



Dr. Waldo Johnson Interview Transcript

Conducted by Dr. Kirk E. Harris on March 5, 2018



Dr. K.E. Harris: Testing, testing, testing. Interview [UFC 00:00:04], Dr. Waldo Johnson for FFHC Newsletter. Let me rephrase that question again. I don't think you really need it. The basic question is from your view based on your experience and your positioning in the field. **What are the key strands of research suggesting about the condition and status of black families in America today?**

Dr. W. Johnson: First let me thank you for the opportunity to participate in this interview and to share my thoughts about black families. When I considered the research, the extent research with respect to black families, the research historically has pathologized black families in many ways. The earliest and perhaps the most widely known of the research has documented black families in very pathological ways, and the fact that they even still survive is very uncharacteristic of the kinds of experiences and the context in which these families function. When we think about this, all the way back from when blacks first came to this country in 1619 throughout the period when blacks were chattel slaves, all the way up to 1865, and then even post Civil War during the Antebellum period, during the Jim Crow period, even to current day, we can see recurring themes, even in the history, where black families still are not viewed with respect to their strengths in ways that parallel white families.

Dr. W. Johnson: In fact, white families traditionally are viewed as the reference points by which we assess functioning with black families, which is very interesting given that black families, from their very entrance into US society, were never given the option to function in the way that white families do. From a research standpoint, it's a setup in many ways, as a way of suggesting that they are innately inferior and the inferiority lies within the individuals themselves, but even going beyond the individuals,



the practices, even though many of the practices that they engage in are very similar to the very same ones that the majority populations do, and it is in many ways black families' attempt to imitate in a manner, so that they are viewed in more receptive ways, but they still get dinged, so to speak, in certain ways.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Basically, it sounds like what you're saying is that, at least in your experience and your context, that the reference points for black families have been white families, but the relative related set of opportunities and structures and the like that white families might be afforded or that are available to them are different than black families.

Dr. W. Johnson: Right. Yes. Access to those kinds of resources and supports have largely been denied historically, and even to a sizeable degree today, and so the manner in which that would allow you to make those comparisons, because often when we do kind of comparative work, we do so with the way that we often in research are kind of thinking about, that we don't compare generally for example apples to oranges, so that has often some comparability in the two groups that allows for you to set up an exercise by which you could conduct some kind of comparison.

Dr. W. Johnson: That's not the case with respect to black families and white families in large measure, so when we look at them historically, in a research context, I want to make sure that I'm clearly saying this, it is not my opinion that black families are necessarily inferior or dysfunctional in comparison to whites, they must be viewed in the context of the spaces and the times in which they are allowed to function. Given that those spaces and those contexts have been very narrowly constructed, then we have to kind of recognize that then white families, by nature, would not be the best reference or comparison group for black families.

Dr. K.E. Harris: That point really does lead me to the next question. Because basically when you're talking about the lack of comparability, you're also talking about the differential in experience, and the differential in experience for black families largely is a function of what arguably is institutional racism, historical oppression, and the impacts that that has had on the families and family members. From your view, what is the impact that this historical differential, which some would say is probably a euphemistic characterization of downright racism, and its role that it has played on black families?



Dr. W. Johnson: I think institutional racism is a very clear and obvious way to kind of think about the impact that a differential treatment and stuff can play. When we think about it with respect to black families, I would say that institutional racism ends up resulting in kind of political and social differences as they are applied to a particular group, and in this instance black families, and so we can begin to kind of think about all of the various institutions and policies that exist that have actually resulted in not considering, either explicitly or implicitly, ways in which they may negatively impact black families.

Dr. W. Johnson: In many instances, what we see as opposed to implicit concerns that as a result of this institutional racism as it impacts black families, we see disparities with respect to black families in ways that we don't see there. When we think about wealth, black families have decidedly far, far less with respect to wealth and intergenerational wealth that can be passed on even in comparison to whites, and so the argument often is made that it's not true when we think about that in terms of if we think about families that would be considered say a part of the Gilded Age, where they made huge fortunes and stuff, and so while the opportunity for becoming the Rockefellers or the Carnegies or something like that may not be what most families in America would be, so this whole notion about everyone pulling one's bootstraps and working hard and getting ahead, so clearly there's evidence that this has not been the case for most people in America.

Dr. W. Johnson: But even when we think about just the differential between say the working and middle class whites and working and middle class blacks, we still see huge differentials with respect to wealth. Some of that is due to policies. You can't deny that there are ways of which some whites, even though they may not have been owners of plantations and stuff, but they benefited as being whites even when job opportunities came about that blacks would not have been able to have, that we have to also consider New Deal policies, and also kind of post World War I and World War II policies, where for example with respect to housing policy, many veterans returning back from war were given federally subsidized loans to purchase homes, which was largely not extended to black veterans.

Dr. W. Johnson: Then as we look forward, we think about the ways in which the redlining and the like of loans has also been bolstered by banking policies that discriminated against blacks, and so those are, in my mind, just an example of some of the underpinnings



that play themselves out as racialized institutional policies, but we can see the same thing with respect to income. We see the same thing with respect to education, the criminal justice system. We can go on and on and just kind of think about all of the various aspects of American life that often contributed to family development in some ways, and how they have been disproportionately denied, if not just outright denied, to blacks.

Dr. K.E. Harris: What's interesting about that, and I know that there's been a lot of reference about this not relatively new book, *The Color of Law* by Rothstein, and he talks about how governmental policy has proliferated racial segregation and racial disadvantage in America, and this leads me to my second question because if you think about it, right, and I tell my own students that it was just in the '60s that the South was segregated. That's 50 years ago. That's not that long ago. That's our age. Let me speak for myself.

Dr. W. Johnson: Growing up in the South as well, right here.

Dr. K.E. Harris: We're of the age where we know of that experience, right? Here's the thing. Often there's lack of comparability between black and white families is a really important issue, and then we talk about this institutional racism and the unique pressures that it has placed on black families, but we also know that black families have survived, despite this hostile economic environment, and that black families show some persistence against those forces that would otherwise destroy and decimate our community, right? **From your perspective, what would you say are some of the key resiliency factors that are manifest in the black experience, in the context of the black families, that actually have permitted that survival and facilitated that ability to overcome despite the odds?**

Dr. W. Johnson: With respect to resiliency, I think historical reflection, which often I feel doesn't get kind of enough credit, but I think it's important to kind of recognize that even as you kind of begin talking as a way of introduction about this interview and talking about this in the context of Black History Month that we just celebrated, I think that it's really important to recognize the way in which, although February is often kind of viewed as a time when we set this aside and do this, that the retelling of the black experience, particularly here in America, is a really important source of resilience that is necessary for building resilience within black children, that allows them to grow up in ways where they are not totally defining themselves by the way



in which the world outside of their family and community views them, that it's a reminder for even young adults who have maybe in their minds done all of the things that they were told they needed to do in order to succeed, but still find it very difficult to shatter certain glass ceilings and things of that sort.

Dr. W. Johnson: For those of us who in some ways are at minimum at the mid career, maybe moving to the last stages of our kind of professional lives and stuff, and then begin to sometimes measure our successes against those of our colleagues who don't necessarily come from the same kinds of family life and community experiences and stuff, and there's a way in which we could kind of begin to think that we've not done as well as we possibly could. In my mind, the historical reflection is a way for us to kind of understand, first of all, that our personage, who we are as individuals did not begin in 1619, and so that we have a history that goes far beyond that, and that becomes really important because if you think about yourself as someone who began as a slave, there's a way in which that perception of yourself limits the possibilities of what you could be, but just knowing that our history and our lineage goes far beyond and long before there was an America and stuff becomes really important.

Dr. W. Johnson: In addition to that, what's even more proximal for us to reflect on with respect to resilience is the notion that even among those who came here as slaves, and I always point out to my students that African-Americans are not the only people who came to the US as slaves. There were other groups. There were even some whites that came to the US as slaves, because the US really started as a debtors colony, a place where people who had maybe had some bad financial situations in England and other places in Europe and stuff could come, start over, pay off their debts to the people who they owed money to back in the old country, and start afresh. Blacks were never given that opportunity at the very beginning, and so we were slaves, but we were chattel slaves, and it's important for people to understand the distinction between being a chattel slave and just the traditional kind of slave, because in the chattel slave ...

Dr. K.E. Harris: Or indentured servant.

Dr. W. Johnson: Right, or indentured servant, because in chattel slavery, there's no real opportunity for freedom unless it is of the grace of the landowner, the person who owns you, and so even looking at those who were slaves, who then even during the slavery period



still managed in certain kinds of ways, when slavery was officially over during the Reconstruction period, during the Jim Crow period, during the 1960s and stuff, our legacy is just filled with story after story after story, some of which are widely known, and then there are those that are only known to a handful of people. But the fact that there were always people working to triumph over these really harsh experiences becomes a reminder that we should not really expect our experiences to be that much different in certain ways.

Dr. W. Johnson: There are ways in which we can parallel what went on with them and kind of see 21st century manifestations of the same thing, and I think that kind of historical remembrance and teaching and stuff is a real bolster, and it's the kind of thing that I feel is very criminal in this country not to prepare black children in ways where they can draw upon that. Everyone is not going to use it in the same way, but for it not to be one of the tools in their toolkit means that they're already kind of starting out at a disadvantage.

Dr. W. Johnson: Then I would say, beyond that, religion and spirituality. When you look at the research of Linda Chatters and Robert Taylor, who have kind of studied the role of religion with black families and stuff like that, and even for people who might not respond to a specific religious framework or spirituality, that becomes really, really important, kind of recognizing that somehow there is some acknowledgement of a being beyond ourselves. That goes back to our kind of African traditions and the notion that we are because of this kind of collectivist perspective, as opposed to the European Cartesian notion that I am, therefore I do.

Dr. W. Johnson: Being linked and anchored in a particular kind of way with something larger than yourself also in an environment where the self, as the black self, is viewed with suspicion and contempt, that becomes really important, so I view that. I view resilience as also being a part of also having racial consciousness, drawing upon culture I think with respect to families, more specifically, extended families. Extended families mean something to black people in America that's in many instances unlike other groups here, and there may be some other groups that have extended family experiences that may parallel, but I do think there is something kind of unique about it for black families, so I view all of those things as a part of what helps black families to survive, particularly when they know that kind of institutional options are not available to them.



- Dr. K.E. Harris:** Even though this wasn't one of my original questions, given the times that we're in and the most recent release of the Black Panther, really I noticed that there's a lot of excitement, right, around this cultural recognition that you begin from somewhere other than you've been told that you begin, and that that has some power. People are latching onto it, so I think really even as we reflect on this in kind of a pop cultural sense, there is a real saliency to this, right?
- Dr. W. Johnson:** Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I'm very excited about the way in which Wakanda has suddenly become something for us in a way that we can recognize that we do come from someplace other than where we are at this particular moment, and maybe it's not Wakanda, but it does kind of recognize something very powerful. There were lots of symbolism in that movie, and some of us, through our family teachings or through our religious or spiritual teachings, have kind of long recognized that our being did not start in 1619, but to the extent that a medium like film, and particularly Black Panther, is helping to get us a much larger swath of the community to also kind of recognize that becomes really important. Whether we agree about where it is that we all come, in my mind, it's not that important as it is to kind of recognize it did not start with Jamestown.
- Dr. K.E. Harris:** Right, right, right. I think that's an important thing, and I really didn't think of resiliency in that way, but there's a social psychological interpretation of resilience which is really about that you're able to reconcile who you are today based on what your history has been rather than kind of a much narrower view. I remember Richard Cross was a professor at Cornell when I was there, and it was interesting how these middle class students, white, black students would end up in his office as a psychologist, and he was not a clinical psychologist, but they'd been working through this stuff, because all of a sudden they come to these elite institutions and they find out that they're not who they believe they are based on what people are saying about them, right? I think dealing with reconciling that's having the capacity to reconcile what the larger society is telling you versus who you really are and your history and your context is really important, and if you can't reconcile that, of course you're going to go into cognitive dissonance. You're going to struggle, right? You need to be anchored in your history and yourself.
- Dr. W. Johnson:** The thing is, and then when you think about this across the life course, for children, and even though I don't think this is restricted to youth, but we can see it in much clearer ways



because of their youth, they are becoming, and so even if this is how I see myself at age six or seven, then you still ideally have a lot of life ahead of you. But even for those who might be teenagers or young adults who are just coming to reconcile with that as a result of maybe Black Panther and things of that stuff, they are still becoming also, so they're still these kinds of things. But I do think resilience comes in multiple ways, and ideally that's a great thing, that there's not just this one source of resilience.

Dr. K.E. Harris: That's good. I'm going to touch on an area that I know that you're deeply engaged in, and that's workaround as it relates to black fathers and fathers. **What's your sense based on your experience and your research related to the roles that black fathers play in buttressing, supporting the resilience of black families? Any thoughts that you have about that?**

Dr. W. Johnson: I often think about this in terms of first of all the ways in which black fathers were socialized, and in many ways bought into the notion of the kind of instrumental roles that men were expected to play. Even despite the fact that black men have some of the greatest difficulty in terms of doing that, because of just the way in which people respond to them or kind of view them in rather ...

Dr. K.E. Harris: I want to be clear. When you say "instrumental roles," you mean like producing income, having a job.

Dr. W. Johnson: Right, right.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Okay.

Dr. W. Johnson: I often start with that because I find that to be an interesting conundrum, because there are ways in which black men, who when you look at their functioning in the economic environment, are probably the most fragile of many, but they buy into that lock, stock, and barrel, and it defines how they see themselves. Even in my own work, in terms of kind of looking at father involvement, early on, I just came to recognize that even if you recognize that dads have some difficulty in terms of trying to be economic or instrumental providers, and you might kind of say, "There are other important roles that fathers can occupy and stuff," for many of them, it's much easier for them to accept those other roles after they have demonstrated they can do ...



- Dr. K.E. Harris:** Very interesting. I always talk about them having to cross the threshold, that's the way I always talk, into providership in order to get to those other things.
- Dr. W. Johnson:** That's right.
- Dr. K.E. Harris:** But that largely is advanced also by the public policy that they've experienced, right?
- Dr. W. Johnson:** That's right, that's right, that's right. They recognize the policies that are at play that in many ways impose this instrumental provider role.
- Dr. K.E. Harris:** And define them.
- Dr. W. Johnson:** And define them. The fact that, with respect to going back to this notion of institutional racism, we had a whole period in this country where these fathers were not even allowed to be a part of their households because they couldn't provide for various reasons, and if they showed up, then that would threaten that source of provision that was coming through government, so when we talk about the ways in which black families have survived over time, a lot of that has also been despite the fact that American society may be sending mixed messages, on one level saying dads need to be in the home, supporting stuff, but then creating policies that really kept them out.
- Dr. W. Johnson:** Yes, so this instrumental provision. Now, what I found interesting in recent decades is how so many of these younger dads who also have notions about finances and money and stuff, but seem to be a little more willing to assume these non-instrumental roles, even if they haven't mastered the instrumental role. Maybe some of that is about the way which the whole notion about fatherhood is also changing in certain ways. We still generally expect fathers to be instrumental providers, but in the broader context, that for most families having one income is insufficient anyway, so dads might be instrumental providers, but they're not sole providers anymore.
- Dr. W. Johnson:** Then that in some ways kind of may open some doors for dads to be kind of viewed in different ways, but to be the provider, but also to be the protector in the home and stuff, and so in instances where families are situated in environments where there is high rates of community violence, fatherhood then in that respect, and I would go even a step further beyond



fatherhood, just say men roles, adult men roles in families and in neighborhoods and stuff, become the protector, and in that respect trying to protect their family and stuff from some of the things that's going on in the neighborhood, and there are ways in which having certain kinds of institutional racism as reflected in policies that has resulted in disproportionate number of these men in prison or incarcerated means that they can't do the provide ...

Dr. K.E. Harris: Because they're physically removed.

Dr. W. Johnson: Right, they're physically removed, so they can't be there to protect their family. There's another way in which black families are at risk due to institutional racism.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Right.

Dr. W. Johnson: Then when we think about nurturing, because that's a important role, it's also impacted by absence, and we know now that a sizeable proportion of that absence is not just men floating around, standing on street corners, they're incarcerated somewhere, either in a jail or a prison, and particularly in a place like Chicago where you have a jail system that is as large as some prison populations and stuff, that has a huge impact on these families. There are ways in which a lot of these kind of traditional roles are either truncated or they are diminished because of the ways in which policies, whether they were unintentional or intentional, play out and disproportionately impact this particular segment of the population, so that their roles become really difficult to enact in the kind of traditional sense. Then when people start talking about black families don't look like white families, if you didn't have this harsh incarceration policy that pretty much impacts many black families, then maybe they would more closely resemble in certain kinds of ways.

Dr. K.E. Harris: **I had a question, because, as you know, the work that Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities does is we work with social service agencies who are serving moms and kids, and a lot of times, even once the father is physically available and potentially one is able to engage them, the narrative is they're disaffected, they're not really interested in being involved. Maybe they don't have the best kind of qualities that would make them appropriate to be near their children and that kind of**



thing. What do you say about that narrative? Where does that narrative come from?

Dr. W. Johnson: I think a part of that is we often have to be careful about that, because I think a part of that is sometimes discomfort on the part of organizations working with this population, because heretofore they have not worked with them. Parents, fathers are parents, just as mothers are parents, but they don't parent the same, so you cannot necessarily offer the same services and offer them in the same mechanism to dads and expect the same kinds of outcomes that you would necessarily get with mothers and stuff, and I think those are some of the things that sometimes get in the way.

Dr. W. Johnson: I think that there sometimes can be just a lack of understanding and sympathy for what black fathers don't know. In my mind, and some of the research suggests this, that there sometimes can be such contempt on the part of agencies that are traditionally accustomed to serving moms and stuff, and increasingly agencies are serving dads because that's also a part of the more progressive policies, that you got to think about how you link these two together. But if you're starting out by feeling like these particular ...

Dr. K.E. Harris: [inaudible 00:38:50]

Dr. W. Johnson: Let me turn that off. If you're starting out from the perspective that these particular parents, men as parents, fathers, are undeserving, as you say their behavior and stuff, because these particular organizations also work with mothers who often are untowards in certain ways and stuff, but they work with them.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Right.

Dr. W. Johnson: But if you feel like the dads somehow are subhuman or subpar, that there's no rehabilitation, that they can't be kind of viewed in positive ways. One of my research studies that kind of examined these kind of concerns in the child welfare system, we found also that sometimes with line workers who are responsible for delivering these services, that these workers often have had similar kinds of experiences with their own children's fathers or other men in their families lives and stuff, and they bring certain kind of baggage to the practice experience that would be considered unacceptable and unethical.



Dr. W. Johnson: If you're kind of starting out with not really wanting to engage them or not feeling that there's nothing that's good that's going to come of this, clearly there are some dads I think that do require a lot more work to better prepare them to assume the responsibilities of parenting and stuff like that, but we have to be committed to the notion that there exists within these individuals the opportunity to do so, and that then we structure our interventions in ways that are designed to address their concerns and to get them to the point where they can be contributing parents. But that doesn't always mean that the way in which we're going to get dads to that point is exactly the same thing that we did with moms, and if we're not willing to invest in that kind of way, then we're not really all in toward that.

Dr. K.E. Harris: **My last question, and you've been so gracious, we know that in a lot of Chicago, I shouldn't say "a lot," but in some Chicago communities, particularly African-American communities, we seem to be struggling with community safety, community violence questions, and again often these issues are symptomatic of these larger structural concerns that you articulated earlier, just in terms of the inability for individuals to matriculate in typical economies, the exclusion, the segregation. But we also noted that this violence is real in communities, and it has some really significant tolls. It's traumatic, right, in the communities. I guess maybe if you could just comment, one, on what you think some of the strategies might be related to mitigating some of these concerns, some of these issues in our communities, and maybe more particularly comment on what unique role that you think fathers might play ...**

Dr. W. Johnson: Okay. I take the perspective to begin with that violence is embedded in the social fabric of the US. I am very concerned about the wave of violence that is really impacting economically disadvantaged communities here in Chicago that are largely black and Latin communities, but I'm very clear that violence permeates the entire landscape of Chicago, of Illinois ...

Dr. K.E. Harris: Of the US.

Dr. W. Johnson: Of the US. Right. Okay. First of all, and even as we think about the community violence that is right now rampant in Chicago in let's say maybe five, six neighborhoods.



Dr. K.E. Harris: Right.

Dr. W. Johnson: Right.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Which is really also important to identify that it's not every single black community, right?

Dr. W. Johnson: No.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Which is the way it's projected.

Dr. W. Johnson: That's right. It's not all black neighborhoods, so five or six, so even when we think about that. What is it about those neighborhoods? If we were to think about this as a social experiment, what is it about those neighborhoods that make them violent? I'm going to start off by saying that you would be in agreement with me in saying that there's nothing inherent about the people living in those neighborhoods that make them ...

Dr. K.E. Harris: Absolutely. Of course I agree.

Dr. W. Johnson: ... genetically violent or something like that. We're going to, just for the purposes of the experiment, dismiss that as one of the factors, so kind of knowing that, so then what is it? In many of those neighborhoods, these are neighborhoods that have also been neighborhoods in transition over time, so if we think about 50 to 75 years ago, most of those neighborhoods are not inhabited today by the people who lived there during that particular time, and in the period of the exodus from those neighborhoods and the influx of the people who are residing there now, there have been all kinds of changes.

Dr. W. Johnson: But perhaps the most pronounced have been economic changes, and so how then do the neighborhoods, that in some instances were very thriving neighborhoods at one point, go from that to neighborhoods that are viewed as really having very little with respect to kind of economic viability. I don't want to go as far to say that neighborhoods have no resources, because if there are people in the neighborhoods, there are resources. But economically, because I also would argue that even so much of the violence that often gets described in terms of individual behavior and stuff like that is also about the lack of economic opportunity, so if we want to really turn the corner on that, then we've got to be very clear about how it is that we can improve



and enhance the economic viability of people who are in spaces that are really viewed as at the bottom of the income distribution.

Dr. W. Johnson: Whether we're talking about in neighborhoods like Inglewood or West Garfield Park or Roseland, or whether we're thinking about Pilsen or Little Village or some other neighborhood, we have to think about that. Then recognizing that economic viability and building that cannot be synonymous with gentrification.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Right, right. That's displacement.

Dr. W. Johnson: Right, right. Because then what we then do is start the cycle over again, so we have to figure out ways about how it is that we can enhance and build these neighborhoods, but do it in ways where the people who are residing in these neighborhoods can be the beneficiary of that reinvestment. In my mind, it's okay if some other people recognize this is a good place to be and they come, but it shouldn't be restructured in such a way where they're the only ones who can come and now become kind of the beneficiary of that. I definitely kind of view this as economic, and a part of to build the economic end of this is that we got to then offer legitimate jobs, and to do that, for the kinds of jobs where the most growth exists, means that we need better education in these communities, in terms of the education centers.

Dr. W. Johnson: It's appalling to just kind of think about the ways in which, in a city like Chicago, the educational opportunities vary from community to community, so you can't even say, as a Chicago student or even a CPS student, that everybody gets the same, because they do not, and so you got to also create those kinds of things what will help neighborhoods. I think that when we do those things, that a lot of the impetus or the motivation for a lot of this crime will drop. It won't all go away, but a lot of it will drop because a lot of it, you can't think about it in terms of an economic kind of payoff. A lot of times, young people are not making wise decisions, but sometimes they're not making wise decisions because they don't have good examples to see how someone around them has made a good economic decision that actually paid off.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Right, because if you don't have that many choices and the selections are narrow, then you very may well be choosing between bad options.



- Dr. W. Johnson:** That's right, that's right. I think that that's a part of it. You asked me what can be the role of fathers. We started talking earlier about fathers are to be kind of moral guides and protectors and things of that sort, and I think even in this moment of violence, there is a really important role fathers play, and just to talk about it on one level is that I think all too often, when we think about community based interventions in neighborhoods to maybe try to stem violence and stuff, we consider all of the kinds of programs and people that might address this, but we often fail to include dads in this.
- Dr. K.E. Harris:** Mentoring programs that don't really reflect that impetus.
- Dr. W. Johnson:** Right, right. Even, as you know, there have been, even you think about stuff like becoming a man and stuff, but for the most part, those don't specifically call upon fathers. People will say they don't call upon fathers because there are no dads in these communities. If we know that dads could be important components of these programs, but we have social policies where it makes it difficult to bring dads in, then that suggests to us that if we say these young people are as important as we say they are, then we need to do something where we can have better access to a pool of dads.
- Dr. W. Johnson:** My concern all too often with so many of these mentoring programs is that we careen even the kind of people that we think can be mentors to kids. I recognize nowadays that people have to go through various kinds of background checks and all that kind of stuff, and I acknowledge that, but I don't think that all of the mentors need to necessarily be bankers or someone like myself who teach at a university and stuff, because, as we know, the number of people who teach, in terms of black men or black people in general who teach on colleges and university is small. There are all of these other people ...
- Dr. K.E. Harris:** And there are other models for what exists in the community, right?
- Dr. W. Johnson:** That's right, right. That people who are engaged in legitimate work, that are doing things in their neighborhoods that often get overlooked if you're not one of the say the Greek letter organizations kind of mentoring programs or the 100 Black Men or something like that, so there is a pool of men that we're even not including, and then there are all these others that could be mentors even if it's nothing more than just sharing with them in



certain ways their experience and some instances it's being incarcerated when they have made mistakes, and they have young people kind of navigate that.

Dr. W. Johnson: I think that fathers, as a form of family-based and community-based social capital, are severely overlooked in terms of it, so when you talk about violence, dads could be really helpful with their children and, with a study that I'm doing right now, specifically with their sons about having conversations, about say how to navigate the neighborhood to avoid getting caught up in situations with people who are engaged in certain kinds of violent activity, to talk to them about how not to get engaged in risky health behaviors like starting to smoke when they're a youth or engaging with alcohol or drugs and things of that sort, by just kind of talking about their own experiences when they were growing up, and giving them ideas and strategies about this, just the whole community.

Dr. W. Johnson: There's a body of research that is not huge but is significant enough to recognize the ways in which mothers are often viewed as important forms of family communication with their children, in ways that we don't see that for fathers, and so in these two studies, what we're doing, they're studies where there are father-son dyads, and in one study, the fathers are all non-resident dads, and these are pre-adolescent sons, eight to 12. Then in the other study, the fathers, they can be resident or non-resident, or they could just be father figures, but the sons are 13 to 20. In the second study, they're 13 to 20 because this study is focused on communication around safety. Rarely do kids between eight and 12 are navigating the streets by themselves in the way that once you turn about 13 or 14 when you're adolescents, you need that kind of stuff.

Dr. W. Johnson: But opportunities for fathers to be able to even have those kinds of conversations with their children, and particularly for non-resident dads, is a way in which we are losing out and missing out on very valuable kind of opportunities. The communication doesn't necessarily have to be a one-on-one like you and I are having. It could be on social media. It could be a variety of different ways, but I think you're right, I think there are very specific ways in which dads could be involved. In the same way that we often talk about having sport leagues with police officers and stuff, we bring everybody in to engage except the people who are often responsible for them kids being there in the first place.



Dr. K.E. Harris: The other piece of that is that sustaining that effect over time, because the father is more likely than a mentor to be around for the next 10 years, right?

Dr. W. Johnson: That's right, and can follow the evolution of the kids in a way that someone else who's relationship is more structured would not be able to do it.

Dr. K.E. Harris: Right, right. Dr. Johnson, I want to thank you for your time. This interview has been rich and full of important insights, and I think what's going to happen is this is probably enough for three newsletters. But that said, we'll figure that out. But I want to thank you for your time.

Dr. W. Johnson: You can feel that I definitely need to cut some of it, but a part of the richness of this has been that you're a great interlocutor.

Dr. K.E. Harris: I appreciate that.

Dr. W. Johnson: That helps a lot in order to get the kind of richness that you want.

Dr. K.E. Harris: I appreciate it. You're kind, you're kind.