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### Building an Academic Nation Through Social Networks: Black Immigrant Men in Community Colleges

Joanne A. Sutherland<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Baruch College, City University of New York, New York, New York, USA

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## BUILDING AN ACADEMIC NATION THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS: BLACK IMMIGRANT MEN IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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**Joanne A. Sutherland**

Baruch College, City University of New York, New York, New York, USA

*Whether naturalized or native, a nation becomes stronger as individuals embrace opportunities for postsecondary education. President Obama's commitment to community college education through the American Graduation Initiative (AGI) will facilitate increased matriculation into community colleges, encourage students to transfer into four-year institutions, and ultimately create an academically affluent America.*

*Research on students who transfer from community college to four-year institutions discusses this phenomenon from an institutional perspective; however, there is a dearth in the literature regarding how the Black student population, particularly Black immigrant men, engage in the transfer process in the academy.*

*Social Network Theory is the framework through which the experiences of these men from various countries in the African Diaspora were examined during their transfer process in an American public university system. Data analysis revealed three major findings, including the forms of capital that influenced their academic choices and outcomes.*

Now is the time to build a firmer, stronger foundation for growth that will not only withstand future economic storms, but one that helps us thrive and compete in a global economy . . . . It's time to reform our community colleges . . .

. . . by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.

(President Barack Obama  
Address to the Joint Session of Congress  
February 24, 2009)

Address correspondence to Joanne A. Sutherland, Honors Advisor/Baruch College Undergraduate Honors Program, Baruch College, City University of New York, 137 East 25th Street, Suite 306, New York, NY 10010. E-mail: jas471@nyu.edu

Community colleges were established to provide students with guidance and counseling, in preparation for transferring to senior colleges and universities. In addition to maintaining their open-door policy and their original function of transferring, over the past 50 years, community colleges have expanded more than any other form of public education by including other functions such as community service, remediation of unprepared and underprepared students, continuing education, and technical and vocational education (Cohen & Brawer, 1996). Today, community colleges facilitate access to higher education for all groups, including individuals with weak academic skills, low incomes, and other characteristics that create barriers to further education (Bailey & Weininger, 2002).

An educated citizenry in a democratic society benefits a nation for several generations. President Obama has verbalized his commitment to community college education through the American Graduation Initiative (AGI), which provides an infrastructure of four foci that include (a) increasing the effectiveness and impact of community colleges; (b) raising graduation rates; (c) modernizing facilities; and (d) creating new online learning opportunities. A complementary goal of achieving an additional five million community college graduates by 2020, includes students who earn associate degrees and transfer to four-year institutions. This initiative summons the efforts of all institutional agents and facilitators of postsecondary education, and will strengthen the academic scaffolding that currently exists to provide education at this level.

Several studies have been conducted on transfer students (Bailey & Weinberger, 2002); however, there is a dearth in the literature regarding the transfer experience of Black students, and in particular, Black immigrant men in the academy. The purpose of this research is three-fold: to examine how social networks facilitate the educational experiences of Black immigrant men as they transfer from a community college to a four-year institution; to create a counter-narrative to the deficit portrayal of Black men in this society by allowing them to verbalize their perceptions of navigating the higher education system using various forms of capital and social networks; and to promote the academic successes of this demographically unique population. A study of this kind may provide insight to some barriers of transfer among this population, and, therefore, support the American Graduation Initiative.

### ***SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH***

Research conducted on the transfer process discusses various forms of transferring, what the process entails from an institutional

perspective, and what is expected of students. Studying immigrant students who engage in this process is important because community college is the gateway to higher education for 45% of first-time freshmen (Community College Fact Sheet, 2006). It is also important because community college is the gateway for an even greater proportion of minorities and the underprivileged, both groups that are in large measure made up of immigrants (Conway, 2007). This study is significant in that it contributes to the body of literature by examining the transfer process of Black immigrant male students from their perspectives and allows for exploration into how the men utilize social networks, taking into account that studies assert that African American men do not readily use them because of the way they are socialized (Evelyn, 2002). As national and educational databases use the terms "Black" and "African American" interchangeably and report statistical findings from a monolithic perspective, it is important to note that there are differences regarding national origin, language, religion, and culture that affect the way in which social networks are utilized. Additionally, this research is also significant in that the narratives of the participants reveal how access to information concerning their advancement in higher education resulted from interactions and relationships that were developed through networking with peers, ethnic enclaves, institutional agents, and community organizations. This cadre of collaborators fostered healthy relationships that helped to retain these men in the academy.

### ***THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK***

Social Network Theory (Granovetter, 1983) is the theoretical framework employed in this study to examine the way in which Black immigrant men acquire information during their process of transferring from a community college to a four-year institution. The theory explains that social networks are person-to-person exchanges of information, knowledge, opinions, ideas, and advice and are usually unplanned and emergent systems. The more connections a person has in a social network and the more connections the people with whom they associate have, the more knowledge, influence, and power the original person will control. The study of this theory is critical in understanding the perspectives of Black immigrant male students and determining how influential their peer or informal networks are, particularly when juxtaposed against the institutional or formalized networks that are designed to support a smooth transfer.

Granovetter (1983) posits that within the framework of social network theory, strong ties and weak ties are essential facets and determine the type of information that is received. Strong ties are part of informal networks (networks which are spontaneously created as situations emerge) and consist of family, friends, and significant others with whom one closely associates. These individuals have great motivation to be of assistance and are typically more easily available than individuals with whom one does not interact closely. However, Granovetter further posits that strong ties do not promote economic or academic advancement among students of low socioeconomic status because the information they provide would not be considered a real broadening of opportunity.

Weak ties in social networks are relationships with individuals that one does not associate with closely. Granovetter (1973), in his seminal work, asserts that weak ties provide access to information and resources beyond what are available in one's social circle. Though weak tie relationships are distant, they may connect individuals who are very similar; however, he points out that there is "empirical evidence that the stronger the tie connecting two individuals, the more similar they are, in various ways" (p. 1362). Their support is part of an explicit (e.g., formal mentorship) and strategic agenda, which usually has a life-altering impact on minority children and youth (Delpit, 1988; Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan, 1996; Williams & Kornblum, 1985). The manner in which weak ties communicate and the language that is used within their exchange is different from the way that thoughts, ideas, and opinions are expressed in relationships with strong ties.

Weak ties are an important part of one's social network because, as Weimann (1980) states, they provide the bridge over which innovations cross the boundaries of social groups. In academic settings, weak ties, such as advisors, financial aid officers, administrators, and faculty members, bridge social distances. They also serve to enlighten students because they provide access to information and resources, such as fellowships, grants and internships, that are beyond those typically available in their social circle (Granovetter, 1983).

### ***SOCIAL NETWORKS AND FORMS OF CAPITAL***

Scholars have discussed the concept of the strength and influence of strong and weak ties by defining and analyzing forms of capital and specifically utilizing bridging and bonding social capital to explain

the principle. Both types of capital have been widely researched and defined by several scholars.

Stanton-Salazar and Urso Spina (2000) assert that social capital refers to relationships where individuals can potentially derive institutional support, especially in the delivery of knowledge-based resources (for example, college admission guidance or job advancement). He further asserts that social capital is comprised of resources that are inherent in social relations that facilitate collective actions. Its resources include trust, norms, and networks of association representing any groups which gather consistently for a common purpose.

Naphapiet and Ghoshal (1998) discuss the utility of social capital in its “bridging” and “bonding” capacities and define it as “the sum of actual and potential resources within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Social capital, thus, comprises both the network and the assets that may be gained from the network” (p. 243). Bridging social capital consists of ties among individuals who are different. This type of relationship enables them to get ahead because they are exposed to diverse resources that they would not have been able to access without weak ties. Conversely, the bonding perspective focuses on the collective relations between a defined group (Coleman, 1988), and starts with individuals who are in one’s circle and who offer solidarity and moral and social support. As such, bonding social capital is critical in sustaining strong ties and operates from the premise that levels of associability and trust between the parties in the network must be strong to ensure that collective goals are pursued (Leana & Van Buren, 1999). Adler and Kwon (2002) state that both types of social capital contribute to the decision-making process of students and should not be bifurcated into strands of foci because they both influence the behavior of the whole student. Irrespective of their role in the network, the strengthening of strong or weak ties is increased by communication. Relevant to the study of educational opportunity, Karweit, Hansell, and Ricks (1979) suggest that a “good deal of students’ alienation from school may be associated with their lack of direct contacts with student leaders (via strong or weak ties) and their consequent inability to contribute to student decision-making processes” (p. 26).

Transfer capital is another type of capital that foment the relationships between students through weak ties and worked in conjunction with Social Network Theory to ensure the academic success of the participants in this study. Transfer capital specifically addresses the transfer experiences of students with representatives of an academic institution. It is only used in formal networks within weak ties and develops as a result of interactions with college representatives.

Research conducted by Lanaan, Starobin, and Eggleston (2007) asserts that transfer capital consists of four areas: (a) academic counseling experiences: experiences that consist of interactions between students and counselors as they pertain to career advisement and transferring (articulation agreements, the application process, and academic and entry requirements of the prospective institution); (b) perceptions of the transfer process: what students envision the transfer process is, or will entail; (c) experiences with faculty: whether interactions support, inform, engage, and empower or alienate and discourage; and (d) learning and study skills: the level to which students engage in the acquisition of knowledge and develop note taking, time management, and other skills that enhance learning and facilitate academic success. Transfer capital is strengthened when components of higher education institutions (for example, academic personnel and policies) do not serve as barriers to those who desire to transfer, but instead, facilitate the experience (Clark, 1960). Transfer capital is further enhanced when students have academically, socially, and culturally integrated, which adds to their sense of belonging on college campuses. As students' integration and sense of belonging are increased, the greater the likelihood of completion and the attainment of AGI's complementary goal.

## **METHODS**

Norman Denzin's (2001) methodological approach to critical qualitative research, interpretive interactionism, is used in this study. He asserts that interpretive interactionism "endeavors to capture and represent the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied" (Denzin, p. 1). He further states that interpretive interactionist studies are "idiographic" and "emic"—idiographic, in that every individual case and interaction text is uniquely shaped by the individuals who create it (Denzin, 2001). They are emic because experiences are studied through the use of thick descriptions which attempt to depict the experiences of individuals as they interact in their specific situations.

This method of inquiry consists of five phases: deconstruction, capturing, bracketing, construction, and contextualizing.

- Deconstruction includes critically analyzing how the phenomenon has been studied and how it is represented and analyzed in the existing research and theoretical literature (Denzin, 2001).

- Capturing includes securing multiple cases and personal histories that embody the phenomenon in question to capture new data (Denzin, 2001).
- Bracketing enables the researcher to take the phenomenon out of the world in which it occurs and hold it up for inspection (Denzin, 2001).
- Construction builds on bracketing (Denzin, 2001). In bracketing, the language of the narratives is dismantled in order to expose terms and grasp their deeper meaning. In construction, the researcher lists the bracketed elements and classifies, orders, and reassembles the phenomenon back into a coherent whole.
- Contextualization, the final phase, takes what is learned about the phenomenon, through bracketing and construction and fits the knowledge back into the social world in which it occurs (Denzin, 2001).

This five-phase process was used to obtain the personal histories regarding the birth places of the men, their educational influences, the educational institutions they attended prior to matriculating into college, their motivation for attending college, their transfer experiences, their personal perceptions of education, and the utility of education in their lives. The reader is therefore drawn into the events that transpire during their transition and gains a vivid understanding of their experiences and academic trajectories.

## ***FINDINGS***

Three major findings emerged as a result of this research study: (a) the importance of spheres of influence: familial, peer, and community relationships; (b) the issue of negotiating institutional agents: knowing when to listen to them; and (c) being in the academy, but not part of it: feeling like an academic and social outsider-within.

### ***The Importance of Spheres of Influence: Family, Peer, and Community Relationships***

The first finding revealed that these seven men from various countries in the African Diaspora were strongly influenced by their families, peers, and communities. Parental involvement played a significant role in their academic achievement. None of their parents had first-hand experience of being students in an American higher education institution, and in some cases, had not attended college

at all; however, the values that were instilled in these men helped develop their sense of agency (the ownership of their actions and decisions), and such values encouraged them to believe that they belong in the academy and motivated them to find a place there. This stage in their personal development became even more meaningful, as some of the men became estranged from their parents in order to study in the United States. Their parental influence transcended the seas that separated them.

Secondly, strong ties through peer networks provided the most information for them and encouraged academic, social, and intellectual stimulation with individuals they gravitated toward as a result of similar interests, characteristics, or social attributes. Their relationships, whether racially homogeneous or interracial, provided information prior to and after the actual transfer event. The tenets of social network theory (Granovetter, 1973) confirm that peers are a crucial variable in educational attainment and career aspirations, and that the influence of their social networks can be positive or negative. The men who participated in this study shared that prior to transferring, their peers encouraged them to attend a particular four-year institution because of the experiences they would gain and the reputation and academic rigor offered by the college. In social network theory, Granovetter (1983) states that strong ties are more likely to be of assistance, are typically more easily available, and involve individuals with whom one associates closely. He also states however, that strong ties do not promote economic or academic advancement among students of low socioeconomic status because the information they provide would not aid in a real broadening of opportunities. The men in this study are from poor or working class families in their countries of origin. While the strong-tie relationships of the men were easily accessible (as is stated by the theory), they also provided information that increased their educational mobility. As such, the tenet of the theory, along with the socioeconomic status of the men and their networks' abilities to provide information that increases their educational mobility, does not fully align with their experiences.

Lastly, two types of communities fostered their educational aspirations. Communities of location—their native lands—provided spaces in their homes, high schools, or churches where the young people were encouraged to “fight for” an education in order to become “somebody big,” of importance, and well-respected by others. The term “fight for” was used by a few of the men, each from a different country within the Diaspora. They all revealed that a college education is an extremely valuable commodity in their countries—a

commodity that many are not privileged to obtain. Their communities of interest created spaces within the four-year institution to which they transferred, and encouraged them as a result of their academic disciplines, or religious or athletic affiliations.

### ***Negotiating Institutional Agents: Knowing When to Listen to Them***

The second finding revealed that there was an issue of distrust and a measure of discomfort in how the men were treated by institutional agents who were designated by the institution to provide information for them. The men said that they were treated rudely, misinformed, received conflicting information, or ignored by a faculty member or administrator. As a result, some felt unsure about what to do to resolve their situations. In other instances, misinformation cost significant amounts of time and money. Only one of the seven reported no incidents of being treated poorly. Ultimately, the men developed coping mechanisms by rationalizing the behavior of the institutional agents.

### ***In the Academy, but Not Part of It: The Academic and Social Outsider-Within***

In the third finding, the data show that the participants experienced either academic or social incongruence when they transferred to the four-year institution. Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer (2003) define academic incongruence as a mismatch between students and the institution, in that the students' level of preparation is either above or below the level of the courses being taught, or when students have ideological differences with the material presented or find it culturally irrelevant. Some participants experienced social incongruence that Massey et al. (2003) define as students' perceptions that their beliefs, values, and behaviors are not in accordance with those of other students. As a result, they feel like outsiders and are not socially comfortable in that environment. This notion of being in the academy, but not feeling a part of it, is comparable to Patricia Hills Collins' (1999) theory of the "outsider-within." In her articulation of the marginalization and oppressive conditions of African American women (for instance, alienation in school or work), she interlocks their experiences with race, class, and gender. Her initial use of the term outsider-within described "how a social group's placement in the specific, historical context of race, gender, and class inequality might influence its point of view on the world" (Collins, p. 85). In much the same way, the presence of these immigrant men in the

academy presents the same issue, as the discussion of their influence and points of view on their academic and global worlds is broadened.

Some of my findings differ, however, from discussions in the literature by Brown (2002) about the attitude of Black men on campus. Brown posits that a lack of involvement with social networks in the institution is a result of internalizing societal perceptions and harboring self-doubt regarding their presence on campus, which leads to a high degree of unwillingness to immerse themselves in campus life. For the men in this study, the lack of interaction with formal social networks in the institution stemmed from receiving conflicting information or misinformation over a period of time and feeling disrespected by those in a position to help. As a result, the participants depended on other sources for information. The men were active, proactive, and interactive with their college community. They engaged in on-campus employment, sports, organizations, and other activities, which caused them to compete nationally and internationally with other universities. This type of engagement does not correspond with Brown's findings.

Lastly, research shows that parents' level of educational attainment influences the educational attainment of their children (Public Policy Institute of California, 2005). However, the educational experiences of these men were antithetical to those of their parents'. Upon graduation, these men would have attained baccalaureate degrees in computer science, bio-medical engineering, mechanical engineering, sociology, and music education.

## ***DISCUSSION***

Social network theory is an appropriate framework by which to examine how the participants in this research study acquired their information with regards to transferring and maintaining matriculation in their educational institutions. The role of strong and weak ties and the utilization of bonding and bridging social capital enable them to navigate the system and meet their needs. The respondents also developed transfer capital, which assisted them through a sometimes daunting process. However, while there are instances where the behavior and experiences of the men aligned with social network theory, there were occasions when they did not. Many theories employed to understand student behavior are developed from a Eurocentric perspective, such as the Student Adjustment Model, the Theory of Student Involvement, and Resource Theory. In the analysis of this case study, however, it would appear that the

experiences of these immigrants of African descent could not be captured as the theory was operationalized. I would like to submit that the possibility exists that the theory is Eurocentric in orientation and may not be able to capture the nuances of other cultures. As a result, its ability to explain and predict behaviors of culturally different individuals is reduced and may not be as powerful.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE***

Though scholars assert that Black men have challenges with educational attainment and access to higher education opportunities, the narratives of these Black immigrant male students demonstrate that they have circumvented their cultural, social, linguistic, financial, and academic challenges through their own tenacity and resilience. However, for a smooth transfer to be the experience of all students, state and institutional practices must be examined in order to address policies that may create barriers for students.

Students encounter various types of barriers. Practices such as institutional commitment to standards or putting a certain image above students' needs impinge student progress and cause them to lose interest, enthusiasm, or passion for pursuing their educational goals—a process, described by Clark (1960) as the “cooling out” function in higher education. In some instances, articulation agreements do not exist between many two and four-year institutions. In cases where there are agreements, issues of transfer are handled on a case-by-case basis; and where credits are to be transferred, it is often done unwillingly. In addition, complex and unclear admissions processes along with multiple deadlines hinder access (College Board, 2008). All of these issues are problematic for minority and first generation students because they have no familial experience with the higher education system, or no one to whom they can turn for advice.

Opponents of community colleges believe that these institutions impede academic mobility, while proponents assert that they increase the possibility of postsecondary attainment to the baccalaureate level for those who otherwise would not have matriculated. In either case, the issue of increasing access to higher education as well as graduation rates must be addressed not only for underrepresented, marginalized groups and individuals of color, but for all individuals.

Not all of the networks used by the men in this study are institutionally based. As AGI proposes several goals for an educated citizenry, universities should expand their scope by incorporating churches, civic, and other organizations in their recruitment efforts.

In an attempt to achieve the President's initiative, it is imperative for institutional agents, including faculty, administrators, academicians, service providers, and all who work with students in any capacity, to be culturally sensitive to the clientele they are attracting and the students who are matriculating into America's colleges.

For practitioners to effectuate positive, realistic, and permanent change, and bring the American Graduation Initiative to fruition, there must be a paradigm shift in facilitators' thinking, recognition of the challenges faced by this population of students, and an understanding of why the challenges exist and how practitioners can competently address them. In so doing, the likelihood exists that there will be increased levels of trust between the students and those who serve them. Additionally, mandated policies for professional development should create campus climates where student-agent interactions are enhanced and students view themselves as individuals who belong in the academy and are not just members of the academy.

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