



Capital identity projection: Understanding the psychosocial effects of capitalism on Black male community college students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined factors impacting the success of Black male students in a Southwestern US community college. Data were collected using multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews ($n = 29$), unstructured concept mapping, non-participant observations, and a focus group. Study findings revealed the harmful effects that glory-seeking, materialism, and excessive consumerism can have on student success, in and out of college. This notion is termed capital identity projection, and is described as a harmful psychosocial disposition that occurs in a capitalistic value system when an image of economic success is extended to the point of one's own detriment. This notion is presented in light of extant research from masculinity studies, economic sociology, and economic psychology.

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1. Introduction

Capitalism emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries in Britain following the collapse of the feudal system and as an extension of mercantilism. This economic system quickly spread throughout Western Europe and beyond (Appleby, 2010; Callaghan, 1975; Geiger, 2010; Wallerstein, 1974). Since the system's rapid expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries, capitalism has served as the primary economic system in Western society (and now in the world) (Nee & Swedberg, 2005; Shutt, 1998; Walters & Cooper, 2011). While forms of capitalism have varied (e.g., fragmented, coordinated, industrial, state-organized) (see Jackson & Deeg, 2008), there are four common principles indicative of this system. According to Hunt and Lautzenheiser (2011), these principles are: "market-oriented commodity production; private ownership of the means of production; a large segment of the population that cannot exist unless it sells its labor power in the market; and individualistic, acquisitive, maximizing behavior by most individuals within the economic system" (p. 4). They describe the latter as a social¹ ethic, a consumer-oriented attitude fostered by capitalism where income and possessions are ardously pursued. This pursuit is guided

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¹ The researchers see this as a psychosocial ethic as opposed to a purely social ethic.

by the notion that subjective needs and discontent can be removed by the acquisition of goods. Moreover, given that capital attainment is a marker of personal value, competition is fostered to hold grander assets.

This notion of individualism and procurement is the focus of this manuscript, where we discuss how the values of a capitalist system can foster malfunctioning dispositions and behaviors that negatively affect individuals.² We term this notion, capital identity projection, describing this concept as a psychosocial malady which occurs when projection of socio-economic achievement is pursued in lieu of personal well-being. To clarify, the term ‘projection’ is used to refer to the portrayal or public display of a capital image, not as a psychological projection whereby one’s own feelings or actions are attributed to others.

This concept is contextualized around data derived from a study of Black male students attending a community college in the Southwestern United States. The larger study from which this data were drawn focused on factors affecting the academic success of these students. From this research, capital identity projection emerged as a recurrent concept with numerous intricacies. To address this concept and the intricacies associated with it, the researchers: (1) discuss relevant literature which contextualizes the challenges facing Black males in the community college; (2) provide an overview of the qualitative methodology employed in this study; and (3) describe capital identity projection with related premises in light of study findings and extant literature from masculinity studies, economic sociology, and economic psychology.

Capital identity projection is an integral addition to the literature on Black social-psychology and economic psychology, as few psychological studies have examined how economic systems affect the lives of those who live within those systems. Even fewer examine the psychological effect of capitalism on people (Kasser, Cohn, Kanner, & Ryan, 2007). This is a particularly important notion given the large percentage of the world’s population which resides under the influence of capitalism. In particular, this study presents a psychosocial perspective on the effects of capitalism on Black males, a sub-population which has historically fueled the capitalistic economic engine as “slaves, sharecroppers, tenant-farmers, maids, Pullman porters, factory workers and others at the base of bourgeois society” (Ferguson, 2011, p. 69).

A unique component of this research is the investigation of the psychological effects of capitalism on students enrolled in a community college. The community college is a particularly appropriate institutional context for an analysis of the influence of capitalism on Black males, as these institutions have traditionally served as an avenue for postsecondary opportunity for societies most underserved (Nevarez & Wood, 2010) and are a representative microcosm of American society (Cloud, 2010; Dicroce, 1995; Grimes, 1999). Unfortunately, Black male disparate outcomes in wider society are evident within community colleges. After 3 years, more than half (55%) of Black male attendees will have left without obtaining a degree (Wood, 2011a). These data serve as a clarion call to better understand factors that affect the success of this group in college, of which capital identity projection provides added insight. To situate the presentation of this concept, we first discuss extant literature on Black males in the community college.

2. Black males in the community college

Overwhelmingly, Black males utilize community colleges (public 2-year institutions) as their primary, and often last, opportunity to achieve a postsecondary degree (Bush, 2004; Bush & Bush, 2005, 2010). In fact, 44.2% of Black males enrolled in tertiary education are enrolled in community colleges, with only 26% in public 4-year institutions (NPSAS, 2008a). While traditional college populations are conceptualized as being between 18 and 24 years of age, the average age of a Black male in the community college is 27.7 years old (NPSAS, 2008b). Further, these males tend to be enrolled part-time (nearly 60%) (NPSAS, 2008c) and work 26 hours per week on average (NPSAS, 2008d). Moreover, nearly one-third of these men (32.4%) have dependents (NPSAS, 2008e). Additionally, large contingents of these men (49.5%) attend community college with the primary interest of gaining job/occupational skills or to pursue a job certification (NPSAS, 2008f).

Given that these men are older, attend part-time and have many external commitments (e.g., work, dependents), they tend to be adversely affected by environmental factors. Environmental factors refer to challenges which are external to the college but which impact their success in college (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Wood, 2011b), this includes variables such as: family responsibilities, employment, and outside encouragement (Mason, 1998). The effects of these external factors on student success are marked. For example, Wood (2012a), in identifying variables most predictive of first-time, first-year, Black male persistence in the community college examined the effect of background, academic, social, and environmental variables on students’ continuation in college. Using a hierarchical logistic regression approach, he found that three environmental variables, hours worked per week, supporting others, and stressful life events, were far more predictive than any other variables in his model (e.g., social, academic, background), accounting for 55% of the variable in persistence.

Wood (2011a) also noted the importance of external environments, highlighting the interrelationship between environment and psychological outcomes. He asserted that “the most predominant factors affecting the success of Black males are psychological in nature, resulting directly from barriers, negative messages, and stressors in and out of the college environment” (p. 24). Indeed, Mason’s (1998) model of urban African American male community college persistence illustrates a similar relationship, noting a direct effect between environmental variables and psychological outcomes. In essence, what occurs in students’ lives outside of college (in wider society) has a direct effect on their performance in college. While scholars have illustrated this connection, little if any research and Black males in the community college has focused on external environmental factors from an economic structural perspective. While some research has investigated the effect of employment

² The authors themselves are pro-capitalist, this concept is a critique of the values perpetuated by a capitalistic media as opposed to the system of capitalism itself.

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