

Black Community Involvement and Subjective Well-being

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined subjective perceptions of personal rewards associated with Black community involvement. A purposeful community sample of 50 adults of African descent congregated within the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States offered written responses to the question, "What, if any, are the personal rewards/benefits associated with Black community involvement?" Quota recruitment was employed so that equal numbers of men and women, and young adults, middle-aged adults, and elders were represented in the sample. Responses to the question of rewards associated with Black community involvement reflected four dimensions of well-being, including social well-being, psychological well-being, emotional well-being, and spiritual well-being. The majority of perceived rewards reflected manifestations of social well-being. Significance of these findings is discussed.

Introduction

I am passionate about the explication and preservation of adaptive African American cultural practices; a passion, no doubt, derived from my personally salient African American ethnic identity. As an academic, this passion has led me to pursue studies of what scholars and community workers label, *the African American helping tradition* (see Grayman-Simpson & Mattis, 2012; Martin & Martin, 1985). African Americans have a long and active helping tradition characterized by a combined focus on the sacrifice of time, abilities, and financial resources for the purpose of dismantling obstacles to Black progress (Carson, 1993; Hall-Russell & Kasberg, 1997; Hunt & Maurrasse, 2004; Winters, 1999; Wyatt-Knowlton & Royster, 2006). This tradition originated within a pre-colonial African cosmology that values the interconnected essence of all living entities, and has been maintained and reinforced by: (1) a pre-colonial African cosmology; (2) persistently oppressive American social, political, and economic conditions; and (3) a collective hope and faith in the Black community's ability to transcend oppressive conditions (Mbiti, 1970; Martin & Martin, 2002; McAdoo, 2007; White, 1987).

Black liberators such as Harriet Tubman, Denmark Vessey, Gullah Jack, and Nat Turner who risked their individual lives attempting to rescue their people from bondage serve as powerful historical examples of the African American helping tradition (Higginson, 1998; Larson, 2004; Williams & Dixie, 2003). Evidence of this tradition is also found through examinations of the Black Church and mutual aid societies that were established for the eradication of the slavery system, spiritual deliverance of Black people, racial solidarity, and the provision of financial and material resources to Blacks in need (Frazier & Lincoln, 1974; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Wilmore, 1983). It is also witnessed through examinations of the anti-lynching campaign, the Civil Rights Movement, Black Nationalist Movement, and Post-Nationalist Artistic-Activist Movement (Belenky, Bond, & Weinstock, 1997; Raines, 1983; Seale, 1991). Throughout African people's history in America, this helping tradition has been essential to the group's survival and ability to flourish (McAdoo, 2007).

Empirical and anecdotal evidence leaves little doubt that the African American helping tradition continues to benefit the larger Black community. For example, in a quantitative study conducted by the Twenty-first Century Foundation, a substantial portion of study participants indicated that they offered "significant support" to the Black community through assistance to youth, religious institutions, grass roots organizations, and cultural work efforts (Hunt & Murrasse, 2004). Another qualitative study by Hall-Russell and Kasberg illustrated the ways in which the African American helping tradition, in the forms of communal child-rearing, cooperative economics, work in human services professions, and participation in social justice activities, benefits Black families, neighborhoods, and the larger cultural group (Hall-Russell & Kasberg, 1997). Still, another national study conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service, revealed the connection between the African American helping tradition in the form of youth work and Black community development (Foster-Bey, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006).

Although a number of examples demonstrate the positive impact that engagement in the African American helping tradition has on the larger Black community, the ways in which engagement in this tradition might also benefit individual members of the community remain a virtual mystery. As a counseling psychologist, trained to promote optimal functioning within individuals and groups, and to provide clinical interventions from a strengths-based perspective, the potential subjective benefits of engaging in the African American helping tradition are of particular interest to me.

Several scholars propose that optimal human functioning is found, not in excessive possession of any one good thing, but in balanced possession and unification of complementary personal assets (see Deiner & Suh, 2000; Myers, 1988; Nobles, 1986 for examples). In the instance of this particular study, potential complementary individual benefits resulting from engagement in the African American helping tradition were considered. Responding to the dearth of knowledge around the potential connection between the African American helping tradition and subjective well-being, this qualitative study examined personal benefits associated with this tradition in the form of Black community involvement from the standpoint of a community sample of Black adults congregated within the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants in this study articulated their Black community involvement as being comprised of: (1) support of historically Black institutions, (2) support of non-historically Black institutions serving the Black community, (3) mentorship of other adults of African descent, (4) mentorship of youth of African descent, (5) provision of financial support, (6) provision of emotional support, (7) engagement in self-care, and (8) provision of safety to the Black community (Grayman-Simpson, unpublished data). The following research question guided the present descriptive study: “What, if any, are the personal benefits associated with this Black community involvement?”

Method

Sampling Procedures

Believing like Burr (1995), Gergen (1985; 1999), and Raskin (2002) that meaning is culturally, socially, and historically relative, purposeful sampling was utilized in this study (Patton, 1990). Specifically, purposeful homogeneous sampling was employed with regard to participant race and region of recruitment. All participants recruited for this study were Black – determined by phenotypic features (i.e., dark skin, curly hair, facial features), and all were recruited from urban areas within the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States (Brooklyn, NY, Wilmington, DE, and Washington, DC). In addition, this study employed purposeful stratified sampling along the lines of gender and developmental stage - approximately equal numbers of men and women within each of the three primary adult developmental stages (i.e., young adulthood, middle adulthood, and older adulthood) were recruited from each city within the region. The use of purposeful sampling enabled analysis of across group and within group perspectives on the personal benefits of Black community involvement.

Participants

The research team used face-to-face contact to solicit Black adult participants from various neighborhood settings (e.g., senior citizen centers, barbershops, building stoops, laundromats, train stations, clothing stores, and restaurants). Recruitment settings were chosen based on the high frequency with which persons of African descent are known to congregate within them. The eligible sample included a total of 60 self-identified Black men (n = 30) and Black women (n = 30). Participants' ages ranged from 21 to over 70. Thirty-three percent (n = 20) were young adults between the ages of 21 and 39, another 33% (n = 20) were middle-aged adults between the ages of 40 and 59, and still another 33% (n = 20) were elders at least 60 years of age. Approximately 75% percent (n = 45) of this sample self-identified as African-American, 8% (n = 5) Mixed African Heritage, 7% (n = 4) West Indian, 5% (n = 3) Unspecified African Heritage, 3% (n = 2) as Other, and 2% (n = 1) as Continental African (see Grayman, 2009 for additional demographic information about the eligible sample). Fifty adults from the eligible sample of 60 elected to respond to the present research question.

Survey Administration

Participants completed a paper-and-pencil "Black American Prosociality Pilot Study" (BAPPS) survey. The BAPPS survey is comprised of 21 open-ended questions, and a one page 13-item demographic questionnaire. The open-ended questions ask participants to give written responses to questions about their motivations for, forms of, and perceived benefits and burdens associated with other-oriented behavior. One of the questions asked participants to write in their thoughts on the personal benefits of giving back to the Black community. Open-ended questions within the survey were systematically varied in order to control for primacy-recency effects; however, the demographic questionnaire was always positioned last within the survey protocol.

Survey administration took between 30 and 60 minutes to complete. All participants were offered a \$10 gift certificate to a national chain bookstore as compensation. A community newsletter summarizing results from this study was created and sent to study participants who expressed interest in receiving it. The newsletter was also sent to community centers located within cities where data was collected.

Analytic Procedure

Written responses were content analyzed by two research assistants using processes outlined by Neuendorf (2002) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Content analysis provides a systematic method of reducing textual material into manageable units of data that are then classified according to their meaning into quantifiable content categories or codes (Weber, 1990; Neuendorf, 2002). The goal of this analytic process is to uncover the complex meaning of textual messages, and make inferences regarding relationships between and among codes and themes (Neuendorf, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Research assistants read responses separately for initial sentiments relating to the benefits of Black community involvement. Following the ideas of Glaser (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1990), these sentiments were allowed to emerge from the data rather than pre-existing categories. Preliminary sentiments were noted. The research assistants compared lists, merged compatible sentiments, and created a preliminary codebook comprised of overlapping and distinct emergent ideas. Once a preliminary codebook was established, the author and a third research assistant coded ten randomly selected units of text in an effort to establish inter-rater reliability. The following simple formula was used: $PAo = 2A/(nA + nB)$ where PAo represents proportion of agreement, A represents the number of agreements between the two coders, and nA and nB represent the total number of units coded by the two coders (Holsti, 1969). As suggested by Miles and Huberman, a conservative minimum inter-rater reliability of 85% was sought before coding of all units commenced (1994).

The initial check of inter-rater reliability yielded 90% proportion agreement. Having reached acceptable inter-rater reliability, the remaining units were coded by the author and third research assistant. Following Hill et al.'s guidelines (2005), sentiments endorsed by all but one participant were deemed to be representative of a *general perspective*, sentiments endorsed by more than half of the participants were representative of a *typical perspective*, those endorsed by less than half but more than three participants were representative of a *variant perspective*, while sentiments endorsed by three or fewer participants were representative of a *rare perspective*. Differences between adjacent categories (e.g., general vs. typical) served as evidence of between group difference (Hill et al., 2005). Finally, interrelated sentiments were grouped together under overarching themes.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of written responses suggests that Black men and women perceive personal benefits in association with Black community involvement in the forms of: (1) Social Wellness, (2) Psychological Wellness, (3) Emotional Wellness, and (4) Spiritual Wellness. Table 1 summarizes codes connected with these emergent themes.

Table 1*Rewards of Black Community Involvement (N = 50)*

Theme	Frequency <i>n</i>
Social Wellness	
Creating Change in Others – Ability to effect positive change.	27
Witnessing Change in Others - Ability to see positive change.	8
Fulfillment of Obligation – Completion of familial, moral, and/or spiritual responsibility.	5
Supply of Resources to Others – Ability to provide time, money, education, and/or food.	4
Promise of Others Paying it Forward - Belief that those who are helped will in turn, help others.	4
Promise of Future Payback from Others – Hope in future reciprocity from those helped.	3
Psychological Wellness	
Love – Relationships characterized by mutual support, connection, adoration, and appreciation.	10

Emotional Wellness

Self-Gratification – Positive thoughts and/or emotions about self and/or life. 8

Spiritual Wellness

Spiritual Reciprocity – Benefitting and/or being benefitted by the divine. 3

Few/No Rewards – Absence of rewards or negative outcomes. 4

Immeasurable Rewards – Rewards beyond qualification. 1

Other – Incomprehensible responses or responses not fitting into any emergent theme. 6

Total 83

Social Wellness

Social wellness is exemplified by one's ability to make a contribution to a collective, one's belief in a collective's ability to actualize its potential, and one's belief in the inherent humanity of a collective (Keyes, 1998). Social wellness was the most commonly reported personal benefit of Black community involvement. Specifically, the reported ability to: (1) create change in others, (2) witness change in others, (3) fulfill familial, moral, and/or spiritual obligations, (4) supply others with necessary resources, (5) experience hope that others will pay the help forward, and (6) experience hope that those helped will reciprocate in the future, all served as indicators of this dimension of well-being. With respect to the benefit of creating change in others, one study participant had this to say:

I think that all black people need to support one another and be unified in the community. I work with kids because I want to help cultivate them and prepare them for a world where they need to be better than their white counterparts. I do it because I know that being a positive role model really makes a difference in their development.

Another participant explained the benefit of witnessing change in others this way, “I would be able to see: Young black minds learn from my example and flourish not only as petals but flowers and plants—growing up to be trees with strong roots and big strong stems.” Speaking on the fulfillment of familial, moral, or spiritual obligation as a reward, one participant commented that a personal benefit of Black community involvement was, “Knowing that I’ve done the right thing.” Another, reporting the reward of being able to supply needed resources to members of the Black community commented, “Seeing your contribution reflect a positive outcome within the life of someone Black. Whether someone can use your money to buy a suit to get a job. And it’s a cycle. They can help someone else.” Commenting on the personal benefit of Black community involvement as the continuation of the African American helping tradition, one study participant wrote, “I feel rewarded in the fact that I support and uplift the community at large and hope that those I assist will ‘pay it forward.’” Finally, another participant, mentioning the hope of reciprocity that emerges as a benefit of Black community involvement stated, “Complete satisfaction when one of my kids comes back and tells me that they graduated high school, going to college in a field that will help me as a senior, upcoming senior.”

The emergence of social wellness as the most common benefit of Black community involvement was remarkable because it highlighted the relatively minimal status of the individual person in constructions of personal reward among this group of Black adults. Participants repeatedly indicated that personal rewards lay in being productive members of a larger cultural group, in the flourishing of that group, and in the presence of unbroken circles of love within the group. In essence, findings from this study lend further support to previous scholarship emphasizing the persistence of a salient communal sense of self among people of African descent in America (see Jagers, Smith, Mock, & Dill, 1997; Mbiti, 1970; Nobles, 2006; White, 1987).

Two noteworthy differences in perceptions of social wellness rewards surfaced through this analysis. Specifically, Black men and women differed with respect to the extent each saw fulfillment of familial, moral, and/or spiritual obligation as a reward of Black community involvement. Black men did not mention fulfillment of obligation as a benefit at all, while Black women discussed fulfillment as a reward with *variant* frequency. Young adults also differed from middle-aged adults and older adults with respect to the extent that creating change in others was perceived as a reward of Black community involvement. Young adults wrote of the idea of creating change in others as a reward with *variant* frequency, while middle-aged adults and older adults *typically* discussed this benefit. Black women’s perceptions of fulfillment of obligation as a reward may be the consequence of being socialized into a uniquely gendered communalistic moral sensibility; while, the difference in opinion about the benefit of creating change in others between young adults and middle-aged and elders may reflect the latter’s developmentally predictable greater value for the generative role. A substantial body of literature exists supporting both propositions (see seminal work by Erikson, 1959 and Gilligan, 1982 for examples). At the same time, while it is worthwhile to acknowledge these two areas of difference, it is equally

important to highlight that Black men and women at each adult developmental stage were in general agreement, rather than disagreement about the six perceived social rewards of Black community involvement, and about the relative dominance of social wellness in general, as a personal benefit/reward associated with Black community involvement.

Psychological, Emotional, and Spiritual Wellness

In addition to illuminating Black community involvement's connection to social well-being, study participants also suggested that it is related to psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Specifically, participants' articulation of love as a benefit of Black community involvement pointed to an important aspect of psychological wellness as it is manifested through positive relationships with others (Ryff, 1989). Reflecting this sentiment, one participant reported, "When I do my part to uplift the Black community I am directly helping myself. I am at one with my people from those on the 'bottom rung' to the most 'elite' in the upper echelon." Middle-aged and older adults spoke of this reward with greater frequency than younger adults. The difference may reflect middle-aged and older adults' stronger need for racial solidarity with the Black community as compared to younger adults; a need possibly arising in tandem with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that took place while the two older cohorts were coming of age and crystallizing their cultural identities.

Further, reports of self-gratification as a benefit of Black community involvement, like those of three participants who shared, "It makes me feel good. Just self-gratification." "Feeling good about yourself," and, "Feel great and motivated to do more," reflected indicators of emotional wellness as constituted by the possession of positive affect (Deiner & Lucas, 2000). Interestingly, women and younger adults endorsed self-gratification as a reward associated with Black community involvement more than men, middle-aged adults, and older adults. This finding was interesting because it was inconsistent with findings from a national study that showed a tendency for men and older adults to express positive affect more frequently than women and younger adults (Simon & Nath, 2004). With no known studies of positive affect among African Americans, I am left to speculate that the contradictory findings related to study design rather than actual meaningful differences in experience. Both studies asked questions about affect; however, the national study asked questions related to affect in every day lived experience. Community involvement, as conceptualized by participants in this study, did not necessarily reflect everyday lived experience. It is possible that affect connected with everyday lived experience is qualitatively different from that connected with community involvement, and that this difference was reflected in the contradictory findings. Additionally, within the literature, community involvement is commonly discussed as being within the sphere of "women's work," and more specifically, Black women's work (Gilkes, 2001). From this perspective, I conjecture that enacting this salient dimension of our cultural identity leads to greater experiences of affective rewards in the form of self-gratification for Black women than Black men, for whom this role may be less salient (Callero, 1985). I also speculate that the

younger adults' more frequent discussion of self-gratification as a personal reward associated with Black community involvement as compared to middle-aged and older adults is a manifestation of the Generation Xers' greater assimilation into the United States' characteristically individualistically-oriented culture.

Finally, experiences of spiritual reciprocity in relation to Black community involvement, exemplified by comments such as, "It does the soul good to give for reasons that defy immediately discernable benefit to one-self. The greatest recognition is a clear conscious and a satisfied spirit," and "God gets the glory and change takes place in someone thinking or lifestyle. Hopefully stopping some of the generational mindsets that exist," reflected aspects of spiritual wellness as discussed by scholars (see Mattis, 1997 for an example). In sum, results of this examination revealed that the majority of study participants saw Black community involvement as being related to multiple dimensions of subjective well-being.

Table 2

Thematic Endorsement by Gender (N = 50)

	Male <i>n</i>	Female <i>n</i>
Social Wellness		
Creating Change in Others	13	14
Witnessing Change in Others	4	3
Fulfillment of Obligation	0	5
Supply of Resources to Others	3	1
Promise of Others Paying it Forward	3	1
Promise of Future Payback from Others	2	1

Psychological Wellness		
Love	5	5
Emotional Wellness		
Self-Gratification	2	6
Spiritual Wellness		
Spiritual Reciprocity	2	1
Few/No Rewards	1	3
Immeasurable Rewards	1	0
Other	2	4
Totals	<hr/> 38	<hr/> 44

Table 3

Thematic Endorsement by Adult Stage of Development (N = 50)

	Young <i>n</i>	Middle <i>n</i>	Older <i>n</i>
Social Wellness			
Creating Change in Others	4	11	12
Witnessing Change in Others	2	2	3
Fulfillment of Obligation	1	1	3
Supply of Resources to Others	1	0	3

Promise of Others Paying it Forward	1	2	1
Promise of Future Payback from Others	1	1	1
Psychological Wellness			
Love	1	4	5
Emotional Wellness			
Self-Gratification	5	2	1
Spiritual Wellness			
Spiritual Reciprocity	2	1	0
Few/No Rewards	1	1	2
Immeasurable Rewards	0	0	1
Other	1	3	2
Totals	20	28	34

The greatest significance of these findings may rest in their ability to complicate our understanding of outcomes associated with the enactment of the African American helping tradition. Typically, this work is portrayed within the social science literature as an exclusively burdensome endeavor for the helper. Without minimizing the known burdens associated with the enactment of the African American helping tradition, this study shows that doing for others is also a rewarding experience. For community workers invested in the promotion of subjective well-being within the Black community, this may be an especially important finding. Especially, the revelation of a multiplicity of well-being indicators emerging in tandem with Black community involvement (i.e., social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual), point to a need for greater community appreciation for the value of this particular cultural tradition.

Limitations

Although results of this study offer significant contributions to the literature, current methodological limitations temper the magnitude of these contributions. Specifically, the intentional geographical restrictions placed on sample recruitment prevent the generalizability of these findings to the larger Black adult population within the United States. Additionally, the use of open-ended surveys, rather than interviews or focus groups, limits the depth of data collected in this study. This choice was intentional. The gathering of breadth of information was deemed more salient than depth of information at this nascent stage of this research. However, future qualitative investigations of this topic should include in-depth explorations into the connection between Black community involvement and subjective well-being. Finally, this study's sole focus on Black adults restricts the applicability of these preliminary findings to Black youth. While results of this investigation showed social wellness to be the most common reward associated with Black community involvement among adults, previous research with Black youth found psychological wellness to be the most common benefit associated with community involvement (Franklin & Pack-Brown, 2001; Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). Future studies that replicate this investigation with Black youth populations may help to clarify the extent to which these findings do, or do not accurately reflect the subjective perspectives of Black youth.

Conclusion

Some scholars suggest that cultural traditions are sustained out of habit, even in instances where habit defies reason. It is also suggested that cultural traditions are sustained out of purpose, such as the purpose of meeting multiple ecological needs (Irvine, 1993). Results of this study suggest that the African American helping tradition in the form of Black community involvement persists today, not simply as a consequence of habit, but also because it continues to fulfill basic group and individual social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual needs. In short, this tradition it holds the promise of a unification of complements (Myers, 1988). From a strengths-based perspective, the evidenced fulfillment of larger cultural group needs, and we now know, individual group members' personal needs in conjunction with Black community involvement, encourages the continual socialization of cultural group members into the practice of this tradition, and an increase in scholarship in this area from an africanological perspective.

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