

The Athletic Dream—But What are the Career Dreams of Other African American Urban High School Students?

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Career development is impacted by race and perceptions of limitations in the opportunity structure (Smith, 1976). According to Smith (1983), “. . . race is the more prepotent factor in determining one's status, income and career development” (p. 167). For example, by virtue of being African American, male or female, certain social and personal factors encumber the career development and subsequently the status attainment of the African American individual in the labor market. These factors serve as barriers to education and employment and, ultimately negatively impacts upon the career development of the African American (Gibbs, 1988; Parmer, 1987; Subich, 1989). In the career development literature, African Americans have been studied more than any other ethnic group (Hoyt, 1989; Parmer, in press [a]). The research, however, fails to account for the inherent racial, social, cultural, and economic barriers that impact career decisions and employment status of African American youth (Dillard, 1980; McDavis & Parker, 1981; Smith, 1983; 1981).

Due to the perception that there are racial, social, cultural and eco-

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conomic barriers in society, African American youth may believe that the athletic dream is more attainable than other careers (Oliver, 1980). The athletic dream is the desire of African American youngsters to pursue super stardom through athletics, which provides an easy and quick path to success and mobility. The athletic dream has been a widely accepted phenomenon for African Americans since the 1930's and 40's when Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson became legendary sport heroes. For example, it has been stated of Joe Louis, that ". . . the Brown Bomber was Black America's silent deity" (Chalk, 1975, p. 180). While the quest for super stardom can exist for any athlete, proportionately more African American males than white males pursue the athletic dream (Braddock, 1980; McPherson, 1974). Pursuit of the dream begins long before the athlete enters high school, often as early as elementary school. Edwards (1982a; 1982b) noted that there is a potential for the dream to occur as soon as the family and significant others recognize that the youngster has athletic talent. Although there are many negatives consequences associated with the notion of the athletic dream, it is still considered to be an option for many African American males (Edwards, 1982a; 1982b; Kirk & Kirk, 1993).

Purpose of the Study

Beyond the athletic dream, we know little about the career dreams of African American youth. The pursuit of the athletic dream among African American males, in particular, leads us to raise questions about the career dreams of other African American youth. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe the career dreams of African American males and females, athlete and nonathlete, urban high school students, and to examine whether there are differences as a function of selected demographic variables as gender, type of school attended, grade level and athletic participation. This study is unique because it is an attempt to measure the career dreams of African American male and female, 11th and 12th grade high school students within the context of their homogenous ethnic group and to assess within group differences. In this study, career dreams will be defined as the image a student has of his/her future occupation in ten years as it relates to marriage, children, professional sports participation, success in occupation, and clarity of occupations.

Theoretical Background

If we are to understand the career development of African Americans, we must examine specific aspects of their career decisiveness, choice, and dreams. One aspect of career development which has not been explored is that of career dreams. In the career development literature, the concept of dreams are correlated with the concept of aspirations and are often used synonymously (Arbona & Novy, 1991; Parmer, 1987; Shapiro & Crowley, 1982). Arbona and Novy (1991), using the Holland Work Environments Typology, examined ethnic differences in career aspirations and expectations and found few significant differences among the groups. Others (Holland & Gottfredson, 1975; Touchton & Magoon, 1977) have used the Self-Directed Search Daydreams Scale to demonstrate that vocational aspirations can be predictors of subsequent vocational behavior. Skovholt, Morgan, and Negron-Cunningham (1989) reviewed the career development literature relative to usage of the term imagery. They divided the concept of imagery into areas of guided imagery and free daydreams. Klinger (1987) noted that daydreams add a unique factor to career development because daydreaming can be gratifying, help people cope, create, and overcome boredom.

According to Martin (1991), a variety of "external pressures resulting from economic, mobility, and family or social factors may influence individual motivation and ability to make vocational decisions (p.276)." Researchers have acknowledged that gender influences marriage and family, educational, and career plans (Shapiro & Crowley, 1982; Thompson, 1980; Tittle, 1981). Women generally perceive children and family as significant in their lives, such that they tend to adjust their educational and career plans in order to accommodate these roles. Borus (1983), for example, noted a correlation between early marriage, early parenting, and low career aspirations; in contrast, a man's position in the labor market was enhanced by marriage and family (Rosenfeld, 1980). Although gender, marriage and family may influence career dreams, these factors or patterns of influence may not be equally applicable to African American males and females (Staples, 1985). The career dreams of African American males and females may be influenced by differential variables, given the long work experiences of African American females (Tidwell, 1992) and their greater financial independence (Maslon, 1983); and the high unemployment rates of African American males (Tidwell, 1992) and their status in society (Staples, 1982; Hampton, 1979).

Method

Sample

The participant group consisted of a convenience sample of 446 11th and 12th grade African American students from three different public high schools in a large urban midwestern city. The schools were selected because the student population was 100% African American. School A was a general education or neighborhood high school. School B was a vocational high school requiring students to score at or above grade level on a standardized achievement test in order to be admitted. School C was a technical high school with special requirements in math and science. Students were also required to score at or above grade level on a standardized achievement test in order to be admitted.

Descriptive information about subject's personal demographic variables revealed that students from School A, the general education school, comprised 38.6% of the sample. Students in School B, the vocational school, comprised 39.7% and School C, the technical school, 21.7% of the sample. Since the sample included 11th and 12th grade students, most of the subjects were 17 (41.5%) and 18 (37.7%) years old. A few of the students were 15 (0.2%), 16 (14.7%), 19 (6.1%) and 20 (0.5%) years old. Twelfth graders (55.5%), outnumbered 11th graders (44.5%) and females (55.5%), outnumbered males (44.5%). Most of the students reported their level of course work as regular or following the traditional curriculum (79.4%), while others characterized their course level as honors (12.6%), advanced placement (4.5%), or essential (remedial) (3.6%). More than half of the sample (56.4%) indicated that they would attend a four year college after high school. Approximately 32% of the sample identified themselves as interscholastic athletes, 27.4% as intramural athletes and 40.9% were identified as nonathletes.

Instrument

The questionnaire was developed after examination of the career development literature. It included information about demographics, school and family factors, career dreams, career decisiveness and career choice. Demographic and career dream questions were used in this study. Information regarding student's gender, grade in school,

the type of school attended, and athletic participation was gathered through self-report.

Career dreams were measured in terms of subjects' perception of their lives over the next 10 years. Specifically, one's likelihood of marriage in ten years, expected number of children in ten years, and likelihood of participation in professional sports or games in ten years were assessed. A four-point Likert scale was used to assess questions about marriage, and sport participation, with possible responses ranging from "very likely" to "unlikely." A multiple choice item was used to assess the number of children they expect to have in ten years, with responses ranging from 0 to "more than 5." Each of these items was scaled such that larger values indicated that the student was less likely to be married, to participate in professional sports and to have fewer children in ten years.

In addition, the student's dream occupation was assessed for clarity by asking "if you were to enter the occupation of your dreams, what type of job would you be doing?" Clarity of the dream occupation item was scored according to the clarity of response with (1) indicating a vague, (2) a general, and (3) a specific response. Inter-judge reliability of .70 was obtained in an earlier sample (Jepsen and Grove, 1986). For example, "medical profession" would be a vague response, "a doctor" would be a general response and "a neurosurgeon" would be a specific response. A specific response suggested greater clarity and represented a clearer understanding of career dreams. The last dream item was a four option multiple-choice question that asked students to indicate the likelihood of success in their dream job. Scores ranged from "very likely" to "unlikely" and was scaled from 0 to 3 such that larger values indicated greater likelihood of success.

Procedures and Analysis

Arrangements were made for physical education teachers of 11th and 12th grade classes to send students to a central location where the investigator administered the questionnaire. Students were selected from physical education classes for several reasons: (a) The class was required for all students; (b) students were grouped according to grade level; and (c) with the exception of School C, classes were coed. On the questionnaire students were self-identified as either athletes if they represented their particular school in any sport as first or second team players and non-athletes if they participated in intra-

mural sports at church, at recreational centers, the park district or at various playgrounds.

Many students did not provide answers to some career dreams questions, perhaps because the questions appeared near the end of the questionnaire. Therefore, the number of cases varied across variables. Analyses were performed on all data available for each variable. First descriptive data and dreams for the entire sample were summarized using percentages. Relationships among the career dream variables were reported utilizing Pearson's correlation coefficients. Intercorrelations among variables were reported to assess the degrees of independence with respect to career dreams. Dream data was analyzed by gender, school, grade, and athlete status to examine subgroups of interest. The Chi-square tests of independence, with an overall alpha level of .05 as a criterion of significance was used. However, since a total of twenty significant tests were used, the Bonferroni corrective procedure was adopted in order to control for possible Type I error rate due to numerous Chi-square tests being used. This amounts to setting the adjusted alpha level for individual Chi-square to be equal to .0025 [= .05/20].

Results

Descriptive Career Dreams

Descriptive information about the career dream criteria revealed that a majority of the students thought they would be married within ten years (60%) and would have children (81%). In general, the desired size of family was much smaller than students' family of origin, with 20% wanting no children and 68% wanting no more than 2 children. Fifty-five percent of the students responding were "specific" concerning their dream occupation and only 13% were "vague." An overwhelming majority of the 227 students who responded stated that they were likely to be successful, with 53% reporting that they were "very likely" and 35% reporting that they were "likely" to be successful in their dream occupation. In keeping with this general note of optimism, 32% of the 445 students responding indicated that they were either likely or very likely to be professional athletes in ten years.

Intercorrelations Among Career Dream Variables

Table 1 summarizes the Pearson intercorrelations assessing the degree of independence among career dream variables; correlations

Table 1
Intercorrelations Among Career Dreams' Variables

<i>Career Dreams Variables</i>	2		3		4		5	
	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>n</i>
Marriage	38*	(443)	10	(205)	-10	(225)	06	(444)
Number of Children			03	(207)	-11	(227)	-09	(444)
Dream Job Clarity					-06	(205)	-03	(226)
Dream Job Success							-04	(226)
Professional Athlete								

*Significant at $p < .01$ level

were generally low and non-significant (all less than .11) with the exception of the significantly high correlation between the likelihood of marriage and the number of children variables. The positive correlation ($r = .39, p < .01$) indicated that as the likelihood of marriage increased so did the size of the anticipated family. Therefore, the career dreams variables were generally independent of each other with the exception of the correlation between marriage and children.

Likelihood of Career Dream Variables in 10 Years

The Chi-squared relationships between the gender, school, grade, and athletic participation and the career dream variables of likelihood of marriage, number of children, career in professional sports, dream occupation clarity, and success in dream job in 10 years revealed several significant findings. Only two of the four Chi-square tests of independence between likelihood of being a professional athlete and the categorical predictor variables of gender, school, grade and athlete, summarized in Table 2, were significant at the adjusted alpha level of .0025. Males were more likely than females to perceive themselves as professional athletes $\chi^2 (3, n = 198) = 21.0, p < .0001$. Intramural high school athletes were more likely than nonathletes to believe that they would become professional athletes $\chi^2 = (3, n = 304) = 65.77, p < .0001$.

Clarity of Career Dream

The Chi-square tests of independence between dream occupation clarity and the categorical predictor variables of gender, school, grade

Table 2
Chi-Square Tests Between Likelihood of Participation in Professional Sports and Categorical Predictor Variable

<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>VL</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>SU</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Gender								
Females	246	7.3	18.3	20.3	54.1	3	21.0	.0001
Males	198	15.2	25.8	25.8	33.3			
School								
A	171	15.2	25.7	22.2	36.8	6	15.80	.02
B	177	9.6	19.2	25.4	45.8			
C	97	5.2	18.6	18.6	57.7			
Grade								
11th	198	12.1	22.7	27.3	37.9	3	7.83	.05
12th	246	9.8	20.7	19.1	50.4			
Athlete								
No	304	5.6	16.1	21.7	56.6	3	65.77	.0001
Yes	140	22.1	32.9	25.0	20.0			

Note. Likelihood of professional athletics categories in percentages are as follows:
 VL = Very Likely L = Likely
 SU = Somewhat Unlikely U = Unlikely

and athletic participation, summarized in Table 3, showed a single significant relationship. Dream occupation clarity was significantly related to school, $\chi^2(4, n = 201) = 25.50, p < .0001$. Examination of the cross classification of the three dream occupation clarity categories with the three schools indicated that students in School A, the general education neighborhood school, were generally more vague concerning their dream occupation when compared to students in School B, the vocational school, and School C, the technical school, and that students in School B were particularly specific about the nature of their dream occupation compared to Schools A and C respectively.

Discussion

Descriptive Career Dreams

The purpose of this study was to describe the career dreams of African American male and female, athlete and nonathlete, urban high

Table 3
Chi-Square Tests Between Dream Clarity and Predictor Variables

<i>Predictor Variables</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>G</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>df</i>	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Gender							
Females	123	10.6	31.7	57.7	2	2.03	.37
Males	80	17.5	30.0	52.5			
School							
A	73	26.0	27.4	46.6	4	25.50	.0001
B	83	3.6	25.3	71.1			
C	48	10.4	45.8	43.8			
Grade							
11th	87	17.2	25.3	57.5	2	3.45	.18
12th	117	10.3	35.0	54.7			
Athlete							
No	130	13.1	31.5	55.4	2	.048	.98
Yes	73	13.7	30.1	56.2			

Note. Dream Occupation Clarity Category Codes as Percentages:
 V = Vague G = General S = Specific

school students and to examine whether there are differences as a function of selected demographic variables as gender, type of school attended, grade level and athletic participation. Results revealed that a majority of students wanted to be married, wanted to have no more than two children, were specific about their dream occupation, and thought they would be successful. With regard to dream occupation, African American males and females have high career dreams and generally are optimistic about their ability to achieve their dreams. Findings are generally consistent with the optimism expressed by African American students in previous studies (Antonovsky, 1967; Mickelson, 1990; Shapiro & Crowley, 1982). This may suggest that this particular group of African American high school students are not conscious of, or have not yet confronted socio-structural barriers, and therefore are inclined to be optimistic about achievement and success. Another hypothesis might be that although African American students see limitations in the career opportunity structure as a fact of life, they do not allow conditions to preclude them from having lofty dreams.

Intercorrelations Among Career Dream Variables

With the exception of the correlation between marriage and children, the career dreams were independent of each other. Correlations suggested that as the likelihood of marriage increases so does the anticipated family size. Findings would suggest that African Americans may see the roles of marriage and children as mutually exclusive and thus do not see marriage and children as an influence on career dreams. Childbearing responsibilities and single parenting will negatively influence career dreams (Borus, 1983). Although many African American may see marriage and family as correlated, a large number of single parent families are present in the African American community (Gibbs, 1988). It may be that urban high school students do not understand the relationship between success in career dreams and parenting roles and responsibilities.

Likelihood of a Career Dream Variable in 10 Years

Students' perceptions of the likelihood of achieving a career dream in ten years was significant for only athletic participation across the variables of gender and athlete. Thus, the athletic dream continues to be a career dream for many African American males. Although intramural males athletes were significantly more likely to perceive themselves as athletes, percentages suggest that some nonathletes may possess the athlete dream. The obvious reason is mobility, status, and fame, however, another explanation is that in a racist and segregated society, sport affords an opportunity for the African American male to dominate on the field or court, something he is unable to do elsewhere in society (Olsen, 1968; Riley, 1974). A majority of females said a professional career in athletics was unlikely. Yet, some of the females surveyed indicated that they were likely to have a career in professional athletics. It may be that the media coverage of recent female olympians such as Florence Griffith Joyner (Woodward, 1989) has served to foster the athletic dream for a small segment of the female population.

The dream of professional sport participation would suggest that the magnitude of the difference between students' perceptions and the actual distribution of adults in athletics deserves special comment. Generally the likelihood of a male becoming a professional athlete is about 1/50,000, (Edwards, 1982a; 1982b). Given the more restricted opportunity and the larger population of females, the odds are even

greater. Thus, although urban African American males were more likely than black females to perceive themselves as a professional athlete, both groups overestimated their chances by phenomenally large margins.

Clarity of Career Dreams

Dream occupation clarity was significantly related to school. The relationship between school and clarity of dream occupation would suggest that students in School B, the Vocational School, were more specific as to dream occupation. Greater clarity in response is assumed to represent a clearer understanding of career dreams. It may be that the students who benefit from vocational training in high school and are more knowledgeable concerning specific career occupations because vocation training provides experience, awareness, information, and skills necessary for an understanding of the world of work. The clarity of dream occupation by vocational high school students is consistent with previous studies (Grasso & Shea, 1979). Grasso & Shea (1979) noted that vocational students, due to their training for the labor market, have a clearer understanding of the occupations they would want to pursue and perform better on the job.

Students in School A, the general education or neighborhood school, were more vague relative to occupation when compared to School B and C. This finding is especially significant because a majority of high school students are enrolled in general education/neighborhood schools. Students enrolled in general education schools are tracked into specific curriculum where the course content may be similar to vocational or math science schools, however, expectations of students are often lower (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1985). Students in School C, the specialized school emphasizing math and science, were expected to be specific about career dream clarity due to their preparation relative to the more academically rigorous curriculum.

Implications

The findings suggest that counselors must not only provide educational and occupational information leading to clarity about career dreams, but also provide knowledge about career options that may be equally as rewarding as athletics. This may require infusing career

and vocational education into the academic curriculum and providing exposure to African American mentors in other careers. Counselors must also become culturally sensitive of the social, cultural and economic factors influencing the career dreams of African American students and assist students in understanding barriers and obstacles limiting opportunity to achieving career dreams. This will require counselors to explain that the opportunity structure is not always open due to racism and sexism. It is essential that both males and females understand the impact of what Epstein (1973) terms the "double whammy" or the "dual status of their ethnic and sexual membership group" (Smith 1981, p. 277). Cook (1993) noted that it was not "alarmist" to teach women about the unique problems they face in the work environments. Likewise it is not "alarmist" to teach African American students to be cognizant of barriers to achieving their career dreams.

With regard to the athletic dream, it is important for the counselor to assess their personal beliefs about the athletic dream as an option to mobility. The counselor must also understand the role of athletics in the life of the African American individual. In order to be an effective change agent, the counselor must encourage African American youth to explore various career options. Counselors must also help African Americans males to understand that they must transfer the same level of energy expressed on the field or court to the classroom learning environments. This type of discipline and training begins prior to college. Programs must begin in elementary and middle school and involve parents, school and community (Parmer, in press [b]). Programs must also be developmental, educating across the lifespan such that the student athlete is encouraged to project beyond the period of athletic participation.

The present study suggested several directions for future research. Research must answer questions about the career dreams of African American students using a yardstick "devised of their own experiences" (Maslon 1983, p. 111). First, more research should examine the career development of African American male and female students. This would involve operationalizing terminology to include all salient, cultural influences upon career dreams. Secondly, given that the career dreams of African American males and females are generally reported as high or lofty, research must further identify the extent to which their career dreams are achieved. Achievement may be related to the degree to which the student possesses the necessary education, information and requisite skills. This may require longi-

tudinal studies to examine the career dreams of African American students from different geographic locations, such as urban, suburban, or rural. A third question may examine the sociocultural context of within group differences of African American male and females. For example, how has dual career roles influenced the career dreams of African American students? or What do African American youth value in the work environment?

Finally, aspects of the career dreams of African American urban high school students were examined. Although, few differences were reported, counselors must continue to examine the significance of race, gender, and barriers to career development. This study will serve as a springboard for future research on African American youth.

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