

# Perceptions of Hope and Hopelessness Among Inner-City African American Adolescents: A Qualitative Study Utilizing Grounded Theory and Photovoice Methods

Dana Baynard Harley MSW, LISW-S  
PhD Candidate



## Introduction

African Americans are about 24 percent among those in poverty in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2008; Williams, Sawyer, & Wahlstrom, 2005). However, African Americans constitute roughly 12 percent of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Given the representation of African Americans in the United States, this group is overrepresented among the poor (Williams, Sawyer, & Wahlstrom, 2005). In 2007, more than 2 million African American families were below the federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Those under the age of 18 were most likely to be impoverished. In 2006 the poverty rate for minors in the United States was approximately 17 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In 2001, African American minors comprised 30 percent of children living below the poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau 2008; Williams, Sawyer, & Wahlstrom, 2005).

Social science research literature is laden with problem-focused research and lacks studies which examine resilient and hopeful African American adolescents. Davis-Maye and Perry (2007) suggest a growing need for studies that identify specific factors that contribute to the development of hope and success among poor African American adolescents, especially girls. See (2007) also recognizes this void in the literature and calls for future studies to examine the unique needs and strengths of African American girls. Davis-Maye and Perry (2007) point out that: concepts such as success and hope need to be contextually defined. Such concepts are often measured by standards foreign to environments that African Americans dwell. Future research should focus on and include qualitative studies to reshape the definition of success and hope as defined by African American adolescents, and to allow for clearer discussions for identifying factors contributing to hope, resilience, and success.

Few studies have examined the perceptions of hope and hopelessness among poor African American adolescents. Snyder (2005) pointed out that very little psychological theory and research has addressed the area of children's hope in general. The study of hopelessness in children has been primarily with children and adolescents experiencing suicidal intentions and severe psychological problems (Snyder, 2005; Kazdin, 1986). This study explores the perceptions of hope and hopelessness among low-income African American adolescents.

## Primary Objectives

### Purpose

The purpose of this combined grounded theory and photovoice (participatory action research method involving the use of photography by research participants to capture images and construct knowledge about such images) study is to explore and better understand how the constructs of hope and hopelessness are defined, perceived, and experienced by impoverished African American adolescents between ages 13 and 17. Previous research suggests that feelings of hopelessness are a defining characteristic of the "underclass personality." (Wilson, 1987). Poverty is linked to perceived feelings of failure and predicts hopelessness (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005; Bolland et al., 2004; Bolland, 2003). Research in the area of the effects of hopelessness on impoverished youths has lagged behind; however, researchers have begun to explore the impact of neighborhood context on developmental tasks during adolescence.

### Rationale

This study focuses on how impoverished African American youth construct meaning about their feelings and experiences related to hope and hopelessness. One of the unique aspects of this particular study is the participants' ability to co-construct their realities alongside the researcher through the use of photovoice. While quantitative research methods are vital, they alone cannot provide all the knowledge and critical insights necessary to fully appreciate children's experiences (Darbyshire, Macdougall, & Schiller 2005). Qualitative studies allow researchers to explore and describe the daily lives of African Americans in the context of their communities. More specifically, this type of research provides an account of how adolescents feel about their lives and the world in which they reside (Jarrett, 1995). This study will inform researchers of how impoverished African American youth conceptualize and experience feelings of hope and hopelessness in the face of adversity. Moreover, it will provide critical insights regarding specific factors that contribute to the development of hope among such youth, as well as specific factors that impinge upon the development of hope. Implications will be made for social work research, education, and practice.

### Research Questions

1. How do impoverished African American adolescents define hope and hopelessness?
2. How do impoverished African American adolescents think about goals, future orientation and hope?
3. How do impoverished African American adolescents perceive the influence of family, peers, and neighborhood context in regards to hope and hopelessness?

## Method/Analysis

### Methods

This study utilized grounded theory and photovoice as data collection techniques. Grounded theory seeks to understand the experiences of individuals in a rigorous and detailed manner through such mechanisms as in-depth interviewing. A set of semi-structured open-ended questions composed the interview schedule. Participants engaged in two separate interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes to an hour each. All interviews were audio recorded. These sample interview questions below guided study participants to discuss how they experience feelings of hope and hopelessness.

- ❖ Tell me about a typical day for you.
- ❖ What types of dreams do you have for the future? (school, career, family, places to live)
- ❖ What types of things would get in the way of you achieving your dreams.
- ❖ Tell me in your own words what you think hope means. Are there times when you feel hopeful? Describe things that make you feel hopeful.
- ❖ Tell me in your own words what you think hopeless means. Are there times when you feel hopeless? Describe things that make you feel hopeless.

Photovoice is a participatory action research data collection technique that allows researchers to discover the meaning of various events, constructs, and perceptions held by individuals through the use of photography. Researchers have utilized photovoice with women, impoverished adolescents, people of color, and other marginalized groups. Various topics have been explored through the use of photovoice including: community violence, health promotion and health needs, sexual health issues, social justice, community needs assessments and empowerment issues. (Wang, 2006). Research participants were given cameras and asked to take photographs of images that represented hope and hopelessness. Participants are educated in basic photography and given proper consent forms necessary for photographs of humans. Research participants are asked to return cameras one week following receipt of the camera. The researcher develops the film and proceeds with analysis of the photos, along with the research participants. Participants are then asked to give a verbal explanation regarding their selection of photos. The following interview schedule is an example used to guide the discussion:

- ❖ What do you see here?
- ❖ What's really happening here?
- ❖ What do you want to say about it?
- ❖ What can we do about it?

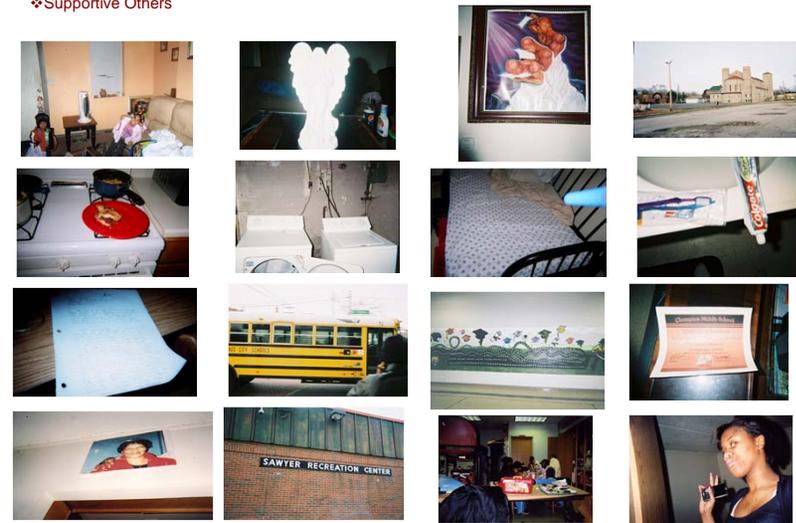
### Analysis

- ❖ Each interview was audio recorded
- ❖ Listened to each audio interview twice
- ❖ Transcribed each interview verbatim
- ❖ Read each interview a minimum of three times
- ❖ Line by line coding
- ❖ Development of codebook following third transcript
- ❖ Memo-writing/summary notes
- ❖ NVivo software utilized to organize, process and store interviews and photographs
- ❖ Constant comparative analysis
- ❖ Categories, themes, subthemes developed

## Preliminary Results

The following themes were generated from the data in regards to perceptions of hope by study participants:

- ❖ Spirituality
- ❖ "The Basics"
- ❖ Success in Academic Endeavors
- ❖ Supportive Others



The following themes were generated in regards to perceptions of hopelessness among study participants:

- ❖ The Environment
- ❖ Negative Behaviors
- ❖ Negative Thoughts



## Potential Implications

### Social Work Practice

This study utilized in-depth interviews and photography to better understand the perspectives, culture, and lived experiences of low-income African American adolescents in regards to hope and hopelessness. Participant photographs support, augment, and illustrate the perspectives of adolescents in this study (Freeman & Mathison, 2009). Social work practitioners could benefit from utilizing technology such as photograph with children and adolescents to expand and reshape constructs such as hope. Photography offers children and adolescents an alternative means to convey important ideas that may be difficult to discuss.

### Social Work Research

This study helps social work practitioners, educators, and researchers to answer the call for diversity by reshaping the constructs of hope and hopelessness, and by providing culturally grounded theoretical and methodological frameworks for use with diverse populations. Traditional constructs of hope and hopelessness have been limited to cognitive processes related to goal attainment and future orientation. This study broadens the construct of hope to include relationships with significant others, having basic needs met, and spirituality. This study expands the construct of hopelessness beyond the scope of individual ideas about negative expectations for the future. The participants in this study experience hopelessness largely due to the impact of negative community factors such as violence, crime, litter, graffiti, and gang.