

A Cultural Analysis of “Ain’t No Makin It”

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In the book, *Ain't No Makin It*, a young aspiring sociologist submerges himself into a public housing establishment in Chicago, Illinois and befriends two separate male peer groups. One of these groups, referred to as the “Hallway Hangers,” are a predominately white group, who reject the value of education and hard work, as they believe that the system is unfair and biased. Alternatively, the second group, called “The Brothers,” believe in the power of education and hard work, as they believe that the American system is equal and open and that success is based on individual merit. MacLeod investigates the trend of social reproduction as he follows the two groups’ members from adolescence to middle aged adulthood. His qualitative ethnographic research methods and insightful analysis suggests that class is the most significant cause of social immobility. The next natural inquiry in this investigation is what is it about the lower class that is so disadvantageous to the members inside. Whether the structure, culture of the lower class or the agency of those inside that most influences their outcomes. The life outcomes of the Brothers and the Hallway hangers are nearly equal and remarkably bleak. These outcomes were most influenced by the lower class’s culture, particularly the cultural influence of family and friendship, learned mannerisms and speech patterns, and the stigma or stereotype associated with lower class.

Culture is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “the beliefs, customs, and arts of a particular society, group, place or time” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*). One area that influenced the beliefs or customs of the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers is family. There are some important differences in the two groups’ families. In general, the Hallway Hangers had less involved and authoritative parents, with little discipline and usually did not have older siblings that succeeded in traditional schooling. The Brothers on the other hand, had involved parents and

enforced rules like curfews and success in school. Several of the Brothers also had older siblings that were generally following the education route. These differences affected the two group's values. Because the Hallway Hangers did not see much emphasis placed on the importance of following authority figures at home, they did not tend to follow authority figures outside the home like teachers or police officers. The Hallway Hangers' parents did not stress the importance of a formal education in future occupational success because they did not want to encourage them unrealistically. The Brothers' parents placed great emphasis on success in school as they believed that hard work and a good education was the key to occupational success. Largely because of parental influence, the Brothers believed in the Achievement ideology, and in an education's ability to secure them a job. But the Hallway Hangers believed that the system was inherently unfair and that their fate was low-wage jobs despite education and hard work. The Hallway Hangers' belief that hard work did not matter was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their attitude and work ethic made them appear lazy to employers, and they lost many jobs that way, which only reinforced their belief in a bias system. The Brothers, worked hard in school and at their summer jobs, but their naïve belief in equal opportunity made occupational failure a personal inadequacy. Because the Brothers blamed the wrong thing for their occupational failure, it is possible that they settled for less, as that was all they felt capable of achieving. The two groups cultural values and beliefs from childhood influenced their future occupational success greatly.

While the family culture of the two groups' had an important role in the life outcomes of the boys, the subcultures and influence of the peers themselves may have influenced it more. As a group, the Hallway Hangers prided themselves on being "bad," a machismo attitude that led them to violence and defying authority. For obvious reasons, a value of physical spars to settle disputes is inconsistent with success in the workplace. The Hallway Hangers had difficulty restraining their anger and taking orders from bosses, which not only narrowed their job choices but cost them many jobs as well. In the first set of interviews, Stoney mentions that he would one day like to own his own pizza shop, but later on he says, "Just the public service thing: I just can't do that" (MacLeod 2009, 321). In contrast, the Brothers encouraged one another to succeed in school and obey authority figures. The Brothers also face opposition in the workplace but it is not due to authority problems. The Brothers believe in an equal playing field to a fault and do not realize they are disadvantaged by factors outside of their control.

The Hallway Hangers and the Brothers are both similar in that they did not choose which family or which circumstances in which to be born. The damages to children from living in poverty are numerous and well documented. One study in the American Sociological Review examined the effect of poverty on children's future success. They concluded the true determining factor of children's future success was dependent most on how long they had been in poverty. In terms of future employment, they conclude, "at the age of 25 years, only children exposed to long-term poverty are more disadvantaged than the never poor" (Wagmiller et. al 2006, 86). This is consistent with the outcomes of the boys. At the age of 25, most of them were still struggling to find jobs and a large contributor to that was the fact that they had been submerged in the culture of poverty for so long.

The effect of an intact and involved family on education and future economic success of children has also been studied in many instances. One study in The American Journal of Economics and Sociology shows and discusses this correlation and concludes that, "It suggests that by maintaining intact families, the parents can not only help their children achieve their

academic goals, but also help them gain the necessary life satisfaction which in turn is most likely to contribute to their future economic success” (Madhu and Aman 2012, 686). This group’s primary obstacle of employment was their spotted permanent records. Perhaps the fragmented nature of the Hallway Hangers parental and limited authority and stability at home increased their likelihood of criminal activity, which set them up for a poor economic outcome.

However, if the Hallway Hangers’ lack of economic success is largely due to the values and attitudes instilled in them at home and reinforced by one another, this same theory could not be applied to the Brothers. The Brothers had relatively stable families, strong role models, and a dedication to hard work. Yet, they had only marginally better outcomes than the Hallway Hangers. The Brothers had one unmistakable disadvantage that the Hallway Hanger’s did not. The Brothers were black. While discriminating against African Americans for employment is now illegal, studies show that a hidden bias still clearly exists in the job market. Bertrand and Mullainathan, two economics researchers conducted a study in which they sent fictitious resumes in response to Help Wanted newspaper ads in Chicago and Boston. The first group of resumes had traditionally white names, like “Allison” and “Brad” and the second group with black-sounding names like “Tamika” and “Jamal.” The results were that, “White names receive 50 percent more callbacks for interviews” and they concluded, “Differential treatment by race still appears to still be prominent in the U.S. labor market” (*Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal?* 2004). While racism is not as obvious in today’s culture as it has been in the past, it still runs deep. Unfortunately for the Brothers, cultural assumptions and stereotypes hindered their employment greatly, despite their high school degrees and credentials.

The Brothers faced the obstacle of race in getting hired at conventional jobs, so the path of least resistance for this group was to seek employment at a place where the stereotype of a street-wise, rough teen from the projects was an asset and not a handicap. Most of the Brothers fought their way to conventional success, but one member took to drug dealing, the easiest attainable path to financial security. Super, a Brother, who claims to believe in the efficacy of traditional schooling, struggled in high school and eventually turned to the underground economy. Despite the moral battle Super felt because he truly wanted a traditional and legal job, he continued selling drugs because it was the easiest route for him to take to financial independence. Unlike Super, most of the Brothers played by the rules of the system while seeking employment. They sent formal applications, went to interviews, and used their limited connections to gain access to employers. The Brothers still struggled to make money. This is because successful occupational status comes about not just through following the rules of the system, but also through following the rules of the culture.

A great counter example of how following the rules of culture leads to higher occupational success is Derek. Derek went to a private school for several years on scholarship and made excellent grades. Because he was socialized by the kinds of people that had financial resources and high occupational statuses, he learned the attitudes, norms, and beliefs of that class. This helped him tremendously later on, as he had many opportunities of promotion and being placed into positions of leadership at an airport. He talks in detail about his outgoing personality and friendships he has formed with his coworkers and his high job satisfaction. Derek fits in with this crowd, because he learned how to fit in with that crowd in private school.

In Clarendon Heights, the two groups are surrounded by lower class culture. The culture of poverty theory posits that the attitudes, values and habits of those in the lower class are hindering to achieving success in the workplace and middle-class environment. MacLeod mentions

throughout the book that the boys' speech patterns, style of dress and posture reek of the lower class and put employers off. There is a stigma of the impoverished engrained into society by the achievement ideology. The belief that America is an equal opportunity nation leads people to believe that those in poverty are lazy, incompetent or uninterested in moving up the social ladder. This idea strongly affected the boys' getting jobs.

These assumptions could have easily hurt James (a brother) had his circumstances just been a little different. James enrolled in some computer classes at a local college and was initially placed in a night class. The night class was full of minority students, and because James was mastering the material so quickly, the instructor asked if he would like to move to a more advanced section. The section he was moved into was comprised of primarily white students and James says that it moved at a much faster pace. When registering, James was automatically placed in the night class with the other minorities because of an assumption. If James had not been offered the opportunity to switch sections, he might have finished with less skill.

For the Hallway Hangers, the culture of poverty and the sense of hopelessness that accompanies it is exactly what drove them to alcohol and drugs. Of course, the boys made the decision to smoke or drink on their own, but it is only because they saw no other route of escape to a higher quality of life. MacLeod explains that the drugs relieved the hallway hangers from their bleak outcomes temporarily and "... promise power and self-actualization, which are otherwise beyond the Hallway Hangers" (MacLeod 179). The hopelessness of poverty often leads to drugs and alcohol abuse, which reinforces the public misconception that poverty is caused by drug and alcohol abuse. Providing financial resources to those like the Hallway Hangers does not seem to be the answer, as that would only exacerbate the problem. But if poverty were caused by only a lack of resources like food, shelter and education, then food stamps, public housing, scholarships and affirmative action would be dramatically improving the situation. The root of the problem is the culture of and surrounding poverty, the attitudes and beliefs of those inside and outside the problem.

Because the Brothers were black *and* from poor-economic backgrounds, they faced a huge obstacle in getting hired. The Hallway Hangers had the same background, and it was their attitudes and criminal background that prevented them from achieving the most. In the end, the advantages for the brothers (strong work-ethic, willingness to learn, and hope) were held back by their disadvantages (place of origination and race). The Hallway Hangers had the advantage of being white, but because this was combined with a pessimistic attitude, they could not get very far up the social ladder either. We see the worst of both worlds intersecting with Boo-Boo and Chris, the two black members of the Hallway Hangers. Boo-Boo ends up dead and Chris spends most of his time behind bars or battling drug and alcohol addictions. The low social mobility of these two groups is seen because of culture.

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