ON THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN HEALTH

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RWJF Investigator Award in Health Policy
Horatio Alger's stories are a great example of the tenacity of American cultural values around unbounded social mobility and the idea that the American Dream is within anyone's reach. Horatio Alger-type narratives permeate films, politics, sports, and so on. Americans love the idea that someone can go from rags to riches, to come from nothing build a prosperous life entirely an account of their individual moxie. In this 1890 text, Alger recounts the trials and tribulations of Luke Larkin, the poor son of a carpenter’s widow. Suffering meager resources and many indignities, Larkin was still able, through perseverance, to “struggle upward from a boyhood of privation and self-denial into a youth and manhood of prosperity and honor…There has been some luck about it but after all he is indebted for most of his good fortune to his own good qualities”
Holding on to the American Dream

Now, in the context of the economic downturn, the American Dream is perhaps undergoing revision and rethinking about its tenability, but it still remains powerful in our national consciousness.

Rethinking the American Dream

Along with millions of jobs and 401(k)s, the concept of a shared national ideal is said to be dying. Has it been misplaced? Exploring the way our aspirations have changed—the rugged individualism of the 50s suburbia—the author shows how the American Dream came to mean fame and fortune, instead...

by DAVID KAMP  April 2009
The American Dream...No Excuses

Nowhere is this more evident than in President Obama’s successful rise to become the first Black president of the U.S. His presidency appears to fulfill the promise of meritocracy. In the screenshot at right, he is giving a speech (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/17/us/politics/17obama.html?scp=1&sq=obama%20naacp%20speech%202009&st=cse) to the NAACP on its 100th anniversary. In it, he argues that despite some barriers, there is “no excuse” for African Americans failing to achieve the American Dream.
So as Langston Hughes asks, what happens to a dream deferred? In May of 2009, an article in the NY Times, “Minorities affected most as New York foreclosures rise”, (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/16/nyregion/16foreclose.html) described the ways in which the foreclosure crisis disproportionately affected Black and Latino homeowners, shattering the dream of homeownership and the broader American Dream. Readers reacted in the comments section(see text at right) by arguing not only that America is essentially meritocratic but that failures to achieve and/or hold on to the American dream reflect African American characterological, cultural, and moral deficits.

May 15, 2009 10:09 pm
"this is what happens when you force loans on people whose culture does not celebrate the American values of hard work and diligence."
--STOEV, Columbus

May 15, 2009 11:09 pm
Financial literacy should be a core requirement for getting a high school degree. But, ultimately, common sense about saving and paying bills on time doesn't come from the government - it comes from parents. Own up to your responsibilities, folks. And, please don’t blame others when you have to bear the consequences of your own mistakes.
--AL, Garden City, NY

May 15, 2009 11:30 pm
"Thank you Congressman Barney Frank for forcing lenders to make loans to minority borrowers who might not otherwise have qualified."
--John Clark, Tallahassee, Florida

May 16, 2009 10:28 am
"Special thanks to Clinton, Barney Frank, Maxine Waters, Chuck Schumer, Christopher Dodd and a bevy of Democrats who insisted that every minority is entitled a home, whether they can qualify or not. Renting and saving to buy a home LATER was never an option."
John Henryism

In our study we investigate the costs of attempts to strive unfailingly for the American Dream. The story of John Henry is instructive here. Shown here in this painting (http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/04/13/books/review/downes-slideshow_3.html), Henry was a railroad worker in the 1870s who raced a steam powered drill and won, only to die thereafter. His story served as the inspiration for Dr. Sherman James’ formulation of John Henryism. Defined as persistent high-effort coping in the face of adversity, in James’ original work he found that John Henryism can lead to hypertension among African Americans from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Meritocratic ideology could act as a catalyst for John Henryism.
Research Aims

- **Aim 1: Meritocratic Ideology (MI) distribution and variation in American society:** To describe variations in public endorsement of MI in the United States across historical periods, consistent with concurrent political-cultural climate; and across geographical regions.

- **Aim 2: MI, social inequality, and modern racism:** To investigate whether, among Whites, beliefs and values consistent with MI are associated with attitudes that support social inequality in the U.S.

- **Aim 3: MI ideologies/narratives & African Americans:** To describe, using qualitative interview data and Black media outlets, the quality and content of African Americans' expressed beliefs about meritocracy and how it affects their lives.

- **Aim 4: MI and African American health:** To investigate whether beliefs and values consistent with MI are negatively associated with mental and physical health and well-being.