

“PULL YOURSELF UP BY YOUR BOOTSTRAPS” AN AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: In the United States an individual success does not equate a heightened level of effort on their part, nor is success more likely if one works harder. In short, we do not exist in a meritocracy, but we like to pretend we do. Phrases such as “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” are one such example of this pervasive and damaging mentality. These idioms are antiquated manifestations of systemic oppression primarily directed at communities of color. This ideology is damaging due to the fact that it masks itself as harmless encouragement, when in actuality it perpetuates systems of victim blaming, racial and gendered stereotypes and invalidates the lived experience of those effected by these systems of oppression. The ideology of “working harder” as expressed within the bootstrap mentality is an invalid solution for overcoming systematic adversity in the United States due to poverty’s cyclical nature, a discrepancy in quality of and access to education, and the existence as well as impact of racial and gender wage gaps.

Introduction

“Pull yourself up by your bootstraps!”, “All you have to do is put yourself out there!”, “If you just work hard enough you can achieve anything!” These American idioms all express the same ideology, that we exist in a meritocracy. A meritocracy is a society that operates in a vacuum void of systematic oppression. If anyone, anywhere merely works hard enough the seemingly cemented hardships of poverty, discrimination, illness, etc. become malleable and one can craft the life they wish. This is not our reality. Systematic oppression not only exists, but resoundingly impacts the lives of countless minoritized individuals. For these individuals, “working harder” is not a viable solution and the meritocracy is a hollow savior. The data to debunk this mythology exists, but we must first connect the dots of institutionalized oppression.

The validity of a meritocracy is founded in the assumption that we are all either one, on an even playing field from birth, or two, that equity can be attained once one reaches an age of independence from their adolescent socioeconomic situation. These are invalid

assumptions for dealing with systematic adversity in the United States due to poverty’s cyclical nature, a discrepancy in quality of and access to education, and finally the existence as well as impact of racial and gender wage gaps.

Unlivable Sums

In order to understand why the bootstrap mentality is damaging, it is critical that we pinpoint who it is damaging. Generally, this phrase is directed at three main demographics: those in poverty, people of color and women, especially women of color. Individuals are additionally targeted by this mentality if they exist in more than one of the aforementioned categories. A significant amount of statistical evidence demonstrates that merely putting more effort in is not a viable solution for raising oneself out of poverty or overcoming racial and gender-based barriers.

The United States Census Bureau determines whether or not one is “impoverished”. An individual is considered in poverty if “a family’s total income is less than the family’s threshold...” (United States Census Bureau, 2019). A “poverty threshold” is the minimum amount the Census Bureau deems necessary

for an individual to provide oneself with basic necessities annually. The Census Bureau uses the poverty threshold as a “statistical yardstick”, meant to generally reflect a family’s yearly economic needs. (United States Census Bureau, 2019.) According to the University of Michigan’s article *Poverty in the U.S.*, the 2018 poverty threshold for a single individual under 65 years of age was \$13,064 per year. This sum is meant to cover all of the individual’s needs i.e. housing, utilities, food, water, transportation, clothing, health care, education, etc. Everything one needs within the span of a year is not to exceed \$13,064. In order to determine whether or not one is impoverished, the Census Bureau subtracts this number from the individual’s income.

It is important to note that the amount of income the Census Bureau uses for this calculation is the pre-tax total. Meaning the amount of money one actually receives after federal and state income tax is taken is not the number they are using to calculate poverty thresholds. If the sum is any amount over their calculated threshold, the individual is not considered in poverty. This categorization does limit one’s options for governmental financial assistance.

Poverty thresholds nominally increase as children or adults are added to households. The 2019 Census Bureau poverty threshold for a two-person household is a combined pre-tax income of \$17,120. For a two-person household with one child ranging anywhere from 0-18 years of age the poverty threshold only increases by \$502, to a combined annual income of \$17,622. (United States Census Bureau, 2020.) Additionally, the Census Bureau does not include every U.S. citizen in their poverty census. On their website they state, “Poverty status cannot be determined for people in: Institutional group quarters (such as prisons or nursing homes), college dormitories, military barracks, living situations without conventional housing ...[and] foster children... under age 15.” (United States Census Bureau, 2019.)

Thus, the vast majority of the homeless population is not counted in the U.S. poverty census. Nor are those living on college and university campuses, foster children under the age of 15, or those in institutionally controlled housing such as nursing homes, hospitalized individuals, prisons, etc. This is exceptionally problematic due to the fact that those who occupy the lowest level of economic standing in this country are not being counted. Therefore, all data concerning the economic health of U.S. citizens is invalid because we are not counting those who suffer the most.

When examining the demographics of individuals who do meet the Census Bureau’s criteria for poverty, we also see patterns. According to the University of Michigan, “poverty rates for Black and Hispanic people greatly exceed the national average. In 2018, 22.5% of Black people and 18.8% of Hispanic people were poor... and 10.8% of Asian people.” (University of Michigan, 2020.) While Black and Hispanic poverty demographics were given on the U.S. Census Bureau website, there was no quotable information to be found regarding current percentages of Native American poverty proportions. However, an article published by Pew Research Centers in 2014 states that “Native Americans have a higher poverty and unemployment rate when compared with the national average... About one-in-four American Indians and Alaska Natives were living in poverty in 2012” (Krogstad, 2014). This would make Native Americans the most impoverished demographic in the United States, with a poverty rate of 25%. However, this cannot be confirmed, as their data is not given.

It is inescapably clear that the monetary sums that qualify for the U.S. poverty level are unlivable. One needs significantly more money when adding a child to their household, considerably more than the \$502/year that the Census Bureau deems necessary. It is evident that if a two-person household is only collecting a yearly pre-tax income anywhere in the

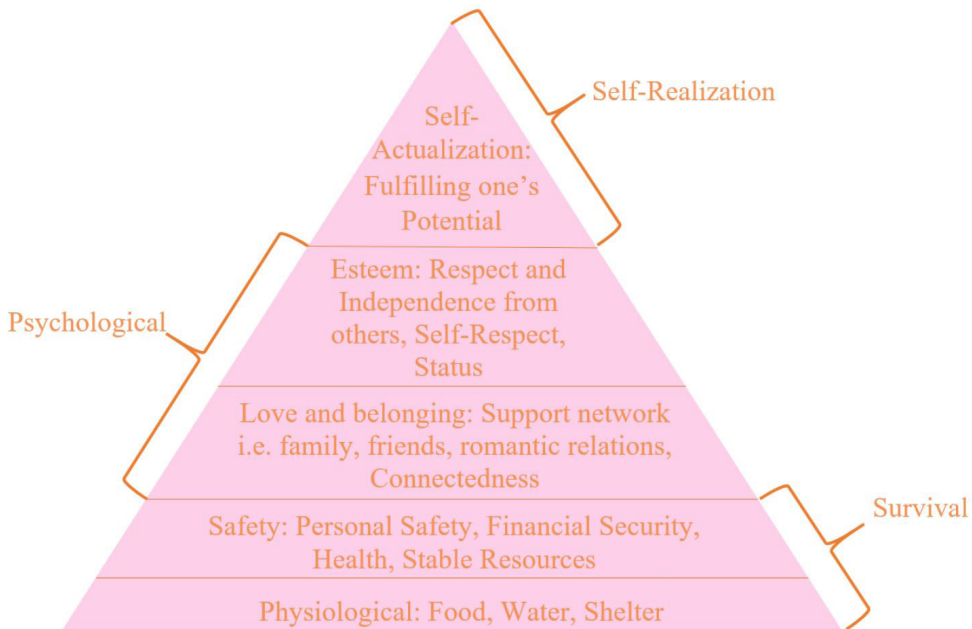
neighborhood of \$17,120, they are struggling. (United States Census Bureau, 2019). Instead of collecting data and examining the actual reasons for these issues continue to exist, society chooses to blame the victim. “They’re just lazy.” “They don’t work hard enough.” “They’re just relying on government handouts.” Those in poverty are frequently accosted with these ignorant remarks who according to the data, are predominantly people of color. This is not to say that all people of color are poor. However, according to the data if one is struggling with poverty, they are more likely to be of color than white. This level of subjugation did not just happen overnight but has been enforced and perpetuated for centuries due to the system’s cyclical nature.

Unveiling Cyclical Poverty

Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, or rather “working harder” is not a viable or even relevant solution for those struggling with poverty. Given the unlivable sums previously stated we can deduce that an individual receiving nominal wages has no financial autonomy. Thus, they do not possess the financial security

that would allow them to leave said positions in order to pursue upward mobility in society. When one is struggling to secure food, shelter, or other basic necessities for themselves as well as their dependents, walking away from a source of income is not an option. This theory is further supported by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.

In 1943 the American psychologist Abraham Maslow published a paper called “A theory of Human Motivation”. In the paper he defined the five major levels of human need, where each level must be satisfied and built upon if one is to optimally move to the next (Maslow, 1943). The first two levels outline physiological necessities including food, water, shelter, and security. Those who live in poverty endeavor to provide these resources for themselves as well as their dependents with inadequate funds. As a manifestation of survival instincts, they exert themselves exceptionally hard to secure a consistent source of income. This fact flies in the face of the Bootstrap mentality. Teetering on the brink of stability as well as survival draws one into cyclical poverty, regardless of how hard they are working.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Image: Gabrielle Fox.

Knowledge is Power

Moving forward with the understanding that poverty is cyclical we are forced to question, what strategies do proponents of the Bootstrap mentality cite as making such adversities malleable? Primarily, education and money are referenced as solutions. It is commonly said that knowledge has the power to liberate. Whether that be a financial, mental, or emotional liberation remains to be seen. However, in terms of finances, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that those with less than a high school diploma have a median earnings estimate of \$520/week. While those with at least a bachelor's degree have a median earnings estimate of \$1,173/week (Torpey, 2018).

While the evidence does support the conclusion that higher education levels lead to higher income amounts, there is data to also demonstrate a discrepancy in quality of and access to education in the United States. Realistically, how accessible is higher education for those struggling with adversity? Furthermore, does the K-12 education system equally and equitably prepare each individual for higher education opportunities?

In order to examine the quality of education U.S. institutions provide their students, it is worth knowing how much funding they are able to spend on their students, staff, and materials in the first place. Public schools are funded through three main avenues: federal, state, and local funding. According to an article published by NPR in 2016, public school funding on average is 45% local money, 45% state and 10% federal (Turner, 2016). Essentially the federal government contributes only 10 cents of every dollar that public schools receive. In turn, state funding relies heavily on their sales and income tax. The discrepancy of funding and further the discrepancy in quality of education, comes into play with the amount gathered by the local governments, which are reliant upon property taxes. This amount accounts for nearly half of a school's funding.

“The problem with a school-funding system that relies so heavily on local property taxes is straightforward: Property values vary a lot from neighborhood to neighborhood, district to district. And with them, tax revenues” (Turner, 2016). Thus, if one lives in a low-income neighborhood, their district schools are also low-income. Schools such as these have significantly less ability to provide quality materials, update buildings, and provide livable wages for teachers and staff, etc. based on the amount of funding received. Again, we are forced to consider Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. These institutions are meant to educate students, but they too must prioritize necessities in order to keep themselves afloat. The nominal funding they receive must be first put towards their bills, teachers, and staff. They must provide food for students as well as educational materials. Given that nearly half of their funding comes from the surrounding neighborhood, it becomes obvious that this amount is not nearly enough. Poverty is cyclical and institutions that reside within these neighborhoods are no exception to their monetary struggle.

The ability of public schools to successfully prepare their students for higher education, as well as provide quality fundamental knowledge is reliant upon the funding they receive. Can we realistically expect one to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, when the quality of primary education they receive has not given them the basic tools required to succeed? Further, with the cost of higher education steadily growing, how is one supposed to accommodate a massive financial undertaking, when their access to basic necessities is insecure? Where is this money supposed to come from when it is obviously not coming from the federal government, and local governments have nothing more to give? The notion of liberating oneself through education only holds true for those who receive the proper resources and information in order to attain this goal.

Wage Gap

Attaining the monetary resources to lift oneself out of adversity is the last pillar of the Bootstrap myth and perhaps, the farthest out of reach. First, let's suspend reality and pretend an individual in a low-income neighborhood received a primary school education that prepared them for college and beyond. Second, this individual was given the financial advice and tools required to navigate the financial aid system that made the four+ year endeavor moderately feasible. Third, they will need to receive their degree and find stable employment post-graduation. Even if all these hoops are jumped through, the individual will still find themselves in a world where minoritized groups do not earn the same amount of money as white men do in the workplace.

Pew Research Center published an analysis of income levels in 2016 called Racial, gender wage gaps persist in U.S. despite some progress. This article analyzes the 2015 median hourly wage data given by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Pew found a discrepancy of wages earned based off of race as well as gender in comparison to white men. In descending order:

1. "Asian women earned...87 cents per dollar."
2. "White women earned 82 cents per dollar."
3. "Black men earned 73 cents for per dollar."
4. "Hispanic men earned 69 cents per dollar."
5. "Black women earned 65 cents per dollar."
6. "Hispanic women earned 58 cents per dollar."

It is also notable that there has been "no progress in narrowing the wage gap...[for] Black and Hispanic men since 1980." (Patten, 2016.)

While these particular wage discrepancies can partly be attributed to level of education, we still find racial and gendered wage gaps among college educated persons. This wage discrepancy is as follows: "Black and Hispanic men earn 80%... White and Asian women earn 80%... [and] Black and Hispanic women earn

70%..."of what similarly educated white men earn.(Patten, 2016.)

Across race and gender differences there is a consistent underpaying of minoritized people. The fact that the aforementioned studies found little to no progress in decades is exceptionally troubling. It speaks to the level of effort society, institutions, and the government as a whole have invested in this issue. We know that this monetary disparity considerably and generationally impacts the lives of those who are discriminated against. Yet, society appears to be uninvested in creating and enforcing permanent solutions, for this struggle which spans centuries.

Conclusion

How can we realistically expect minoritized groups to lift themselves out of adversity, when even with the attainment of the Bootstrap myth's "solutions", monetary resources are still not equitably distributed? The answer is we cannot. Society has repeatedly and consistently placed institutionalized walls in front of minoritized groups, which ensure a pattern of hardship. A pattern which those in power have little intention of supplying aid to overcome, other than to spout meaningless and frankly inflammatory idioms such as "pull yourself up by your bootstraps." What was not anticipated however, was that these adversities would force minoritized groups to develop an unparalleled level of resiliency. We have made it our mission to pull ourselves out of darkness, as no one else will. It has been our responsibility to cultivate this resiliency, generation after generation for survival. The survival of our people, our voices, our stories, and our inner strength is what will ultimately and has already created change. A professor of mine once said, it is the job of those who benefit from a system of oppression to dismantle it. It is then our job, to make it inescapably clear that the system was broken to begin with.

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