuel Huntington recognize and criticize changes in American identity. The predominate claim in Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We* is that a once-existent American identity has gradually faltered from what it was upon the

country's establishment. Numerous exposés of the national identity's salience in decline are both postulated and reported in *Who Are We*, with examples including the lack of a single ethnicity, territorial entitlement, religion, race, or culture; the rising possession of Americans with transnational identities, and a growing "global identity crisis" on which to feed (*ibid.*). This perception of American society relates to the dominant discourse of the American Dream for black Americans since pluralism and nativism speak to the acceptance of minorities in society.

### *Structural Nativists*

While classical nativists tend to believe that immigration and plurality of identity is creating a national identity crisis, some scholars have made arguments that meaning is produced and reproduced within a culture through phenomena, like current events, and that culture must be understood in terms of its relationship to a larger, overarching system or structure (Diener 1984; Kasser and Ryan 1996). This thought within the literature of American identity is relevant to the study of the American Dream, since the role of current events may be important when studying perceptions of identity.

Structural nativists recognize that events are changing the American identity but that American identity is not being destroyed by these events, but rather that the meaning of identity is changing in response to the context. While "relative salience of alternative identities...is situational," and Americans possess more alternative identities than the rest of the world, the concept of identity, as Erik Erikson would say, is "all pervasive" and the isolation of a single identity is thus significant (Erikson 1968, Introduction). Identity, Erikson writes, is as unfathomable as it is all-pervasive (*ibid.*). It deals with a process that is located both in the core of the individual and in the core of the communal culture. As the culture changes, new kinds of identity questions arise (*ibid.*). Anthony Smith says states that possess a high rate of "territorial identity" such as Israel possess a mythomoteur: a constitutive myth that gives ethnic groups their sense of purpose. This may be what America lacks (Smith 1986).

While the American Dream is supposed to provide Americans a sense of shared purpose, I assert that not all races in America can call the American Dream their mythomoteur. Since America is no longer comprised of a dominant race or ethnicity, it is impossible to link a sense of ethnic purpose to American identities—Americans are a multiethnic people (Huntington 2004, xv). Structural nativists argue that the American self-image may be changing because of a lack of a mythomoteur, which simply means an ethnic sense



of purpose. In dealing with the relation between groups in America, structural nativists may distinguish between three dimensions along which supremacy can be measured: the cultural, the political, and the social. Robert Bellah argues that the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon ethnic group has been “by no means equal in all these dimensions” and that the Anglo-Saxon dominance “has declined along all three dimensions, first in the political sphere, second in the cultural, and only quite recently has its social dominance been seriously challenged” (Bellah 1975, Chapter 4).

### **The Modern Day Dream and Pluralism**

Social mobility is the movement of individuals, families, households, or other categories of people within or between social strata in a society. It is a change in social status relative to others’ social location within a given society. This concept most accurately depicts the dream of the pre-Depression era: to have the opportunity to transcend predetermined social status and be successful in this transition was the dream (See: Hearn 1977; Kasser and Ryan 1993).

Ronald Inglehart (1988) tests the hypothesis that modern life has a focus on self-fulfillment. The study concludes that culture can shape the basic nature of economic and political life and that American culture has certainly changed to reflect this sentiment of fulfillment. Marcus and Nurius describe the concept of self-fulfillment and its applications for psychological research (Marcus and Nurius, September 1986). The American Dream can be understood as a representation of what Americans value, ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, much like Marcus and Nurius’s claims in “Possible Selves,” and offers the perspective that with more “options” for an identity, individuals become more accepting, echoing the pluralistic view of culture. In a 2010 study, Sandra L. Hanson and John Zogby found that a majority of Americans consistently reported that the American Dream—for themselves and their family—is more about happiness than material goods (Hanson and Zogby 2010). Charles R. Hearn (1977, 194) echoes these sentiments in his statements that an increasing emphasis on leisure and self-fulfillment immersed in the 30s during the Great Depression. Hearn found that as long as American society centered on industrial expansion and was still in the process of being physically built, such as in the 1920s, businesspeople and the “idols of production” were the heroes (*ibid.*). However, once the process of growth leveled off, there was less to admire in the producers and more time to devote to entertainment and the enjoyment of leisure. Hearn states that this new attitude toward optional mobility appears “as our society gets closer to being fully developed and there are fewer opportunities to be exploited” (*ibid.*, 195).

Modern scholars in the field of American identity are predominantly pluralistic in their views, recognizing American women, black Americans, immigrant Americans and other groups in their research of what being American means. Thus, pluralism is central to modern research (Alba 2006; Zangrando and Zangrando 1970). It is this pluralistic view that leads to an ongoing discussion of the discourse surrounding equality of the American Dream; since society appears to be shifting towards more pluralistic views, Americans that were once oppressed might now have more power and opportunity to thrive and reap the benefits of the American Dream (Stout and Le 2012). Black Americans in particular have been subjected to inequalities in America, both in opportunities and in outcomes, and a pluralistic society would be necessary in establishing equality.

### *Two Discourses of Equality: Opportunities and Outcomes*

As Stout and Le write, "[b]lack youth have to decide whether or not they invest their time and energies developing opportunities and skills that society will not let them fully utilize" (2012). This quote embodies the discourse surrounding equalities of opportunities versus outcomes. This research focuses on the discourses of equality for black American populations. Tied to these views of equality are the views on the achievability of the American Dream. As discussed in subsequent sections, the perception of racial equality in America, or equality of opportunity, impacts the perceptions of achievability in the American Dream. It is important to note here that this research is concerned with equality of opportunities as well as with equality of outcomes. In other words, not all black Americans will define the American Dream in the same way, so a perception of equality for some individuals may be simply having opportunities that are equal to other ethnic groups in America, while a perception of equality for other individuals may have more to do with the actual outcomes being equal. The latter case would presumably be more intimately tied to a discussion on institutional and economic equality, while equality of opportunities would be more linked with social equality.

Regarding equality of outcomes, there is both an implicit and explicit hierarchy between white and black Americans; socially, there is more of an implicit hierarchy today, with the continued presence of racism and disproportionate political racial representation. Economically, there is a more explicit hierarchy, since black Americans tend to represent lower-income households, among other economic indicators of a "lower" hierarchy (Shlay 2006). The literature points to an academic discourse of incongruences in



understandings of equality among the black population.

The discourses of equality of outcomes, and therefore of achievability of the unwritten “all Americans are equal” clause of the American Dream, are reflected in a 2013 Pew Research Center study. The Center, which surveyed black and white Americans through telephone interviews, found that 50 years after Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, only 45 percent of the country believed that America had made substantial progress toward racial equality. The report states that 49 percent said that “a lot more” remains to be done. Racial equality in America is later discussed as a necessary reality before many of the educated black Americans interviewed for this study will feel positive about the American Dream. The shift in perspective also speaks to the role of current events in understanding of identity. In the analysis of interviews, this will also be elaborated further.

The report claims that black Americans are generally more likely to say that police, the courts, public schools, and other key community institutions treat blacks less fairly than whites (*ibid.*). Seventy percent of blacks and about 37 percent of whites say blacks are treated less fairly in their dealings with the police. Similarly, about 68 percent of black respondents and 27 percent of whites say blacks are not treated as fairly as whites in the courts. According to Pew’s data in 2010, black men were more than six times as likely as white men to be incarcerated in federal and state prisons as well as in local jails the last year for which complete data are available. That is an increase from 1960, when black men were five times as likely as whites to be incarcerated. Furthermore, the Pew Research Center found that since 2009, the heightened sense of progress immediately following President Obama’s election has been fading. In 2013, only 26 percent of black Americans said the situation of black people in America was better than it was five years before, down sharply from the 39 percent who said the same in a 2009 Pew Research Center survey. White Americans’ perceptions also fell, from 49 percent to 35 percent in the last four years. Opinions about black progress toward equality vary considerably by educational achievement, a change from the 2009 survey when there was no gap in perception by education among blacks; 22 percent of blacks who have attended at least some college say the situation of black people in America is better today than it was five years ago. Among those with a high school education or less, about 33 percent say equality has improved.

The findings from the Pew report have led to important decisions within this research, primarily with respect to the scope of analysis. This research examines educated people within the black population of America, seeing as the academic discourse has determined differences in perception along particular lines. This study is concerned with how the discourse of equality surrounding perceptions of achievability of the American Dream has changed since Obama’s election for black



Americans who have at least some post-secondary education. The academic discourse on racial equality has deemed the divisions in perception among this group noteworthy.

## **Methodology**

This paper employs critical discourse analysis, which is the study of individual meaning-making that seeks to understand or challenge the "underlying ideologies that play a role in the reproduction of or resistance of dominance or inequality" (van Dijk, 1995, 18). Critical discourse analysis focuses on the ways relations of power, dominance, inequality, or other social factors are reproduced or resisted by social group members through text and talk. This paper focuses on the ways that a small number of educated black Americans perceive the American Dream, how it relates to their personal identities, and in what ways, if any, the American Dream has been misappropriated by the dominant discourse on the subject. Critical discourse analysis does not seek to generalize its findings, does not rely on positivist causality, does not have hypotheses or variable testing, is not meant to be replicable, and recognizes that the researcher, as a member of the society being observed, is not able to be completely objective. Critical discourse analysis is the best method for this particular paper because it analyzes the ways in which different discourses are constructed in relation to a dominant discourse, which is the American Dream.

### *Scope of Analysis*

This scope of analysis for this study focuses on the perceptions of equality and achievability of the American Dream for educated black Americans, and concentrates on educated individuals for two reasons. First, because "having an education" is considered an important factor in the American Dream (Stout and Le 2012). The students who I interviewed for this study have supposedly succeeded, in at least one dimension, in achieving the dream. Second, because several sources indicate that black Americans who have attended at least some college perceive the condition of black people in America worse off than do those with a high school education or less. In short, the academic discourse on racial equality has deemed the divisions in perception among more educated Americans noteworthy. My research takes into consideration the narratives of educated black Americans to analyze disparities in optimism about the American Dream between blacks from several socioeconomic groups, and includes the context of blacks within American society.



### *Reflexivity*

I know that I cannot be fully distant from my research, since I am an American studying other Americans. Because of my whiteness, or perhaps my youth and my accompanying lack of experience with the economic struggles that many Americans, but especially black Americans, have experienced, I can assume that I have a different perception of the American Dream. I have not been jaded by negative experiences in the workforce. These traits were an obstacle to overcome, although I do believe my inherent cynicism toward the American government to provide substantial help to the underprivileged served as a strength, because I was able to analyze information that sheds light on the issues of economic disparity and not doubt its validity, as some researchers who do not believe in equality of the races might. A lack of judgment based on race was crucial for this research project. I was able to synthesize information without an underlying belief that race is a justified cause of or rationale for inequality. I needed to be aware of potential unexplored or unintended biases I may possess, as well as how my own identity as an educated, white female might have impacted any interviews I conducted in person. As a white person who might appear quite privileged, complete disclosure of these individuals' opinions might not have been possible, and consequently might have impacted my understanding of meanings.

### *Case Selection*

The eight interviewees in this study attend Howard University and American University. They are from diverse geographic, social, and economic backgrounds, and are studying various subjects in college. Five students interviewed identified as female, while three identified as male. While an equal representation of genders was the desired approach for this study, two potential male participants were unable to interview and therefore left the study disproportionately female. An interview guide (see Appendix) was created and used during interviews, which were videotaped for logging purposes as well as research presentation purposes. Questions asked of interviewees ranged from their personal definitions of the American Dream to perspectives on whether Obama's election marked a significant change in equality in America. All questions were written with the literature in mind, as this study is a discourse analysis that analyzes interviewee's correlations and conflicts with the literature, and all results from the interviews have some sort of correlation with the literature. While particular questions were asked of participants, interviewees were encouraged to elaborate freely on any subjects that crossed their minds that seemed relevant to share. All of the interviews flowed loosely with the help of the interview guide, although each interview had its own

unique questions asked and answers given, and no questions were leading. Interview transcriptions are not included in this paper, but are available upon request.

### **Analysis of Interviews**

In this study, there are both agreements and disagreements with the literature surrounding the topic of the black American Dream, as well as perspectives that the literature did not address. Three major areas of discovery include: the content of and skepticism about the American Dream, Barack Obama as a symbol of black power, and the role of current events. It is difficult to discern which factors of participants' individual identities are contributing to their beliefs. However, socioeconomic status, gender, and concentration of study (major) seem to be significant variables in each student's identity that could be impacting opinions.

#### *Content of and Skepticism about the American Dream*

As stated previously, the literature surrounding the topic of the American Dream claims that the dream for black Americans is fairly similar to that of all Americans (Huttman 1991). This study finds consistent conclusions. Having a family, a home, a job, and being happy, educated, and self-aware were all goals of importance to the students in this study. There is therefore agreement about the content of the American Dream and a shared desire for it. However, a key difference between the classic definition of the American Dream and the dream described by the educated black students in this research study was the emphasis on a dream of equality. One student said, "The American Dream to me would be getting rid of those institutional barriers that I believe are in place, to allow for everyone to truly have a fair opportunity to succeed and to attain whatever socioeconomic status they desire." Another student claimed that the American Dream is not an individualistic goal in stating, "My definition of success is that I can never truly be successful if my people are suffering." Communal success was an important theme; while the classic American Dream emphasizes individualism, many of the students in this study claimed that the advancement of all black Americans was important to them. The Plurality of success, or communal success, is therefore an important theme to understand when analyzing the American Dream for the black, educated Americans interviewed in this research.

The literature is also in agreement with the results of this study with the claim that black Americans with the highest socioeconomic status are the



most skeptical of the American Dream (Stout and Le 2012). This result suggests that economic success is a weak predictor of optimism in the American Dream for black students. The student from an upper class background was the most adamant that the American Dream no longer exists. The basis for her skepticism, as well as for every other student interviewed, was not in agreement with the literature, however. The theory discussed earlier explained that skepticism of the achievability of the American Dream was attributed to lack of black representation at high levels of government (ibid.). However, this study suggests that black representation is worth nothing if there is not true equality in society, which will be touched on later in this analysis. A lack of communal success, instead, is an integral part of the skepticism in the American Dream that seems to exist for educated black Americans, which implies that a pluralistic society is needed to achieve more trust in the dream.

Structural nativists argue that the American self-image may be changing because of a lack of a mythomoteur, which simply means an ethnic sense of purpose. Many black subgroups in America possess a mythomoteur, an ethnic sense of purpose, yet they have no institutional support to make the goals a reality. The educated group of black Americans interviewed in this study may agree that the desire for equality is an aspect of their ethnic sense of purpose, and more significantly, a collective rise in equality for all black Americans is the ideal dream. While the American self-image may be changing due to a lack of a mythomoteur, the black population may be remaining socioeconomically oppressed due to an active suppression of institutional and systemic support, rendering the mythomoteur of racial equality unachievable.

Another root for skepticism implied in this research is the belief that the American Dream was never made for black Americans. Three of the interviewed students came from immigrant families. Two of these students said the idea of the American Dream was an integral part of their identities growing up; their parents' constant reminder that hard work would yield tangible results pushed them in school and even impacted what friend groups they chose to associate with. However, the other students feel as though the American Dream is an idea that was not made for them or has widely excluded them. "The American Dream has never really been something that has ever seemed like it'll apply to me so it's never been something I honestly thought about," said one student. She went on to explain, "I feel like the American Dream is tied to capitalism and with capitalism you always have to have the poor, and the poor don't look like the people who are on top. The American Dream was never really made for us, although that's what they try to put on us; it's never been the case." Capitalism as an oppressing force for equality is never touched upon in the dominant academic discourse of

the American Dream for black Americans, although this study indicates that it may be an important factor in educated blacks' skepticism of the dream. In short, denotations of the American Dream for the students interviewed for this study are similar to the classic definition, but have a more integral focus on communal equality. Skepticism of the American Dream's achievability does not seem to stem from lack of representation, but rather from the perception that the American Dream is not "made for" black Americans and from the systemic and institutional racial inequality in America.

### *Obama as a Symbol of Black Power*

Students directly dissented from the dominant academic discourse when many of them expressed the belief that they do not believe that President Obama is a symbol of black power. One student stated, "Equality is not necessarily equal to attaining positions in government or even attaining the presidency..." She went on to explain that many black Americans and African Americans feel that for equality to be reached, it would happen from outside the current political system rather than from within it. Six students noted that President Obama has been assimilated into a "system of whiteness." The student went on to say, "I wouldn't see more black people in power as necessarily implying equality, unless they are going to change the institutions in place...You are still attaining positions in institutions that are designed against minorities." Another student said, "You can't justify millions of black lives—who are still in poverty whose humanity are still being taken away—by just a few people who made it."

Robert Bellah (1975) argues that the dominance of the Anglo-Saxon ethnic group has not been historically equal in the cultural, the political, and the social dimensions. He claims that the Anglo-Saxon dominance "has declined along all three dimensions, first in the political sphere, second in the cultural, and only quite recently has its social dominance been seriously challenged." While President Obama may represent a shift or change in the cultural and political representation of the United States government, the students interviewed for this study suggest that Obama has not posed any challenges socially because he has assimilated to the Anglo-Saxon dominated system of whiteness that the U.S. government is fueled by. President Obama's election represents equality of opportunity, which is a social equality. Having the right and ability to run for the presidency and be elected demonstrates the Equality of Opportunity. While Obama's election represents Equality of Opportunity, interviews for this study suggest that President Obama does not represent equality of outcomes, which are institutional equalities. One



female student said, “The political representation is just a distraction to me. It’s a distraction from what’s really going on.” They argue that systemic barriers to racial equality have not been broken as a result of President Obama’s election, and there are no substantive changes or outcomes for the black community as a result of having a black President.

Several students complained that the narrative of Perceptual Equality has been overemphasized. Perceptual Equality in this study refers to the impact that Equality of Opportunities has on society collectively; Obama’s election created a perception and a reality that the Presidency of the United States is attainable for black Americans. “I feel like it’s a cliché that people always say well when Obama was elected it showed every little black boy and girl that they can succeed and they can go to the White House,” said one female student. However, there appears to be a gender gap in the beliefs of Obama’s role as a symbol of black power. All women were confident and adamant that President Obama is not, and should not be considered, a symbol of black power. One woman claimed, “Obama’s built into the regular American system; he’s built into the American Dream. He’s apple pie in Leave It to Beaver honestly.”

The men in this study were not so united against the idea. Two men claimed a confident “Yes,” that Obama is a symbol of black power; they said that Obama represents black power because of the advancement and elevation, or the Perceptual Equality, which Obama’s election offered for the black community. The third man interviewed was skeptical of fully labeling Obama a symbol of black “power” but still claimed that he represents “black elevation.” “He [Obama] did something incredible in a nation that was founded on racism,” the student said. Two women who claimed President Obama is not a symbol of black power cited institutional constraints as the reason he could not create real change in the social system. To explain this claim, one of these women stated that Obama “can’t fully advocate openly because some people might look at him a little differently. He has so many constraints that he cannot fully embrace who he is, or every single issue that is a black issue in the United States because of those constraints.” Three women cited assimilation to a system of whiteness as the reason Obama could not create real change in the social system. One student said Obama is a symbol of assimilation “because he is not threatening to any system. If anything he is sustaining it.”

The man who was not as confident of Obama as a symbol of black power referenced this assimilation, but still ended his viewpoint with the idea of black elevation. The two remaining men see Obama as a symbol of black power because he has advanced and elevated the black community and understanding of what is

possible for black Americans to achieve. They did not ignore that Equality of Outcomes has not radically changed since Obama has been in office, but rather excused the lack of change by noting the bureaucratic constraints placed on the President. One student said, "I feel like they was expecting some big change and everything was going to be equal and I mean at the end of the day he has a job to do and he has to answer to somebody too. I definitely respect President Obama all the way."

### *The Role and Implications of Current Events*

When asked if perceptions of inequality or equality of America fluctuate with current events, five interviewees said, "Yes," that current events impact their personal perceptions of racial inequality in America. Three interviewees said "No," that their perceptions of reality do not change. All three of the interviewees who answered "No" are Political Science majors. One of these students answered:

I don't think my perception changes but it makes the call to action to change those inequalities even more; it kind of lights a fire. And makes it even more pressing that I do something in my life currently and in the future to help address those injustices... Oftentimes I find more so that it's my classes that I'm taking that change my perception of inequalities. However, if you're not a political person or you don't follow the news or you're not aware of inequalities, then I think that current events alter people's perceptions, but me specifically, I don't really think so.

This quote implies two important characteristics of the impact of current events: first, those who are educated about historical events of inequality, such as Political Science majors, may be less impacted by current events due to a constant immersion in social subject matter. Second, that current events can stimulate a "call to action" even if individuals are previously aware of injustices in society. One student said of inequality, "These are issues that have been going on, it's just that when it's so intense and it's constantly in the media, everyone's talking about it and becoming aware of it—myself included. I wasn't involved in these types of conversations before and I should have been, but I wasn't." In other words, current events act as a stimulus for action. The students who claimed that current events do shape their perceptions of equality in America all cited "the media" as a source from which their judgments are made. All students, without coaxing or being asked to elaborate, referenced recent media



surrounding police brutality and disproportionate violence toward blacks as a reason that their perceptions of equality have shifted.

These findings, that most of the students interviewed in this study claim that current events have the power to influence their perceptions of equality, are important because the key puzzle that set the stage for this research project was that even in 2008 after black Americans were disproportionately impacted by the mortgage and housing crises, they were still more positive that racial equality in America would soon be reached. President Obama's election in 2008 was a current event of Equality of Opportunity that trumped the Inequalities of Outcomes of the 2008 financial crisis. The literature claimed that since perceptions of equality shifted from 2005 to 2008 after Obama's election, that even in a struggling economy Obama could be seen as a symbol of hope, of progress, and of renewal that was sure to come. The belief that Obama was a symbol of progress toward racial equality in America was not a sustainable one; according to this research study, perceptions seem to simply fluctuate with current events. Therefore, the literature has overgeneralized one period of time to say that there is a sustainable, positive trend in the belief of racial equality in America based on studies that were conducted in a time period of extreme hopefulness, motivated by a single stimulating current event.

## **Conclusions**

The American Dream: an illusion, a myth, a set of values, a goal for one's life; the American Dream: controversial, exclusive, manipulative; the American Dream: inspiring, motivating, aspirational. The American Dream has many meanings, and the context for those meanings is important. For the educated black Americans in this research study, the American Dream overall is an illusion. Women are more skeptical of the dream than men, and women generally view the American Dream in a more pluralistic way than men, who view it as an individual journey. Racial inequality, a major player in the perceptions of the American Dream, is the foremost reason for skepticism towards the American Dream for these students, which dissents from the dominant discourse that claimed a lack of representation in government was the cause of skepticism. While President Obama's election is often referred to in the literature as a symbol of progress toward equality, several of the black students in this study do not view his election as an indication of progress or of black power, but rather the opposite. Most students in this study view Obama's election as a symbol of assimilation to a system of whiteness, since no real change has occurred in society. Several students said that Obama abandoned his roots in pursuit of the presidency, and that the barriers he, by chance, overcame in his election still exist. Current events also seem to influence perceptions of equality



and inequality, a major finding that ties into the initial puzzle in the history of the topic of perceptual racial equality in America. This particular discovery, linked with all others, can help to explain why perceptions of equality and the achievability of the American Dream fluctuate, become more positive, even as the economic dimensions of the American Dream become more oppressive. The only students who stated that current events do not shape their perceptions of equality or inequality were the three students studying Political Science at Howard University. Every other student stated that his or her perceptions fluctuate based on what the media reports, implying that in 2008, when perceptions that equality in America would "soon be achieved" were positive, perceptions may have been reactionary rather than sustainable.

Opinions about black progress toward equality and skepticism toward the American Dream may vary considerably by educational achievement. The students interviewed for this study state that their studies in school have influenced their opinions. The dominant academic discourse on the American Dream for black Americans also implies that individuals with a higher socioeconomic status are the most skeptical about equality and therefore of the American Dream's achievability. This study correlates with that literature, seeing as almost all of the students mentioned at least partial skepticism in the American Dream. This study opens a conversation that does not end here. The small number of interviews from this study cannot be overgeneralized to represent all educated black Americans. In the future, more students from colleges and universities across America should be interviewed to help uncover more nuances that interviews with students in this study may have missed. A more in-depth analysis of students from historically black universities and colleges (HBCUs) would also be valuable to uncover how the culture and setting of one's education can influence personal identity. Perspectives on equality and the achievability of the American Dream for black Americans who are undereducated and black Americans who are incarcerated should also be interviewed in the future, as a comparison for this study. The students in this study have achieved a higher socioeconomic status by virtue of being black educated individuals in America. Therefore, study of those individuals who have not achieved any of the dream's classic indicators, or those who have been legally barred from achieving them, should also be interviewed.



## **Appendix: Interview Guide**

Notes: I aimed for interviews to last no longer than 45 minutes. Questions were asked to current college students in Washington, D.C.

-Background information on participants:

-Age

-Parents' level of education

-Hometown

-Describe the economic circumstances of your community and of your family growing up.

-Are there institutions that perpetuate the black sense of community?

-How important are black churches in your sense of community/identity?

-How do you define the American Dream?

-What is the American Dream to you?

-Searching for any discrepancies between original definition and personal definition.

-Was the American Dream an ideal that you grew up around? (Did/does it matter to you?)

-Have you found that you have had equal opportunities as compared to other Americans in America? (Perception as compared to other races)

-Does your perception of racial equality or inequality fluctuate with current events?

-What factors have impacted the American Dream over the past 10 years?

-Do Obama's election, Ferguson events; constitute causality shifts?

-Do you see Obama as a symbol of black power? If he was raised white, does he represent black community?

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