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Jamel A. Gibson
jamelgibson27@gmail.com

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Black Lives Matter and So Do Black Men with a PhD

Jamel A. Gibson

Abstract

It is crucial for the Black Lives Matter movement that more Black men pursue and earn doctoral degrees. American society must be made aware of intellectual contributions that underpin the fact that Black men are intelligent, eloquent in speech, and able to research and present any given topic. Black men are often underrepresented in terminal degree programs, and those who do advance to advanced study fall short due to doctoral attrition. These troubling phenomena highlight the need for research concerning motivational factors that may improve the odds of Black men entering and completing postgraduate programs across disciplines. This opinion paper seeks to shine a light on the utility of motivational patterns beneficial to Black men pursuing a PhD and those who have completed the requirements. The dialogue further highlights Black men's significance in the broader societal discussions that need male voices to be heard, valued, and respected. As more Black men begin to earn doctoral degrees, the Black Lives Matter movement will strengthen, and so will Black communities across the nation.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, Black Men, PhD, Doctoral, Black Males, Persistence

Black men are the most vulnerable U.S. racial and gender group for almost every health condition that medical researchers monitor (Smith et al., 2011). There are significant health and societal factors that Black men must overcome to engage in higher education. These factors contribute to low enrollment percentages of Black men in higher education. In 2002, Black men represented 4.3% of students enrolled at institutions of higher education, which was the same rate in 1976 (Strayhorn, 2008). In comparison, the number of Black men pursuing PhDs has risen slightly at the doctoral level (Harper, 2012). As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to fight for justice throughout the world, it is crucial to understand that empowering Black Men to earn PhDs also matters.

What Motivates Black Men to Pursue PhDs

Black men pursuing PhDs are highly motivated by a combination of environmental factors, including parents, teacher-student relationships, peer relationships, and navigating everyday life. Harper (2012) noted that more Black men are pursuing PhDs, experiencing a 109% increase in postbaccalaureate degree attainment. This evidence validates that Black men are making conscious

decisions and efforts to pursue postsecondary education stemming from various inspirational and motivational sources (Collins, 2012).

Parental guidance, direction, and encouragement provide a strong stimulus for Black men to pursue a PhD degree. Black men in postsecondary education are present because parents consistently conveyed non-negotiable expectations of obtaining a higher education degree. This type of positive encouragement provided at the elementary school level instills the notion that college is the most viable pathway to success (Collins, 2012). Parents lacking firsthand college experience are still able to cultivate the belief that college is the next step after high school (Harper, 2012).

Black men in pursuit of terminal degrees are often influenced by teachers who developed and cultivated strong teacher-student relationships. Moye (2010) posited that Black males with strong teacher-student relationships benefit from removing communication barriers and gaining exposure, understanding, and respect, and the possibilities that education affords. Many educators working in underserved school communities are familiar with some of the daily struggles young Black men face and realized that receiving an education in disadvantaged neighborhoods is a unique experience. Harper (2012) concluded that Black males who have obtained a postsecondary degree appreciate the fortune to have had teachers who understood environmental circumstances and invested time, thought, and planning into their education plan.

Black men seek terminal degrees as a result of peers and colleagues sharing experiences and introducing the benefits and possibilities after degree conferral (Sallee, 2011). The development of a strong social network is a major factor that contributes to the Black male's desire to achieve a terminal degree (Ballard & Cintron, 2010). Black men develop supportive relationships with peers in which encouragement and social integration sustain the desire to finish the journey, increasing the likelihood of retention and degree completion (Strayhorn, 2008).

What Black Men Bring to the Table

Black men with PhDs matter and have much to bring to the table. Black men provide an important perspective to conversations about what can advance the Black man and the Black race. Black men with PhDs are researchers and are able to combine lived experiences with a theoretical and personal perspective. This is necessary because it helps validate studies to propel the Black agenda forward.

Black men with PhDs also bring voice and presence to the forefront. For too long, the Black man's voice was left out of conversations because of lack of education, exposure to different experiences, and lack of inclusion in the narrative. Our voice matters and should be included in every conversation that helps

to bring change to our communities. Our presence is equally important because it brings a sense of familiarity to all environments. Presence also helps to reduce fear because more people will become accustomed to being around Black men who can write and articulate thoughts and feelings.

Black men with PhDs bring inspiration to communities. The more examples of researchers, scholars, and men of distinction that Black young men encounter, the more society will produce successful Black men. Inspiration occurs when there is high visibility. Black men with PhDs can permeate all aspects of the community and provide examples of manhood, scholarship, relationship building, and encouragement.

Black lives matter, and so do Black men with PhDs. Black males possess the insight and ability to uplift communities and produce productive citizens to bring change to local school systems and the world. Men of color demonstrate resilient behaviors on a daily basis in the school setting. Many have endured similar challenges as the young men enrolled in their schools, and exemplify the ability to overcome obstacles and demonstrate progress, and success. Black lives matter and so does the development of Black males with a PhD.

About the Author

Dr. Jamel A. Gibson is a principal in Henrico Public School District, Virginia. His research interests focus on reducing male aggression in the K-12 setting, educational leadership, and Black male persistence in doctoral programs. He earned a PhD in Educational Management specializing in K-12 Education at Hampton University.

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