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Posted Date: 2 June 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202506.0003.v1

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Article

# “My Future”: A Qualitative Examination of Hope in the Lives of Black Emerging Adults

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**Abstract:** The presence of hope significantly influences how youth interpret possibilities and commit to future-oriented action. This qualitative study investigates how fifteen Black emerging adults, ages eighteen to twenty-five, living in a major urban city on the East Coast, describe their aspirations, goal-setting strategies, and responses to personal and structural challenges. Participants were categorized as connected or disconnected based on their engagement in school, work, or training programs. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis of interviews, the research identified key differences in agency, emotional orientation, and access to guidance between the two groups. Connected participants often described clear, structured goals supported by networks of mentorship and opportunity. Disconnected participants expressed meaningful hope, yet described fewer supports and greater uncertainty in achieving their goals. These findings highlight how consistent exposure to guidance and structured environments strengthens future orientation and internal motivation. These results deepen our understanding of how young people experience hope across diverse contexts and show that mentorship, intentional goal setting, and greater access to opportunity play a vital role in sustaining hopeful thinking during the transition to adulthood.

**Keywords:** emerging adulthood; hope Theory; black youth; goal setting; mentorship; urban education

## 1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood marks a meaningful and often challenging passage between adolescence and full adulthood, a season in which young people begin to shape their identities, explore professional possibilities, and establish greater independence (Arnett, 2000). This period, typically spanning the ages of eighteen to twenty-five, carries promise and vulnerability. Emerging adults (EAs) must navigate personal agency, access to resources, and varying levels of support from external systems (Mulvihill et al., 2021). While some benefit from structured opportunities that offer clarity and direction, others face complex social and economic barriers that limit their ability to set and reach meaningful long-term goals (Booker, Brakke, and Pierre, 2022; Berzin et al., 2009).

Urban communities often amplify these contrasts, as opportunity and hardship frequently operate in close proximity. While cities provide access to educational programs, career development, and social support, systems and policies often fail to distribute that access evenly. Some young people benefit from systems that accelerate their progress, while others face persistent structural barriers that limit mobility and reinforce disadvantage (Fike and Mattis, 2023; McCoy and Bowen, 2014). Understanding how young people in these environments cultivate hope, set meaningful goals, and build resilience is essential for designing more inclusive and supportive pathways into adulthood.

This study centers the experiences of Black EAs, acknowledging that the lasting impact of historical exclusion and systemic inequity partly shapes their lives. Disparities in education, employment access, housing, and neighborhood investment continue to influence their opportunities and life outcomes (Goodwill and Hope, 2024; Motley et al., 2024). Yet in the face of these structural challenges, Black EAs consistently demonstrate aspiration, adaptability, and determination. Many

rely on cultural strength, personal motivation, and community support to envision and pursue meaningful futures (Booker and Johnson, 2024). Their experiences offer valuable insight into how formal systems and broader societal structures both support and constrain young people during this critical stage of development.

The present study takes place in a major metropolitan city along the East Coast, known for its historically rooted Black communities. Within this setting, opportunity and inequality are both visible and consequential. Neighborhoods with strong institutional ties and abundant resources stand in sharp contrast to others marked by underfunded schools, chronic disinvestment, and high unemployment. For Black EAs in these environments, pursuing long-term goals often means balancing future aspirations with present-day needs, navigating limited resources with courage and tenacity (Holbrook et al., 2024; McCoy and Bowen, 2014).

One critical factor in this process is connection to formal systems such as school, job training, or employment. EAs engaged in such systems often experience greater access to skill development, mentorship, and financial stability (Boeder et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2017). These connections often foster a sense of direction and build confidence as young people work toward long-term goals. Conversely, individuals without access to structured support frequently face instability, isolation, and greater uncertainty about their future (Brown, 2021; Palmer and Connolly, 2023). These contrasting experiences significantly shape young adults' development of hope and plan for what lies ahead.

Understanding the experiences of Black EAs requires close attention to both the shared and distinct realities faced by connected and disconnected individuals. This study centers their voices, exploring how they define their goals, identify barriers, and reflect on the influences that support or hinder their growth. The data reveal that while both groups express hope, their ability to convert that hope into actionable steps differs significantly. These differences highlight how varying levels of opportunity, support, and motivation shape the transition to adulthood (Dixon and Gentzis, 2021; Juvonen, 2014).

Structural inequality and unequal access to opportunity further intensify these dynamics. Many Black EAs navigate economic hardship, attend schools with inadequate resources, and contend with bias in workplace settings. Despite these persistent challenges, many continue to push forward, sustained by personal determination and a belief in a better future (Booker, Brakke, and Pierre, 2022; Holbrook et al., 2024).

### *1.1. Theoretical Framework*

Hope Theory, developed by C. R. Snyder, offers a valuable lens through which to examine how individuals define, pursue, and stay committed to their goals. The theory identifies three key elements: goal thinking, which involves setting meaningful objectives; pathway thinking, which refers to planning strategies to achieve those objectives; and agency thinking, which reflects the energy and confidence needed to act on those plans (Snyder, 2002). Together, these components form a framework for understanding how people create a sense of purpose and possibility, especially in the face of challenge (Snyder, 1991).

Hope Theory and Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) both contribute to our understanding of how Black EAs pursue success. While Hope Theory emphasizes the mental and emotional tools people use to define and pursue goals, Self Determination Theory focuses on the importance of fulfilling basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and connection. Hope Theory is particularly useful for exploring how individuals navigate uncertainty and adversity, making it especially relevant for this study's focus on future planning in contexts marked by systemic inequity.

Social Capital Theory adds another layer of understanding. As Neves and colleagues (2018) described, social capital refers to the value found in relationships and networks that provide access to support, information, and opportunity. For connected EAs, strong relationships with mentors, teachers, and employers can expand access to professional development and reinforce belief in personal potential (Greco et al., 2020). For disconnected peers, however, limited access to these

relationships can heighten feelings of disconnection and reduce exposure to models of success (Booker, Brakke, and Pierre, 2022; Melkman and Sulimani Aidan, 2025).

Resilience Theory further strengthens the study's conceptual foundation by emphasizing the ability to maintain well-being and forward movement despite adversity (Masten, 2014). Rather than being an innate trait, resilience develops through lived experiences, supportive relationships, and cultural strengths that shape how individuals respond to challenge (Thomas, Namntu, and Ebert, 2022). For connected EAs, participation in structured environments such as schools, training programs, or workplaces often fosters this capacity by providing encouragement and tangible guidance. Disconnected individuals, however, may be required to rely more heavily on internal resolve and personal belief systems to persist.

This persistence often reflects a strong sense of tenacity, closely aligned with what scholars identify as John Henryism, a pattern of high-effort coping associated with striving under chronic stress (Volpe, Katsiaficas, and Neal, 2021). Among disconnected Black EAs, this mindset frequently surfaces as they work to overcome socioeconomic barriers without consistent access to formal programs or reliable external support. Although their perseverance is admirable, the prolonged emotional demands of sustained self-reliance can result in burnout, decreased well-being, and heightened vulnerability to psychological strain (Thomas, Namntu, and Ebert, 2022).

## 1.2. Study Rationale

Researchers have studied Hope Theory extensively, yet few have investigated how connection to formal systems, such as school or employment, influences hope processes among Black emerging adults. Most existing research overlooks how levels of structured engagement affect agency and pathways thinking. Many studies also fail to explore how the absence of consistent support can weaken or disrupt the development of hope.

This study directly addresses those gaps by examining the lived experiences of connected and disconnected Black EAs. It focuses on how their engagement, with educational, training, and work environments, or lack thereof, shapes their beliefs about the future and their ability to form clear, meaningful goals. These insights bring greater depth to current discussions about opportunity, motivation, and long-term achievement. Grounding the analysis in participants' reflections allows the study to reveal how social environments actively shape or restrict the development and sustainability of hope.

Two central questions guided this research:

- *How do Black EAs in an urban East Coast city describe their hopes for the future based on their connection status?*
- *What specific challenges or obstacles most impact their sense of hope and self-determination?*

Exploring how Black EAs experience hope contributes valuable insight to theoretical frameworks and practical applications. The findings deepen our understanding of how context shapes hope and highlight the importance of culturally grounded, equity-centered strategies that support young people as they navigate the complex transition into adulthood.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Researchers applied Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Clarke and Braun, 2016) to examine how young Black adults living in a major urban East Coast city describe their futures. Through in-depth interviews, participants shared their experiences in their own words, while a consistent structure ensured comparability across responses. The RTA approach, focusing on researcher reflexivity and iterative meaning making, guided the coding, categorization, and theme development process. The research team engaged closely with participant narratives to construct themes that reflected meaningful differences between connected and disconnected EAs. This process revealed distinct patterns in how hope, self-determination, and structural context influence how participants envision their futures (Booker et al., 2022; Napier, Slemple, and Vella Brodrick, 2024).



## 2.1. Participants

Fifteen emerging adults (EAs), all identifying as African American and residing in a major East Coast city, participated in the study. Ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five. The sample included eight connected participants (three women and five men) and seven disconnected participants (four women and three men). While the research team recorded gender identity, the analysis focused on connection status to better understand how access to structured environments, particularly schools, workplaces, and training programs, influences personal agency, opportunity awareness, and developmental outcomes (Boeder et al., 2021; Holbrook et al., 2024).

The sample size of fifteen reflects accepted guidelines for qualitative research using a phenomenological approach such as RTA. Braun and Clarke (2013, 2021) recommend small, purposeful samples, typically between six and twenty participants, when the goal is to produce rich, contextualized insights into lived experience. Participants in this study offered detailed and reflective narratives, allowing the research team to identify recurring patterns, reach thematic saturation, and explore distinctions between connected and disconnected groups with conceptual clarity.

## 2.2. Definitions

The research team categorized participants as connected or disconnected based on responses to two screening questions asked during intake:

- *Are you currently enrolled in school or a training program? (yes or no)*
- *Are you currently employed? (yes or no)*

Participants who answered yes to either question were classified as connected, reflecting active engagement in structured systems such as education, training, or employment. Those who answered no to both were classified as disconnected. The interviewer explained these criteria during intake and provided clarification when needed. Follow-up interview questions explored participants' educational background, work history, and short-term goals. Their responses aligned with their initial classification and added context to their level of engagement with formal systems of support.

These definitions align with widely recognized frameworks in youth development and workforce research. The Aspen Institute (Lewis, 2022) and Measure of America (Belfield et al., 2012) define disconnected youth as individuals between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five who are not enrolled in school and not employed. This framework ensured consistency in classification and supported meaningful comparisons across levels of structured engagement.

## 2.3. Procedure

The recruitment process included several channels: a preliminary online survey, word of mouth, and participant referrals. Outreach efforts through schools, churches, community organizations, and job readiness programs expanded access but proved less effective in reaching disconnected participants. Peer referrals played a particularly important role. Connected participants who trusted the study's purpose referred selected friends, peers, and disconnected family members. These referrals enhanced credibility and enabled participation from individuals who might otherwise remain unreachable through traditional outreach methods (Lee et al., 2020; Booker, Brakke, and Pierre, 2022).

Participants began the study by completing a short online survey, assessing how participants defined and pursued future goals and included items measuring basic hope levels and current connection status. The survey primarily functioned as a recruitment tool rather than a comprehensive data source. At the end of the survey, participants could volunteer for a follow-up interview by providing contact information (Braun et al., 2020). The interviewer did not use survey responses to shape the content of the interviews. Instead, each conversation followed an independent protocol developed to explore participants' lived experiences in greater depth.

Each participant completed both the survey and interview in full, providing complete and usable data. The recruitment process for connected EAs primarily relied on the structured online

survey. Disconnected participants entered the study through informal peer referrals. A single interviewer, a Black male researcher aged fifty to sixty and raised in the same city as the participants, conducted every interview. His shared cultural background fostered trust, improved relatability, and encouraged open, reflective dialogue. This culturally responsive approach strengthened rapport and deepened the quality of the narratives.

The interviewer followed a consistent and standardized interview protocol to maintain comparability across sessions (Conchas, Lin, Oseguera, and Drake, 2014; Pender, Hope, and Sondel, 2022). The study’s central focus on hope remained undisclosed during interviews, a deliberate choice that limited response bias and promoted authentic, unfiltered reflection (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Logistical considerations eventually prompted a shift from in-person to virtual sessions. This transition removed common barriers related to travel, scheduling, and comfort. Participants spoke from familiar environments, which helped them engage more openly and share their experiences with greater depth (Lewis, 2022).

The research team recorded each interview digitally, transcribed the responses word for word, and replaced personal identifiers with anonymous case numbers such as Case 1. These procedures protected participant confidentiality and preserved the richness of the data. The approach maintained ethical responsibility while supporting the collection of high-quality, contextually grounded insights.

2.4. Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

The research team practiced systematic reflexivity and upheld strong ethical standards to ensure transparency, credibility, and integrity throughout the study. The interviewer’s cultural and geographic alignment with participants supported rapport and cultural attunement across all sessions. Furthermore, the team conducted calibration sessions to address potential bias and maintained reflexive memos throughout the coding process. These memos documented analytic decisions, surfaced assumptions, and guided iterative refinements to the codebook. Collectively, these strategies enhanced thematic clarity and strengthened the trustworthiness of the analysis.

2.5. Data Analysis

2.5.1. Themes and Coding

The research team conducted thematic analysis using the principles of RTA. They identified eight core themes that captured how EAs conceptualize their futures. These themes emerged through a close examination of response patterns that appeared three or more times across interviews and reflected common ideas shared by connected and disconnected participants. The team aligned each theme with specific interview questions, revealing insights into future thinking, emotional responses, support systems, and perceived challenges. Every participant’s voice contributed to the coding process, and the team included all interview data in the final analysis. The coding process reached saturation when no new themes or subthemes emerged during the final stage. Table 1 presents the complete list of themes and codes.

Table 1. Theme Names and Coding.

FUTURE VISION	HOPEFULNESS
Aspirational	Accomplished Past Goals
Career-minded	Articulates Confidence
Certainty	Articulates Doubt
Entrepreneurial	Articulates External Hope
Family-oriented	Articulates Internal Hope
Goals-oriented	Articulates Tenacity
Optimistic	Due to External Motivators
Uncertainty	General Positive Outlook

	Generally Hopeful
<b>EMOTIONAL RESPONSE</b>	Has Opportunities/Resources
Accomplished	Has Support
Anxiety	Spiritually Connected
Anxious	
Contrasting Emotions	<b>CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS</b>
Excited	Age-related
Fearful	Articulates Multiple Challenges
Optimism	Articulates No Perceived Challenges
Readiness	Childcare-related
Tenacious	Education/Training
Trepidation	Financial
Unreadiness	Lack of Needed Resources
	Lack of Social Capital/Connections
<b>FOCUS AREA</b>	Limited Support to Overcome
Children/Family	Mental Health/Well-being
Decision-making	No Plan to Overcome Challenges
Education/Training/Certification	Self-imposed/Mindset/Thinking
Employment/Career	Time-related
Finances/Income	Transportation-related
General Success	Understands How to Overcome Challenges
Goal Completion	
Happiness	<b>SUPPORT SYSTEM</b>
Long-term Thinking	Community Support
Mental Health	Family/Friend
Perceived Responsibilities	Mentorship Support
Short-term Thinking	Multiple Supports
Unsure	No or Limited Support
	Spiritually Identified Support
<b>GOAL SETTING</b>	Stable Support System
"I Have Goals"	Unstable Support System
Changed-mindset Goals	Wants/Needs Support System
Educational/Training Goals	
Employment/Career Goals	<b>HOPE LEVEL INFLUENCES</b>
Family-oriented Goals	Friend Influence
Generally Unspecific Goals	Mentor Influence
Geographic-relocation Goals	Multiple Influences
Housing-attainment Goals	No or Limited Influence
Income/Finances/Savings Goals	Other Family-member Influences
Independent-living Goals	Parental Influence
Positivity/Happiness Goals	Self-initiated Influences
Specifically Articulated Goals	Singular Influence
Stability Goals	
Transportation Goals	
Unidentifiable Goals	

Two coders independently analyzed the transcripts and remained unaware of each participant's connection status during the initial round of analysis. They followed an iterative two-round process, beginning with generating open codes directly from the raw transcripts. During the second round, they refined these initial codes into more focused categories and organized them into emerging

themes. The team used qualitative data analysis software to manage transcripts, track codes, and document analytical memos.

The coders calculated Cohen's kappa to assess agreement, which produced a value exceeding 0.75, a level widely recognized as indicating substantial agreement (Cohen, 1960; Landis and Koch, 1977). When differences in interpretation emerged, the coders engaged in collaborative dialogue, reviewing transcript excerpts together and working through their reasoning until they reached consensus. This process enhanced interrater reliability and enriched overall thematic clarity and coherence within the dataset.

### 2.5.2. Team Training

The coding team participated in a series of calibration exercises prior to formal analysis. These sessions helped standardize code interpretation and ensure consistent application of criteria across transcripts. Throughout the coding process, coders engaged in reflexive memoing, documenting their reactions, questions, and early interpretations as they worked through each transcript. These memos served as a reflective record of analytical choices and helped surface possible sources of bias.

The research team paired memoing with regular discussions to examine assumptions and challenge potential interpretive blind spots. Team members remained attentive to how their personal backgrounds, expectations, and positionality could influence the construction of meaning throughout the analytic process. The team addressed potential bias by collaboratively reviewing early codes, comparing notes across multiple sessions, and implementing cross-checks across themes and participant groups. These intentional practices strengthened the trustworthiness of the analysis and ensured that all findings remained firmly grounded in participant data rather than shaped by researcher assumptions.

The first theme, Future Vision, stems from the question, *"Will you please describe how you see your future over the next five years in one or two sentences?"* Responses clustered around Certainty, Aspirational, Career-minded, Uncertainty, and Entrepreneurial, revealing varied clarity and ambition. The second theme, emotional response, focused on how thinking about the future made participants feel, with common codes including readiness, excitement, optimism, anxiety, trepidation, and unreadiness. These emotions provided insight into participants' mental and emotional orientation toward future planning.

Participants reflected on the areas they think about most when considering their future and the reasons behind those priorities. This dimension, captured in the Focus Areas theme, included codes such as Long-term Thinking, Goal Completion, Perceived Responsibilities, and Finances or Income, all pointing to the practical considerations shaping their planning. At the same time, responses referencing Children or Family and Education or Training or Certification revealed relational and developmental goals that carry deep personal significance. The Goal Setting theme expanded on these insights by exploring whether participants had established specific goals. Codes such as Specifically Articulated Goals, Educational Goals, Family-oriented Goals, and Independent Living Goals illustrated a range of goal clarity and intentionality across the sample.

The analysis also examined Hopefulness, exploring whether participants felt hopeful and why. Codes such as Articulates Internal Hope, Confidence, Tenacity, and External Hope demonstrated different sources of motivation and belief in the future. Challenges and Barriers explored perceived obstacles to goal achievement, with codes ranging from Self-imposed Mindset and Mental Health to Limited Support and No Plan to Overcome Challenges, illustrating divergent capacities to manage adversity.

The final themes, Support System and Hope Influences, provided additional insight into how participants experience guidance, encouragement, and motivation. Participants described a wide range of support, from limited or inconsistent assistance to strong, stable networks. Codes such as No or Limited Support, Stable Support System, and Multiple Supports captured these differences in relational stability. When discussing what influences their sense of hope, participants pointed to various sources, including mentors, friends, parents, and personal motivation, reflected in codes like



Mentor Influence, Self Initiated Influence, Friend Influence, and Parental Influence. These themes offer a deeper understanding of how EAs envision and pursue their goals, revealing important distinctions between connected and disconnected individuals regarding emotional readiness, clarity of direction, and access to supportive relationships.

2.5.3. Silhouette Analysis

Silhouette analysis quantitatively evaluated and validated thematic clusters derived from the coded qualitative responses. This method assessed how individual codes fit within broader groupings, revealing participant responses' cohesion and structural integrity. Unlike frequency analysis, which simply counts how often a theme appears, this approach measures alignment within clusters, ensuring patterns are observed and statistically verified. Such analytical rigor is especially valuable in social science research, where capturing human experience's complexity requires interpretive depth and empirical validation (García et al., 2020).

Each coded item received a score ranging from -1.0 to +1.0, indicating the degree to which it aligned with its cluster. Scores near +1.0 reflect a strong fit, scores around 0 suggest ambiguity, and negative scores imply misalignment. Averaged scores produced cluster scores, reflecting the overall cohesiveness of each thematic group. All codes were analyzed in their original form, preserving the authenticity and nuance of participant narratives. This analytical process quantified qualitative data, confirming each cluster's conceptual soundness, empirical reliability, and effectively distinguishing well-aligned themes from loosely connected ideas.

The analysis revealed four distinct clusters that reflected thematic consistency among connected and disconnected EAs (Tables 2 and 3). These groupings emerged organically from the data and highlighted meaningful differences in how each group described their experiences and aspirations. This structure balanced diversity and interpretability, revealing distinct patterns in goal articulation, support systems, and expressions of hope or uncertainty. Among connected participants, clusters included Goal Oriented and Hopeful Thinkers, Navigating Uncertainty with Positivity, Resource-Constrained Strivers, and Strongly Supported Goal Seekers. Disconnected participants formed clusters titled Family Influenced Yet Unready, Struggling to Define Hope and Agency, Externalized Hope with Emotional Strain, and Emerging Positive Outlooks with Support. These names reflect thematic tendencies and behavioral patterns within each group and serve as conceptual anchors for interpreting findings.

Table 2. Connected EA Silhouette Analysis: Four Clusters.

	Item	Cluster	Silhouette	Score
C1	Income/Finances/Savings Goals	1	0.545	0.269
	Generally Hopeful	1	0.432	
	Readiness	1	0.432	
	"I Have Goals"	1	0.432	
	Multiple Influences	1	0.381	
	Understands How to Overcome Challenges	1	0.381	
	Aspirational	1	0.361	
	Long-term Thinking	1	0.356	
	Articulates Internal Hope	1	0.347	
	Excited	1	0.313	
	Self-imposed/Mindset/Thinking	1	0.313	
	Self-initiated Influences	1	0.295	

	Optimism	1	0.278	
	No or Limited Support	1	0.270	
	Unstable Support System	1	0.270	
	Wants/Needs Support System	1	0.270	
	General Positive Outlook	1	0.263	
	Perceived Responsibilities	1	0.263	
	Specifically Articulated Goals	1	0.251	
	Mentor Influence	1	0.132	
	Articulates Confidence	1	0.095	
	Articulates Tenacity	1	0.095	
	Certainty	1	0.047	
	Career-minded	1	0.036	
	Educational/Training Goals	1	-0.121	
C2	Uncertainty	2	0.589	0.340
	Mental Health/Well-being	2	0.414	
	Positivity/Happiness Goals	2	0.414	
	Other Family-member Influences	2	0.400	
	Goal Completion	2	0.377	
	Children/Family	2	0.321	
	Changed-mindset Goals	2	0.222	
	Generally-unspecific Goals	2	-0.019	
C3	Limited Support to Overcome	3	0.513	0.499
	Finances/Income	3	0.485	
C4	Community Support	4	0.723	0.643
	Multiple Supports	4	0.723	
	Articulates Multiple Challenges	4	0.485	

Table 3. Disconnected EA Silhouette Analysis: Four Clusters.

	Item	Cluster	Silhouette	Score
C1	Parental Influence	1	0.646	0.331
	Articulates Multiple Challenges	1	0.608	
	Trepidation	1	0.608	
	Family-oriented Goals	1	0.493	
	Generally Hopeful	1	0.472	
	Family/Friend	1	0.457	
	Stable Support System	1	0.457	
	Housing-attainment Goals	1	0.443	
	Independent-living Goals	1	0.443	
	Singular Influence	1	0.387	
	Unreadiness	1	0.259	
	Generally-unspecific Goals	1	0.241	

	Income/Finances/Savings Goals	1	0.146	
	"I Have Goals"	1	0.144	
	No or Limited Support	1	-0.167	
	Specifically Articulated Goals	1	-0.339	
C2	Articulates No Perceived Challenges	2	0.549	0.344
	Optimism	2	0.549	
	Unsure	2	0.437	
	No Plan to Overcome Challenges	2	0.373	
	Articulates Internal Hope	2	0.348	
	Other Family-member Influences	2	0.341	
	Articulates Tenacity	2	0.263	
	Unstable Support System	2	0.263	
	Friend Influence	2	-0.025	
C3	Articulates External Hope	3	0.417	0.392
	Anxiety	3	0.367	
C4	General Positive Outlook	4	0.419	0.376
	Mentor Influence	4	0.333	

3. Results

Eight central themes emerged, each offering insight into how participants conceptualized their experiences, goals, and sources of hope. The research team carefully selected each theme label to reflect the conceptual depth of participant responses and capture the unique cognitive and emotional framing expressed by connected and disconnected EAs. Table 4 outlines each theme’s definitions and the rationale behind their names. The team confirmed patterns of similarity and difference using silhouette analysis, which organized responses based on alignment and coherence. The research team assigned each cluster label after closely examining the dominant characteristics within participant narratives. They considered how often each theme appeared, how clearly participants expressed their ideas, and the emotional tone in their responses.

The following section presents the thematic findings, with each theme beginning with a brief definition and followed by an exemplar quote. These elements enhance conceptual clarity and offer direct insight into how participants described their experiences, challenges, and sources of hope in their own words.

Table 4. Theme Definitions and Naming Rationale.

Theme Name	Definition / Conceptual Boundaries	Reason for Label
Future Vision	How participants see their futures over the next five years, including clarity, direction, and ambition.	Highlights forward-thinking and planning mindset.
Emotional Response	Emotional outlook on the future, including confidence, anxiety, and readiness.	Emphasizes how emotions shape future orientation.

Focus Areas	Main priorities when thinking about the future (career, finances, family, education).	Reflects key life domains guiding attention and decision making.
Goal Setting	Specificity and structure in setting and pursuing goals.	Captures differences between strategic goals and broad aspirations.
Hopefulness	Sources and stability of hope, both internal and external.	Reflects underlying psychological and relational motivators.
Challenges and Barriers	Internal and external obstacles to progress.	Highlights the layered nature of adversity that participants described.
Support Systems	Availability and consistency of relationships that offer guidance and encouragement.	Reflects the strength and reach of support networks.
Hope Influences	People or experiences that shape one's sense of hope and motivation.	Distinguishes the social and contextual roots of hope.

3.1. Future Vision: Clarity, Ambition, and Opportunity

Participant narratives revealed clear differences in how they envisioned their futures over the next five years. Both connected and disconnected individuals expressed a desire for growth and success. However, connected participants offered more vivid and concrete descriptions, often grounded in structured plans and supported by their involvement in school, job training, or employment settings. Their future outlooks reflected greater clarity and alignment with tangible opportunities available through formal systems.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "I plan to own a business—specifically a food business. I already have the concept and plan to attend a training program next year."*

In contrast, disconnected participants expressed similar ambition, but their vision was often general and less rooted in actionable steps. Their outlook tended to reflect external dependence and a sense of uncertainty about how their future might unfold.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I just want to be successful, whatever that looks like."*

Silhouette clusters reflected these patterns, dividing participants into those who used goal-oriented cognitive framing and those who projected hope without direction.

3.2. Emotional Response: Confidence, Uncertainty, and Planning

Participants' emotional tone toward their futures often aligned with their access to structured support. Connected participants expressed confidence and readiness, frequently referencing prior accomplishments and the stability of school or work environments.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "I feel ready for my future because I've already taken steps to make it happen. I have a plan, and I'm confident I can follow through."*

By contrast, disconnected participants conveyed emotional hesitation. Many responses reflected worry, confusion, or a lack of preparation, conveying feelings shaped by barriers that made future planning difficult.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "Thinking about my future makes me nervous because I don't know what's going to happen."*

Clustering showed a strong alignment between planning and positive emotion for connected youth and uncertainty and emotional discomfort for disconnected people.

### 3.3. Focus Areas: Structured Planning and Ambiguous Ambitions

Participants identified a range of focus areas, such as career, family, education, and finances, that shaped their thoughts about the future. Connected participants often organized these priorities into a cohesive life plan, drawing strength from established systems and meaningful relationships.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "In the next five years, I see myself somewhat well established in my career... more stable than I am now."*

While equally aspirational, disconnected participants often described broader hopes without clear plans. They desired improved circumstances but did not always articulate the steps needed to reach those goals.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I see myself as successful or starting to be successful."*

Thematic clusters distinguished between structured planning and more aspirational but less grounded thinking.

### 3.4. Goal Setting: Specific Plans vs. General Ambitions

Participants demonstrated varying levels of clarity when articulating their goals. Connected participants often described short- and long-term goals, outlining specific strategies for achieving them. Many linked their goals to training programs, professional certifications, or entrepreneurial projects that reflected purposeful planning and forward momentum.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "My short-term goal is to complete my certification, and my long-term goal is to own my own business. I have steps in place for both."*

In contrast, disconnected participants often defined their goals in broad or emotionally driven ways. Though hopeful, their plans were less defined, often shaped by financial instability or limited guidance.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I just want to be stable. I want to be doing something good with my life."*

Clusters revealed a divide between strategic thinking and reactive or generalized ambition.

### 3.5. Hopefulness: Self-Driven Determination vs. External Validation

Participants described hope as both a feeling and a strategy. Connected individuals internalized hope and rooted it in self-efficacy, often drawing from prior successes, structured engagement, and a strong belief in their abilities.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "I feel hopeful because I know I can achieve what I set out to do. I've already made progress, and I trust myself to keep going."*

Disconnected participants, however, more often credited external sources such as family and peers as the foundation of their hope. They drew strength from the encouragement they received from others, rather than relying on an internal sense of confidence to sustain their belief in the future.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I feel hopeful because I have people who believe in me."*

Silhouette analysis showed a clear distinction between the two groups. Connected participants consistently expressed hope rooted in personal agency and self-direction. In contrast, disconnected participants more often relied on encouragement from others, drawing hope from supportive relationships rather than internal motivation.

### 3.6. Challenges and Barriers: Access, Mindset, and Support

Both groups identified obstacles, but their framing of those barriers differed. Connected participants typically saw challenges as surmountable. They described a balance between personal persistence and available support systems.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "Most of the areas I want to work in, you have to attend school... So, I just take it day by day. If there's a will, there's a way."*



Disconnected participants often described compounded challenges, including limited guidance, financial pressure, and caregiving responsibilities. Their narratives illustrated the emotional weight of pursuing goals without consistent support.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "Childcare. Since I do have a child and I am only 19, I see a lot of things not happening because I do have a child. And I don't have a lot of help."*

Clusters divided participants by their access to resources and support level, revealing how structural inequality shaped their coping ability.

### 3.7. Support Systems: Stability and Scope of Influence

The reliability and diversity of support networks emerged as a powerful influence. **Connected participants** described multiple sources of encouragement (e.g., mentors, family, church, or school) who offered emotional and instrumental aid.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "I have an amazing support system. My mentors, family, and friends push me to stay on track."*

**Disconnected participants** often relied on a single individual or lacked consistent support altogether. Their reflections indicated how isolation or narrow support systems made future planning more difficult.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "I don't really have people to turn to when I need advice."*

Clusters reflected whether participants experienced broad, stable support or fragile, limited networks.

### 3.8. Hope Influences: Agency and External Drivers

Participants credited a range of individuals and circumstances for shaping their hope. **Connected participants** most often described mentors, personal growth, and formative experiences that helped them maintain confidence and momentum.

*Exemplar quote (connected): "My mom taught me that no matter what the situation may be or what is handed to me, if it is something I want, I've got to go for it and always have confidence in myself."*

**Disconnected participants**, by contrast, named role models or friends as aspirational figures but often lacked sustained mentorship or consistent guidance.

*Exemplar quote (disconnected): "My friend J\*\*a... seeing her makes me want to win, too."*

Clusters highlighted whether hope was shaped from within or modeled by observing others' achievements.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Key Findings

This study explored how connected and disconnected Black EAs in a major East Coast city described their hopes, goals, and support systems. Connection status shaped how participants envisioned their futures, the clarity of their plans, and the forms of support that helped sustain their motivation. Connected participants described future pathways supported by consistent guidance from formal environments such as schools, training programs, or workplaces. Their narratives reflected a sense of direction anchored in access to structured opportunities and adult mentors who reinforced progress. Disconnected participants, by contrast, often relied on encouragement from close relationships. Without access to these structured supports, their expressions of hope were more emotionally centered and less anchored in concrete planning.

The broader urban environment also played a critical role in shaping how participants approached their futures. Those engaged in formal learning or work settings described receiving steady support and access to growth opportunities aligned with Snyder's Hope Theory principles. Their accounts suggest that strong community frameworks can reinforce goal setting and help develop confidence and practical strategies. Disconnected participants frequently navigated areas

with fewer available resources and supports. Their reflections illustrated how hope can still emerge through personal determination, although it may be harder to sustain when clear pathways to progress remain out of reach.

#### *4.2. Theoretical Implications*

The observed differences in future planning reflect deeper self-belief disparities, access to structured opportunities, and exposure to environments that support long-term thinking. Participants who were more engaged in formal settings, such as school, training programs, or employment, showed stronger alignment with Hope Theory's core elements, including agency and the ability to identify clear pathways. Practical experiences with goal setting, steady progress, and measurable achievement shaped their confidence. In contrast, disconnected participants, while similarly aspirational, often lacked access to environments that could help them develop the skills and confidence needed to plan ahead. They described motivation but found it difficult to articulate how to turn intentions into action. These findings highlight the importance of interventions that foster inner resolve and provide consistent external support systems that guide and reinforce the pursuit of meaningful goals (Napier et al., 2024).

#### *4.3. Snyder's Hope Theory Integration*

Snyder's Hope Theory remains highly relevant when examining the lives of connected EAs. These participants consistently demonstrated both core components of the model-directed agency and clearly defined pathways. Their ability to make steady progress toward career, educational, or financial milestones reflects strong internal motivation and effective planning. Many described access to mentorship, guidance, and resources that helped transform aspirations into actionable steps, reinforcing the synergy between belief and opportunity.

Disconnected participants, however, brought important nuance to the model. While many expressed a clear sense of agency, their pathways often relied on relationships, informal encouragement, or general aspirations rather than structured support. Several spoke of role models or inspiring moments that sparked belief in the possibility of success, yet few described systems that sustained that hope over time. These insights suggest the need to broaden Hope Theory to account for context-specific sources of motivation and adaptive strategies that youth develop without consistent guidance (Booker et al., 2022; Scioli, 2023). Expanding the framework in this way can offer a more inclusive understanding of how hope functions in environments marked by inequality and uncertainty.

#### *4.4. Avoiding Circular Reasoning*

Rather than concluding that hopeful individuals simply expressed hope, the findings show how specific personal experiences, such as mentorship, career planning, and emotional readiness, actively shape how hope takes form in everyday life. Participants described hope not as a vague personality trait or automatic reaction to adversity, but as something they built through action, access, and affirmation. Connected participants developed self-trust through consistent achievement and reliable support systems. Disconnected participants described a more emotionally demanding process, often drawing hope from singular relationships or brief moments of encouragement. Their reflections highlight how the strength of hope depends on steady reinforcement and opportunities to translate belief into forward movement.

#### *4.5. Implications and Future Directions*

The findings of this study lead to three actionable recommendations:

1. **Develop multi-level mentoring ecosystems:** Because disconnected participants frequently identified one key person as their main support, programs should create intentional, multi-person networks to buffer against the instability of single-source encouragement. Structured

mentoring initiatives embedded in schools, community centers, and youth-serving organizations can offer more sustainable hope-building.

2. **Incorporate hope development into existing programs:** Educators, program leaders, and youth development professionals can strengthen impact by integrating hope-focused interventions into workforce training, reengagement programs, and secondary education. When practitioners emphasize goal setting, pathway mapping, and agency reflection, they help young adults build essential skills for navigating their futures. These exercises normalize forward thinking and provide practical tools that enable participants to activate and sustain hope, even in the face of significant challenges.
3. **Address structural access to opportunity:** Community and policy leaders must recognize that even the most motivated youth cannot achieve their goals in isolation. Investments in education, transportation, childcare, and mental health resources are critical. Hope flourishes not in isolation, but when individuals see how to move from idea to implementation with the support of reliable systems.

Practitioners and policymakers can support young people's progress more effectively by embedding Hope Theory into program design and adapting its framework to reflect diverse lived experiences. Participants in this study described hope as both a personal and social resource. They shaped it through reflection, shared it through relationships, and often stretched it in response to the challenges they faced in their environments. Urban Black EAs navigated systems that either reinforced or weakened their hope, depending on the support, access, and affirmation they received.

#### 4.6. Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study provides meaningful insight into how Black EAs envision their futures and engage with hope in settings such as schools, workplaces, and training programs. When considering the scope and relevance of these findings, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. The study drew from a sample of fifteen participants living in a single East Coast city. While this urban setting yielded rich and deeply contextualized narratives, the perspectives shared may not fully capture the experiences of EAs in other regions or within different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Future research that includes a more diverse participant base will strengthen the field's understanding of how hope operates across a wider spectrum of environments and lived experiences.

Second, although the study included both male and female voices, the analysis did not explore in depth how gender shaped participants' experiences. The analysis may have overlooked critical gender-based differences in access to opportunity, mentoring relationships, emotional expression, and coping strategies by focusing primarily on connection status. Prior research suggests that gender can significantly influence how young adults navigate social and economic systems, often shaping their sense of agency and approach to long-term planning (Correll, 2017). Future research should explore how gender intersects with connection status and other dimensions of identity to influence the development and sustainability of hope. Doing so will enrich our understanding of the unique pathways and pressures experienced across the gender spectrum.

Third, although the peer referral strategy successfully engaged several disconnected participants, it likely excluded those remaining most isolated. Individuals with no links to school, employment, or informal support networks likely did not participate, leaving critical perspectives underrepresented. Researchers could adopt more proactive outreach strategies to reach these voices, including direct partnerships with community organizations and on-the-ground engagement efforts that intentionally connect with young people furthest removed from structured care and support systems (Motley et al., 2024).

Another important limitation stems from the self-reported nature of the data. Participants offered thoughtful and reflective narratives, but their accounts may have reflected memory lapses, personal bias, or a desire to present themselves positively. The research team maintained confidentiality protocols and practiced ongoing reflexivity throughout the process; however, these

safeguards could not fully eliminate the influence of perception and social context on participant storytelling. Future studies can enhance credibility by incorporating mixed methods or longitudinal designs that triangulate interview narratives with observable behaviors, patterns of program engagement, or follow-up interviews over time (Booker and Johnson, 2024).

RTA provided a rigorous and adaptable framework for capturing meaning across participant responses. The research team promoted trustworthiness by calibrating coders, writing reflective memos, and holding regular peer debriefings to examine assumptions and align interpretations. These strategies supported consistency and reduced bias, yet subjectivity remains inherent in qualitative analysis. Future research could increase analytic rigor by inviting participants to respond to emerging themes and include additional coders to independently review transcripts (Nowell et al., 2017).

Although the interview protocol explicitly included a question about hope, the interviewer did not disclose that hope served as the central focus of the study. This approach helped minimize response bias and encouraged authentic dialogue. Because the interviewer did not ask participants to frame their answers through a theoretical lens, they grounded their reflections more in personal experience than abstract constructs. Researchers can build on this approach by combining open-ended interviews with validated instruments like the State Hope Scale. This mixed strategy would support a richer understanding of how individuals describe hope in their own words and how those expressions align with psychological models (Fonseca et al., 2019).

These limitations offer important considerations for future study design, yet they do not diminish the contributions of this research. The findings provide valuable insight into how Black EAs experience, express, and sustain hope in urban environments. They highlight the power of internal drive, the role of relational and structural support, and the importance of expanding opportunity frameworks. This study helps advance theoretical conversations and practical strategies to strengthen future orientation and long-term success.

#### *4.7. Future Research Directions*

Future research should explore how hope evolves over time and in response to meaningful interventions. Longitudinal studies offer an ideal method for tracing the relationship between hope, goal attainment, and overall well-being. Evaluating programs that intentionally apply principles from Hope Theory will provide critical evidence for how this framework functions in real-world settings, including community-based organizations, educational institutions, and policy environments.

Future studies should examine how geographic and environmental contexts shape how young people experience and express hope. Youth living in rural or suburban areas may face different challenges and draw on different supports than their urban peers, which could lead to distinct expressions of agency, motivation, and aspiration. Comparing experiences across regions can reveal how access to resources, community values, and local opportunities influence how EAs define their goals and navigate pathways toward them.

As research expands, scholars must also develop and validate culturally responsive models of hope. These models should account for structural racism, historical trauma, and intergenerational inequities that shape how young adults see themselves and relate to larger systems. Addressing these realities directly will move hope from a vague or abstract concept to a powerful equity, healing, and transformation framework. When researchers center context and culture, they create the foundation for programs and policies that help young adults imagine and build better futures.

## **5. Conclusion**

The emerging adults in this study offered compelling insights into hope, goal setting, and the role of supportive systems in shaping their futures. Their voices reflect a spectrum of experiences, from those who feel anchored by strong networks of encouragement to those striving to establish direction without structured guidance. Connected participants described their futures with clarity

and confidence, emphasizing the role of mentorship, family, and professional ties in reinforcing their ambitions. Many stressed the significance of structured planning and external reinforcement in sustaining motivation. Disconnected participants also expressed hope, but their narratives often reflected a more uncertain and fluid orientation toward the future. They described difficulty articulating concrete strategies and identifying consistent sources of support.

This pattern suggests a qualitative difference in how hope is experienced and expressed rather than a quantitative deficit. Disconnected EAs were not categorically less hopeful; their hope appeared more tentative, marked by ambivalence and a lack of structure. Their experiences illustrate how social and structural factors influence goal setting and problem solving during the transition to adulthood. These findings reinforce that while both groups aspire to progress, connected EAs benefit from a clearer roadmap, whereas disconnected EAs are often left to navigate uncertainty with limited scaffolding.

The study's findings reveal that connection is vital in equipping EAs with the tools necessary for long-term planning. Those with access to guidance and encouragement more frequently expressed confidence in their ability to move forward, drawing on past successes and external affirmation to sustain motivation (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005; Pender, Hope, & Sondel, 2022). Disconnected participants, though equally hopeful in spirit, more frequently described uncertainty, highlighting the challenges of transforming hopefulness into action when mentorship and structured guidance are lacking. Their perspectives affirm that hope alone is not always sufficient; it must be paired with access to support, concrete goal-setting, and sustained encouragement to facilitate meaningful progress (Schwartz et al., 2013).

These findings further affirm that exposure to opportunity and consistent encouragement enhances an individual's ability to set clear goals and work toward lasting stability. Several participants described a strong sense of self-direction, often attributing their progress to personal resilience and internal motivation. Others, however, reflected on the difficulty of sustaining momentum without reliable support or structured guidance. The contrast between these experiences underscores the critical role of mentorship, access to formal programs, and community-rooted resources in supporting EAs as they build pathways toward sustainable and fulfilling futures (Conchas, Lin, Oseguera, and Drake, 2014).

Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of hope in shaping EAs' ability to pursue meaningful goals. The findings reveal that hope, when supported by mentorship, strategic planning, and sustained encouragement, becomes a driving force for long-term success. By illuminating disparities in access to guidance and social capital, this study emphasizes the need to equip all EAs, regardless of connection status, with the resources required to transform hope into tangible progress. Understanding how hope sustains motivation and goal achievement offers valuable insight into fostering inclusive opportunities that empower EAs as they navigate the path to mature adulthood.

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