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Framing Neighborhood Safety and Academic Success: Perspectives from High-Achieving Black Boys in Chicago

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Abstract

Research has explored the impact of neighborhood conditions on academic performance. To address an understudied population—high-achieving, Black male youth from violent communities—this study utilizes Neighborhood Narrative Frames to qualitatively explore Black male youths' lived experiences in their communities and perceptions in relation to school. This phenomenological study explored 18 participants during the 2009–2010 academic year of a charter high school in Chicago, Illinois. Findings illustrate that participants frame their neighborhoods in terms of safe and unsafe people and places, and frame school as a present and future escape from community violence.

Keywords: academic engagement/motivation, resilience, community/neighborhood violence, African-American male youth

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Introduction and Background

Community Violence and Academic Achievement

Social scientists have spent considerable time debating to what extent community conditions, across the U.S., influence academic performance and explain persistent gaps in educational attainment for marginalized groups (Sharkey, Schwartz, Ellen, & Lacoe, 2014). Research has shown individual attributes, such as youth psychological problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) to be a mediator of the relationship between community violence exposure and student-teacher connectedness (Voisin, Neilands, & Hunnicutt, 2011), impacting students' school performance. Other research has suggested that community violence exposure is a risk factor for poorer academic achievement and has a negative impact on grades and test scores (Burdick-Will, 2013; Harding, 2010; Sharkey, 2010). For example, Harding (2010) found that for boys in disadvantaged neighborhoods, community violence accounts for about half of the association between neighborhood disadvantage and dropout. Likewise, using data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, Sharkey (2010) found that children score substantially lower on cognitive tests when a homicide is committed near their home, particularly if the murder happens in close proximity to their home. More recently, Sharkey and colleagues (2014) found that acute exposure to localized violent crime among New York City public school students decreased standardized test scores in English and Language Arts, but not math, and that these effects were much larger for Black students.

Research on neighborhood effects has also examined how neighborhood-level structural conditions (such as poverty), which are often associated with community violence, shape how young people value education (Anderson 1999; Carter, 2005; Ferguson 2001; Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007). For example, MacLeod (1995) found evidence of social reproduction among a sample of low-income youth, indicating that participants exhibited the values and aspirations of the social and cultural milieu in which they were embedded. However, this study did not examine how community violence in low-income communities influenced the value placed on and effort devoted to school by the participants.

Black Youth and Community Violence in the U.S.

Across the U.S., youth living in urban neighborhoods are at greater risk for exposure to community violence, with approximations suggesting that between 50 percent and 96 percent of youth in urban settings have encountered some form of community violence (Zimmerman & Messner, 2013). Studies have linked community violence exposure to myriad issues among urban youth of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, including psychological distress (Voisin & Neilands, 2010) and suicide ideation (O'Leary et al., 2006), aggressive behavior (Lambert, Boyd, Cammack, & Ialongo, 2012), delinquency (Rosario, Salzinger, Feldman & Ng-Mak, 2003), and low academic functioning (Burdick-Will, 2013; Harding, 2010; Sharkey, 2010). However, in comparison to white youth, African-American youth have more than double the likelihood of being raised in impoverished communities, where violence exposure and other urban chronic stressors are prevalent (Brandt, 2006). Additionally, research suggests a gendered experience among youth in

urban settings, as young males more often experience community violence victimization than their female counterparts (Foster, Kuperminc, & Price, 2004). Not only do Black males have higher rates of community violence exposure than individuals from other demographics (CDC, 2010), but they also experience disproportionate amounts of homicide survivorship and subsequent traumatic loss (Smith, 2015). These elevated levels of violence exposure uniquely inform how Black males perceive their environments, navigate potential dangers, and understand safety (Thomas, Caldwell, Jagers, & Flay, 2016).

Overcoming Community Violence

Thriving academically and dealing with neighborhood violence are particularly challenging issues for urban adolescent Black males (Patton, 2012). Some social science researchers attribute Black adolescent males' academic difficulties solely to student characteristics and not to the social context in which they are embedded. Some researchers have suggested these students may be less occupied with academic pursuits and more with acting out their definitions of masculinity, posturing, and fighting the idea of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Lopez 2003). However, the behaviors of urban African-American youth are situated within the context of neighborhood conditions such as chronic community violence, which presents a real threat to positive life course outcomes for this population (Anderson, 1999; Margolin & Gordis, 2000; Garot, 2010).

Harding's (2010) research points to the effect of living in high-poverty neighborhoods, particularly on the outcomes of young males of color. Harding found the males in his study often navigated community violence by using their cognitive maps of people and places to define and bound their environment. Still, there remains a dearth of literature that identifies the precise mechanisms and processes by which community violence impacts learning (Sharkey et al., 2014). Much of the research in this area has been quantitative (Lepore & Kliewer, 2013) and based on findings from high-risk individuals who may be low-achieving or gang-involved (Garot, 2010; Harding, 2009; Sharkey, 2006). Focusing on youth who are most at risk for violence exposure and perpetration limits our ability to uncover all types of processes and to identify risk modifiers that influence the life course outcomes for all youth living in violent neighborhoods (Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006). In fact, we know little about how high-achieving students in violent neighborhoods—particularly among African-American adolescents—safely navigate their neighborhoods while simultaneously succeeding in school (Borofsky, Kellerman, Baucom, Oliver, & Margolin, 2013). This study is intended to contribute to the discourse by providing nuance to the work of Sharkey and colleagues (2014), which highlights how community violence affects schools.

Present Study

Given the dearth of research on African-American male youth exposed to community violence who succeed in school, qualitative inquiry is appropriate. To this end, we leverage the narratives of high-achieving Black male high school students to examine how community violence exposure may impact learning, and scripts used by these students in relation to their school experience.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, we utilize Neighborhood Narrative Frames, which posit that individuals perceive and conceptualize their neighborhood and social environment through narrative frames (Small, 2004). More specifically, Neighborhood Narrative Frames are persistent, culturally constructed themes that individuals create in order to understand their physical, social, and cultural landscape (e.g., their houses, neighborhood landmarks, neighbors, community history). As individuals encounter these various aspects of their neighborhood, their experiences are viewed through their own unique cultural lens, impacting the individual's overall narrative about their community and how to navigate it (Small, 2004). Such frames may provide a plausible explanation for the values and scripts used by high-achieving Black male youth that assist them in maintaining academic success. We explore how youth frame schools, specifically examining the perceptions of high-achieving, racial minority youth who live in violent, high-risk communities. This will illustrate how these youth carefully navigate their environment while maintaining values and scripts that keep them focused on school.

Methods

Data comes from a cross-sectional, phenomenological, qualitative study of 18 participants, ranging from 14 to 18 years of age. The study received institutional review board approval and recruited participants during the 2009–10 academic year of a Chicago charter high school, pseudonymously referred to as Butler College Prep. The sample was congruent with sample sizes in previous qualitative research (Charmaz, 2006) and appropriate for gaining a deep understanding of how high-achieving adolescent Black males define and describe their perceptions of school.

Setting

Participants were recruited from Butler College Prep (BCP), a charter high school that aims to provide students from under-resourced communities with a quality education, promoting academic success and college attendance. Students at BCP primarily live on the west side of Chicago, and 95 percent of students come from low-income families, based on free and reduced lunch qualifications. The BCP student population is 98 percent Black and 2 percent Latino. Students are chosen to attend the high school through a blind lottery process that admits less than one-third of applicants. The school has one of the highest rates of student and teacher retention in Chicago, and 85 to 90 percent of graduates attend college. BCP provided a letter of support for the study and BCP teachers assisted in the recruitment process.

Participants were actively recruited using a non-probabilistic, purposive sampling strategy. Students were approached at a male youth leadership group as well as during classroom visits by the researcher and school teachers who acted as study liaisons. Inclusion criteria for this study included: (1) Black males, (2) age 14 to 18 years, (3) currently enrolled at BCP, and (4) having a GPA of 2.5 or above. At BCP, the average GPA for African-American male students is a 2.3. Therefore, a GPA of 2.5 or higher signals a C+/B- average, indicating a student with above-average academic performance. Interested students were invited to participate in a brief information session where they received consent and assent forms. Approximately

one week after they returned consent/assent forms, the researchers mailed one movie ticket to the home of each student who participated in recruitment. Students who participated in focus groups also received lunch for their participation in the study. We received student assent and parental consent for all participants interviewed during the academic year.

Sample

All participants identified as Black males and the average age was 16.6 years old. Students ranged from grades 9 to 12, with two (11.1 percent) high school freshmen, four (22.2 percent) sophomores, four (22.2 percent) juniors, and eight (44.5 percent) seniors. While breakdowns of participant GPA were not captured, all students in the study had a 2.5 GPA or higher. Participants also provided information about their neighborhood of residence and exposure to community violence, based on the types of violence that they had either witnessed, experienced, or heard in their neighborhood. Participants resided in one of four Chicago neighborhoods—all reported as having the highest rates of violent crime (Chicago Police Department, 2011) in the city. Of the 18 students in the study, 4 (22.2 percent) reported exposure to robbery, 9 (50 percent) reported exposure to fighting, and 14 (77.8 percent) reported exposure to gunfire or shootings in their respective neighborhoods.

Data Collection

Participants were assigned a study number and pseudonym, and met with researchers in the English department chair's office during the student's lunch or advisory periods. Participants completed two semi-structured, audiotaped individual interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Interview protocols included questions that asked participants to describe their neighborhood (e.g., safe and unsafe locations), their school, their experiences with community violence, and their perceptions and behaviors in both their school and neighborhood contexts. The first interview examined how participants described their neighborhoods, family supports, and neighborhood relationships. The second interview examined specific incidents of community violence, how the participants navigated those experiences, and how those experiences impacted school.

It has been suggested that there is no definitive number of interviews that can achieve saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, rather than recruiting participants and conducting interviews on an on-going basis, the number of participants and interviews was determined at the study's outset. Informed by the standards for phenomenological inquiry, the sample was capped at no more than 20 participants for feasibility and in order to maximize the richness and depth in each interview (Merriam, 1998).

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and entered into Dedoose—an online data analysis platform for qualitative data analysis. The study used an inductive approach to analyzing data in order to: (1) condense the raw text data into summary format, (2) establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings, and (3) identify the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are

evident in the data (Thomas, 2003). In addition, this study employed audit trails and peer-debriefing to ensure rigorous analysis.

Coding

The second author conducted open and selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the open coding phase, the researcher explored the data for as many codes as possible—refining codes through peer-debriefing with a larger qualitative research team of doctoral students. Debriefing included examining theoretical ideas emerging from the data and soliciting feedback about themes and categories. In addition, a senior faculty member from the sponsoring institution reviewed the data and developed themes and categories independently for comparison and to determine validity. In the selective-coding phase (i.e., focusing the data by comparing incidents to incidents and other concepts), each transcript was double-coded using the refined codebook and Dedoose.

Results

Our analysis reveals how participants' navigation of community violence shapes their experiences with education. Participants described experiences with neighborhood violence that impacted the scripts they used to talk about school. In particular, participants reported how they: 1) framed physical spaces for safety, 2) framed people for safety, and 3) framed school as an escape from community violence.

Framing Physical Spaces for Safety

Participants cataloged physical spaces, identifying where it was safe for them to go, neutral zones that did not belong to any gangs, and locations known to be hot spots for violence and criminal activities. They reported the following subthemes, framing physical spaces for safety based on: 1) past experiences of community violence, and 2) prominent neighborhood landmarks.

Using Past Experiences

Participants understand their neighborhoods based on past experiences with violence or potentially harmful activity. Jamie, 17 years old, explains how he frames particular spaces based on specific experiences:

> *[Interviewer]: Now, how do you know that Mayfield and Huron are not safe streets?*
> *[Jamie]: Well, I know that because I was born and raised around here. And then while I was growing up, I had experience meeting people that got shot either on that corner, or down the street, or on the same block. Not just on the corner, but on the same block. And yeah, they got shot, stabbed, a lot of things happen. Got jumped on, gang fights happen right there.*

Jamie then explains how he knows what strategies to use in specific locations:

> *[Interviewer]: Where are the unsafe places to go?*
> *[Jamie]: You shouldn't really just stand on a corner—like, corners by the school and stuff. Don't stand right there. Really, don't walk towards, like,*

> *Racine or Halsted. Most of the time I pass, like, even the nighttime, like, when kids get out of schools, there's a lot of fighting and shootings going on there.*
> *[Interviewer]: How do you know that?*
> *[Jamie]: Living over there for, I think, now two years. I've grown up in the neighborhood. A lot of things have changed. As a kid, it really wasn't that bad. I didn't have to worry about anything as a kid, like nobody coming and messing with me or anything. I could just go outside and play. My mom wouldn't have to worry about nothing. Now as I get older, I'm 17 now, a lot more violence, a lot of gangs, a lot of young men in my community that is in gangs are getting shot and everything.*

These observations highlight how youth establish a frame for understanding the safety of a particular location based on previous memories or experiences, and then navigate those areas accordingly.

James, a 14-year-old, demonstrates his framing of safe and unsafe locations in his neighborhood as he describes which activities take place on which streets: "I'm from 78th and Whiteside on the South Side. It's a real quiet neighborhood, not a lot of young people live over there. But I have gangs right down the street or the next street." For James, like most of the other participants, his home is central to describing the parameters of his neighborhood. Thus, identifying his home address first suggests it is an aspect of navigating the neighborhood.

Safety boundaries are determined by several factors. The presence of gangs is one determining factor, as James states: "My neighborhood, from Mayfield to Huron, that's not a safe spot. They're not the safe streets. The only streets you can walk down is Austin where the cars drive past. It's kinda dangerous. They (gangs) shoot mostly every other night." James also identifies that certain streets are safe because cars are present, which may suggest visibility is an important component of safety in neighborhoods. However, visibility alone does not make the street safe. In many ways, his observations suggest that there are no purely safe streets or parts of the neighborhood, only relatively safe and relatively unsafe zones that can change at a moment's notice as conditions on the street (e.g. visibility, traffic, individuals or groups present) change.

Using Neighborhood Landmarks

Additionally, participants used neighborhood landmarks and institutions to mark safe and unsafe locations. Local institutions (e.g., schools, community organizations) and landmarks (e.g., parks) are useful because they help participants readily recall streets, intersections, or more general areas of safety that are useful when navigating the neighborhood.

Darron, a 15-year-old sophomore, describes school buildings as safe havens in his neighborhood:

> *[Interviewer]: What would you say are the safe and unsafe areas in your neighborhood?*

> *[Darron]: I would have to say right in front of the school because it has cameras and there are no gang bangers in the area. I would say here, and also the high school that is a couple of blocks down. That's also pretty well protected because they have security guards.*

Darron describes his school as a safe spot because it is highly visible and protected. As a safe place, his school serves multiple functions. Youth residing in the neighborhood use the area as a place to congregate with their friends in the neighborhood (which could be positive or problematic, depending on the relational dynamics). Darron navigates his neighborhood more freely, knowing that he is close to a school that is visible to people in the community and is deemed a protected space by those residents. Since it is well-protected, the school might also be a gang boundary. However, Darron knows that if he moves beyond the school, possibly to the next block, gang presence is possible.

Parks are not always safe spaces. Russell, 15, describes the politics of unsafe parks in his community, how certain individuals (e.g., BP, LP, TP) are affiliated, and how they reify boundaries:

> *People get shot because they from another park or consider themselves a gang, which is so stupid to me. So it's like BP has a gang. Then MP has a gang. BP, LP, and TP work together, but it's people within those parks that go to other parks and then it's, like, all confusing. So then, like, they never know who the victim is. They never know who they want to shoot, but it always boils down to the fact that you're not from this park, or if you're not from over here, you're in the wrong park. Therefore, you shouldn't be here. Therefore, we're going to shoot you, just become violent.*

The urban park can become what Geertz (1972, p. 17) refers to as a "symbolically charged" entity. Small (2004, p. 140) also suggests that a park can "elicit strong emotions for reasons independent of its obvious functions or observable characteristics." Russell's narrative demonstrates his ability to step outside the phenomenon of the urban park and critique its place in the neighborhood while still understanding the importance of park affiliation. Russell exclaims his confusion about why people are fighting over territory in one neighborhood when in reality it is all the same territory. Russell's ability to critique the park yet still understand the importance to associating with a park signals his need and desire to function in two worlds: his neighborhood and everything outside of it.

Framing People for Safety

Participants also framed individuals who frequented the locations that were a part of their daily travel. Russell, the 15-year-old quoted above, divides neighborhood residents into "good" and "bad" and then explains how these groups have evolved:

> *Well, I think like Jeffrey Manor is basically a regular neighborhood. It's full of good people, bad people. Most people like to shoot for the good thing but they end up going towards the bad. Because a lot of the older people [that is, older young people] grew up not knowing much, I think. So, they fell toward*

> *the violent side. Then, most of the older people have younger brothers or whatever, or young people that hang around, so they influence the young kids.*

Here, Russell is less focused on framing the physical space of the neighborhood and is more focused on framing groups of people who contribute to or deter his safety. He states people start out good or wanting to engage in prosocial behaviors (e.g., going to school, getting a job), but somehow they seem to veer toward "bad." Russell also suggests a lack of information may lead one to "fall towards the violent side."

Shawn, an 18-year-old senior, also frames people and challenges broader societal opinions of drug dealers when describing his neighborhood safety:

> *[Interviewer]: Can you describe your neighborhood?*
> *[Shawn]: I live in K-Town on Washington and Gilmore. It ain't as much violence as you think it would be. But it's still from time to time, things happen. There are drug dealers and all that, but they don't mess with us like most people would think. My neighborhood, it ain't so much as violent as people think it is but it ain't great either.*

Shawn's description identifies specific violent geographic coordinates and overlays the geographic description with neighborhood relational information. This description underscores the importance of recognizing similarities within congruent environmental contexts and between individual and unique experiences. In Shawn's account, both the drug dealers' location and his relationship to them suggests the specific geographic space is potentially a safe place, depending on who is present.

Participants report that perceived "bad" persons are the *right* people to know if being connected to them ensures protection, crucial information about when and where violence might happen, and maybe even an encouraging, motivating word. For example, Josh, a 15-year-old sophomore, explains how knowing the right person helps him navigate the neighborhood:

> *[Interviewer]: How do you navigate Hilldale?*
> *[Josh]: Watch where I go and hang with the right people, people that I've known that I hear about that ain't nobody coming after them to do harm to 'em. I mean, like this little section [of Hilldale] right here, man, everybody knows me. I really don't go in that other section. That last time I went in that other section I had to leave out. Anything could happen down there. Don't anybody know me.*

Being known in a particular place is more involved than mere facial recognition. It also requires exchanging a set of acknowledgments—from a simple nod to a passerby to hanging out on the corner with individuals who might be gang affiliated. Josh underscores this point: "Every day I wake up, I see violence, but I know the people in the neighborhood, and like I talk to them, say 'What up?' to them."

To some extent, participants believe being known is a requirement for successfully navigating a violent neighborhood. That is, gang members and others in the area must know that one is from the neighborhood. More specifically, gang members who themselves are vigilant against rival gangs and threats to their own safety must be able to identify one as being from a particular block, area, or community. Mike, 17, states:

> *I live in Holy City, and it's—you can't, if you're not from around here, you can't walk by yourself around here. Because if you're not known, like, somebody will walk up to you and ask you who you is, and then—and if they don't know you, it's just, I mean, you get jumped on, robbed and all that. But if you're known around here you would be all right.*

However, the right person in one context may not be the right person in another. James states: "But it affect me, because people, if they get into it with somebody, they'd probably say, "Oh, he hangs out with him too. He be with him. Let's get him too." But I try not to, like, I try not to be outside that much."

Given the context that James describes, it is not surprising that the relationships participants identify as most important for avoiding violence are those with neighborhood gang members. Though participants frame gang members as individuals who contribute to an unsafe environment, they conversely frame them as individuals who can also provide a level of protection from violence. These relationships are complicated for Black males who are motivated and engaged in school but fully understand the value and benefit of being connected to the neighborhood. Despite his focus on school, James describes the need to be connected to the neighborhood for "a little safety":

> *[Interviewer]: What's the worst thing that's happened in your neighborhood?*
> *[James]: The gangs, 'cause like how boys are going into gangs like the Stones and the Breeds and then they hang out on the corners. They also just drive ahead and shoot anybody that they see.*
> *[Interviewer]: So you're this 3.0 student—do you still associate with these groups?*
> *[James]: yeah, I hang with 'em, but I do not call myself one of them.*
> *[Interviewer]: So why?*
> *[James]: Well, only reason I still hang with 'em 'cause of a little safety. Because of that neighborhood I'm in. And because some of them are family members. I could walk away from it, but just like, when I'm in the neighborhood, I like to come outside. I feel like if people didn't live in Austin they wouldn't be in gangs. They feel like when they come out they gotta be with somebody, not by yourself 'cause you'll end up getting jumped. So you're with a crew, or a clique. You gotta be with, like, the right person, like, the right clique.*

Framing School as an Escape from Community Violence

Our analysis also revealed how participants' navigation of violence (i.e., framing places and people) shapes their experiences with education. Participants described

experiences with neighborhood violence that challenged the scripts they used to talk about school. In particular, participants reported subthemes related to how: 1) community violence exposure reinforces the importance of school engagement; 2) school provides access to a better future; and 3) school functions as a psychological barrier to neighborhood violence.

Reinforcing School Engagement

James, for example, witnessed the shooting death of his cousin—in front of him at a family member's home just moments after playing a basketball game. James was asked to reflect on this experience. He responds:

> *[James]: It (his cousin's murder) woke me up. I'm more into school and everything. It really woke me up, so now I'm not trying to be out here in the streets and hanging out and stuff. I'm trying to get done so I could leave and get out of here, and if I do get somewhere in life, like, they [his friends] could come, too, and I could help them out.*
> *[Interviewer]: What do you mean get out of here?*
> *[James]: Like, to get off, get out of here, like, to go to college and experience more things than just—like, people say, "All you do is be in the hood or something. That's all you gonna ever be at." Then I could show, like, I made it.*

Before witnessing his cousin's death, James spent time with friends on street corners. James, now "more into school," highlights a positive shift in his framing of school and spends less time on the streets. James could have become preoccupied with his own mortality, allowed his thinking to become fatalistic, and reveled in the here and now (Cummings, 1977). Instead, James highlights this event as a catalyst—an experience that he has framed as an opportunity to "get out." Like the other participants, James' experience with violence has created a desire to leave his neighborhood, and school seems to be the pathway out. He further illustrates this in his discussion of how he chose to leave his former school to enroll in BCP so that he would have more opportunities for academic engagement.

> *[James]: I ended up here due to me not getting the right academics at my other school…. Also, I was—I wanted to be challenged more. I wanted to be challenged more intellectually, because at my other school we didn't have AP, honor classes, or anything like that. The teachers didn't care about what we were doing, because if we did work and we lose it or something, they really didn't ask how we lost it or nothing. Some of our—we did a project, a technology project. Everybody lost they project, but they wanted us to keep saving our work on the same computer the same way, and we kept losing it, so they'll fail us. So I told my mom. They weren't trying to do anything about it, so she went up there. The football coach that was there, Coach Rogers, he worked over here as a gym teacher, and he told my mom about his school, and I came up here one day, and I got to shadow—I shadowed somebody, so I liked the way they was.*

Access to a Better Future
Chris, 18 years old, on the other hand, experiences varying levels of impact from community violence exposure in relation to his thoughts about school:

> *[Interviewer]: So you've seen people get shot, so take all that, and then you go to school the next day. How does it affect your thoughts about school?*
> *[Chris]: It sometimes affect me, but then it sometimes don't. I have to put it aside and not let it affect me, because I know that at the end of the day there's life, and I know coming to school that it's gonna pay off in the long run. Just keep coming to school, and hearing the same things over and over from adults and teachers and everything, like, it don't take that long for you to catch on or grab it and walk along with it…I have to do for myself, and, like, if I really want it, I'm gonna go get it, get my own education. It's not that you gonna keep telling me and you see I don't care. At one point, you gonna get tired of telling me and stop. So why have somebody keep telling you something that's right, and, like, you're listening, and, like, once I hear it, I hear it every day. Every day I see somebody, somebody telling me different. Like, it keep going on, and it got to my head like, stay in school. Stay in school.*

Chris posits that his community violence exposure does influence how he thinks about his future, and school is one way his future can become a reality. School and mentors help Chris conceptualize his future by sending messages that school is important. Chris believes that schools and school officials cannot do everything and that he has a vital role in carrying out the messages he has learned.

A Psychological Barrier to Violence
Demarcus, 17, identifies specific school conditions that make school a safe space.

> *I view school as a place to learn and a place…you don't have to worry about what's going on outside, but I view school as somewhere that I come to get my education and not to think about, like, what's going on. How can I say it? Like, when I come to school every day, I come in school here to learn and get the knowledge that I need to go on to college. I don't come to school to talk about who was shooting last night or who was fighting the other day, the things like that. I just come to school to learn and get what I need to know.*

School has several meanings for Demarcus. First, school serves as a respite from the throes of "outside" life, which include neighborhood violence. Demarcus makes a conscious effort to keep his school and community life separate. Reliving violence in school is, for Demarcus, a distraction from learning. School appears to provide a psychological distance from violence in the neighborhood.

Discussion
The current study builds on the extant literature, examining strategies that high-achieving Black males use to navigate violent neighborhoods while thriving in school. The findings suggest that the ability to stay focused on school in the midst

of chronic violence exposure stems from how youth frame conditions of safety in their environment. More specifically, youth Neighborhood Narrative Frames focus on locations and people that are considered safe and unsafe in their neighborhoods. These findings, in part, support the work of Harding (2010), further illustrating how adolescent males living in impoverished settings traverse neighborhood violence by assessing their social environment for people and places of safety. Not surprisingly, our participants also utilized past experiences to shape their frame of their neighborhood, as personal experiences directly inform an individual's narrative about their environment (Small, 2004).

Our findings also demonstrate how neighborhood experiences can influence the framing of school and education for these youth. Their Neighborhood Narrative Frames generally linked the concept of school to safety and future success as a strategy for maintaining school engagement while navigating their circumstances. Although youth identity is strongly connected to the neighborhood context (Harding, 2010), these youth also recognize the safety risk that neighborhood engagement poses. As a result, they opt to extricate themselves from neighborhood issues, particularly while on school grounds. Instead of becoming less engaged in school and relying on aggressive acting out or posturing (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Lopez, 2003), our participants became even more connected to school. In fact, they leveraged school as a means of immediate safety (e.g., Darron's example of school as a safety landmark) or imminent safety (e.g., Chris' discussion about school helping his future) to secure what they perceived to be a more promising future (e.g., James getting out of the neighborhood and attending college). School also serves as a place where they can unplug from the dangerous scripts of their neighborhood environment (e.g., Demarcus not having to think about issues outside of school). In this way, school provides a sense of both physical and psychological protection.

The ways in which participants framed school demonstrates the complex processes that occur as these youth receive conflicting messages from individuals across social settings. Youth often reproduce the prevailing ideologies and values that exist in their social and cultural environment (MacLeod, 1995), and these youth were confronted with both negative messages (i.e., crime and violence), as well as positive messages about the importance and utility of school. Then, they demonstrated agency in choosing which narrative to pursue (e.g., Chris). This may be due, in part, to students attending a high-achieving school, with above average college matriculation as well as student and teacher retention rates. Their experiences in this environment may have functioned as a mechanism by which participants framed education positively, in light of community violence. For example, Chris and James both discuss the ways in which teachers in this environment helped to encourage their academic pursuits—James further compares his experiences at BCP to other educational environments where he perceived less concern from his teachers.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

As our findings illustrate, schools can generally represent a beacon of hope for students, also providing an immediate place of safety and an avenue toward future

success. Therefore, schools and educators in urban settings have both the challenge and the opportunity to help students to transcend the social barriers that youth in violent, urban communities face. An intentional, school-wide emphasis on students' socioemotional learning may be one potential mechanism for accomplishing this complex task. Socioemotional learning has become an emerging priority of the U.S. Department of Education as well as urban schools across the nation (Blad, 2015; CASEL, 2015), and focuses on non-academic areas of student development that ultimately impact well-being and healthy functioning. Most recently, the pending Compton Unified School District class-action lawsuit in California has shed light on the exigent need for school-based initiatives to address emotional well-being and childhood trauma (Loudenback, 2016; Watanabe, 2015). This is particularly relevant for Black boys in urban communities, as this population encounters disproportionate amounts of community violence and traumatic stress (Smith, 2015)—not unlike the youth in our study, based on their reported violence exposure.

To address this, schools may need to comprehensively examine their policies and practices to ensure that students who encounter community violence are being directed to the appropriate resources both in and out of school. Trauma-informed school practice is another approach that may assist schools in supporting students' needs (Crosby, 2015; Day et al., 2015). Utilizing this approach may be an appropriate next step in communities where schools provide one of few sources of social support for youth. These schools should also endeavor to form partnerships with community-based organizations to bridge support across systems. Partnerships between schools and local community centers to facilitate transportation services, afterschool care, and other resources may create a wider network of support for students who would otherwise be left without such options. Finally, school mentors and staff at BCP played a strong role in impacting both the nature and consistency of the messages that their students received about education (e.g., Chris). Therefore, future research should examine specific interventions that can support schools in conveying such positive messages to students, helping them to frame education as a viable asset, and consequently, supporting long-term adaptive outcomes for racial/ethnic minority youth.

Strengths and Limitations

Although derived from a rigorous qualitative investigation, the data have several limitations. First, the sample is small and limited to high-achieving, Black adolescent males from a charter school setting, and thus, not generalizable. However, small samples are common in qualitative studies, and are particularly appropriate for drawing out thick, rich descriptions and preliminary knowledge in a new area of inquiry (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Second, this study cannot be used to address or identify any causal links between community violence exposure and educational outcomes. Third, socio-economic status and caregiver participation is not addressed, which may have impacted participants' perceptions of school.

Conclusion

This study identified key themes in high achieving Black males' quest to do well in school. Neighborhood Narrative Frames may provide a strong framework for

examining Black youths' perceptions. Overall, a deeper knowledge of these processes may shed light on how to best support the academic success of Black youth in violent neighborhoods, improving their access to a better future.

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