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In this manuscript, I discuss the experiences of African American male scholars at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the American South and the impact of their academic and social experiences on their respective campuses. Furthermore, I discuss their utilization of code-switching or a lack thereof as a tool to navigate their post-secondary environment. I examine the challenges and successes of each individual scholar while allowing the participants to discuss their collective experiences in the post-secondary milieu. I view the groups' collective experiences through the theoretical lens of Sellers et al.'s (1997) Black Identity Development theory. Using this conceptual framework, I review the experiences of the African American male participants characterized by stigma, internalized conflict, and resiliency within academic and social settings in the post-secondary environment and the opportunities for student affairs professionals to alleviate these struggles. I call upon post-secondary administrators, faculty, and staff to gain a better understanding of how their direct work with African American students in general, and with African American males in particular, as well as university officials' ability to advocate for this group to promote systemic change, could have widespread implications for African American male student achievement.

"LISTEN UP, I GOT A STORY TO TELL": A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXAMINING

COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCES AND CODE-SWITCHING AMONG BLACK MALE

SCHOLARS AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

by

Jadarius Rashaun Jackson

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Approved by

_____

Dr. Craig Peck
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

To the little Black boy who sat with tears in his eyes after hearing society tell him what he could not be or what he could not do. Your perseverance, determination, and faith will continue to do the unthinkable, and so will you!

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Jadarius Rashaun Jackson has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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more right than wrong. I want to thank me for just being me at all time … I got to

thank the Man up top, G.O.D., because I'm nothing without him."

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Indubitably, my identity has been shaped by personal and unique experiences. I have constantly battled issues of social justice and cultural competence in the educational milieu. Nonetheless, I continue to advocate for myself and other marginalized individuals while speaking against social injustices in academia. Through critical pedagogy, social justice and cultural competence can be accomplished and create avenues for social change (Freire, 1993). As a Black male doctoral student at a Minority Serving Institution, cultural competence is essential in my development as a leader. Culturally proficient leaders willingly explore the culture of others without disregarding their own beliefs while embracing the diversity of individuals and groups from different backgrounds (Horsford, 2016). As a minoritized person, I think it is reprehensible to frown upon cultural competence and social justice. Moreover, I have several identities, and I do not "fit" neatly inside of society's pre-constructed notions of what an individual with certain "credentials" should be; therefore, it is incumbent upon me to be a culturally competent leader and employ social justice in all of my practices.

I was in advanced classes during my K-12 years; therefore, I was all too familiar with what I came to know as code-switching and how the practice impacted my educational trajectory and identity development. For me, code-switching allowed me to navigate between languages in my interactions with other African Americans based on our relationship and the environment. Identifying appropriate times and environments which required a code-switch were seemingly learned by trial and error. Specifically, I remember seeing "House Party 2" (1991) during my childhood years and immediately recognizing the significance of code-switching in the post-secondary milieu. The main character, Kid, enters college and immediately experiences a culture shock. Kid is immersed in hip-hop culture, which is a movement significantly predicated on the

culture of African Americans and their experiences within society. Furthermore, he learns through interactions with some of his contemporaries, administrators, and faculty members about the need for code-switching. Miles, another Black male student at the university, frequently engages in a hyperbolic form of code-switching with faculty members. Miles's and Kid's dialogues are laced with colloquialisms germane to their culture; however, Miles immediately alters his tone, word choice, and posture while interacting with faculty members. Indeed, Miles's actions appear to be farcical, but the relevancy for code-switching was illuminated in his interactions.

As a child, I was able to identify the significance of engaging in code-switching. While I did not fully understand all of the intricate dialogue exchanges in the conversations, I understood the importance of the practice. Presently, I feel I have truly mastered the art. I carefully articulate my thoughts in academic, formal, and informal settings. I understand the significance of the switch, and while I constantly question the fairness of the practice, I engage in the exercise to achieve my desired goals. However, to question the fairness of the practice is a bit asinine. Sports commentator and reporter Stephen A. Smith eloquently said, "Fair is a place in the county where they judge pigs. It does not exist." While I believe modifying the current educational landscape is necessary, I also recognize complaining about inequities surrounding the issue and failing to advocate for change significantly contribute to the problematic matters at hand.

Statement of Problem

As posited by the White hegemonic group, education provides an arena of fundamental egalitarianism among various racial groups. Therefore, the pursuit of post-secondary education is paramount for a plethora of minority groups. Indeed, Black students are attending college at a historically high rate, but these statistical gains are primarily due to the post-secondary

educational trajectories of Black females and international students (Gin et al., 2017; White et al., 2019). According to Kena et al. (2015), 22% of African American males receive bachelor's degrees compared to 41% for White males. Correspondingly, African American males represent less than 5% of the college population, and degree completion rates are lowest among African American males compared to any other race and gender groups within the collegiate milieu (Harris & Harper, 2015).

Social justice promotes egalitarianism at its core, and the previously mentioned premise provides members within society presumed rights and privileges (Wang, 2018). However, marginalized groups have consistently endured traumatic and unconscionable ordeals while attempting to establish and maintain their individual identities without assimilating to Western hegemonic civilization. For example, the communicative practices of African Americans have been a point of contention for some; therefore, examining the code-switching practices of African American male scholars could provide insight into how the practice is used as a tool to persevere in uncomfortable academic environments. According to Flennaugh (2016), before we advance to a post-racial society, we need to shed an intense spotlight on the legacy that race has left on the United States. Examining and exploring systems of oppression created by an inequitable system is paramount. Indeed, marginalized groups in the United States, specifically Black men, continue to gain access in previously inaccessible areas. However, neglecting to acknowledge race as a significant factor related to their academic endeavors, economic dissimilarities, and social injustices illuminates the constant presence of flagrant racial inequality (Flennaugh, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

My purpose in conducting this study was to understand the experiences of African American males in predominantly White post-secondary settings and examine how they use code-switching in these environments. I wanted to understand the challenges and successes that African American males experience. Examining the experiences of African American males in post-secondary institutions that are PWIs provided me insight into understanding how code-switching may or may not be used as a tool to navigate the post-secondary milieu. Code-switching is a practice I have utilized throughout my life, both within and outside the educational environment. I have discussed the significance of African American English (AAE) and code-switching with my contemporaries. We also dialogued about how the practice is often used as a tool to matriculate through the post-secondary environment. Furthermore, discussions also focused on the rejection of code-switching and how the practice may directly challenge the essence of Black Identity Development. Due to my familiarity with the practice and my interest in the factors related to the educational pursuits of African American males, I conducted a qualitative study examining the factors related to code-switching in the post-secondary environment and code-switching's impact on the previously mentioned group's ability to succeed.

As part of my study, I highlighted some of the experiences of African American males in the post-secondary milieu with code-switching and examined its relationship to their collegiate experience and educational trajectory at a PWI. Indeed, African American males can use techniques such as code-switching to adjust to the educational and social dynamics present in the post-secondary environment, but academic institutions may certainly aid in the transitional process. Capitalizing on advantageous support systems could assist Black males in transitioning

to college life (Palmer et al., 2018). Thus, informing faculty and staff members about the significance of relationship development with the previously mentioned group could prove to be significant. Despite universities' greatest efforts, African American males must willingly acknowledge some personal accountability and wholeheartedly attempt to pursue their academic endeavors. According to McFarland et al. (2018), 50% of Black males graduate from high school in the United States. Half of the previously mentioned group attempts to further their education at 2-year public community colleges, and many Black male high school graduates never attempt to pursue higher education (McFarland et al., 2018). Statistically, the educational trajectory for Black males consistently decreases as we ascend the formal educational ranks.

Research Questions

The impetus for my research questions was connected to my interest in understanding Black males and their self-efficacy processes as they relate to their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that characterize their experiences as Black male college students. I was also interested in the potential implications of code-switching. Listening to the Black male participants' voices was a vital component of this study. Based on the research questions, a qualitative approach provided valuable insight into the experiences of African American males in the post-secondary environment and the place of code-switching in those experiences. Moreover, only the students themselves were able to talk about their experiences in an enriching way, and the data illuminated the necessity of the practice. As the researcher, I brought together a more complete and, thus, comprehensive account of the participants' experiences by analyzing the data. Presumably, their stories enriched readers' understanding of these aspects of their lives.

My research questions were:

- What are the experiences of African American males at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) in the American South?

- What role, if any, does code-switching play regarding their academic and social pursuits?

- What do African American men perceive as key influences that helped them succeed in the university setting?

Background Context: Cultural Identity and Code-Switching

African American males are in a precarious predicament in the educational environment. Maintaining one's identity is paramount and striving to achieve one's goals is equally important. In this section, I discussed some of the factors related to the academic success of Black males as well as the significance of code-switching and how Black males use the practice in their academic endeavors. In W. E. B. Du Bois's seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), particularly in *Of Our Spiritual Strivings* and *The Coming of John*, he carefully analyzed the inner struggles of code-switching without specifically naming the practice. However, other theorists believed adopting the standard language was a form of fully assimilating and "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Thus, identity issues impacting Black males have the potential to be a constant issue.

For many, code-switching frequently occurs throughout the day in various cultural contexts and environments. Arguably, it is relatively distinguishable for some to recognize changes in vocal inflections and language choices when speaking with colleagues, relatives, and/or friends. W. E. B. DuBois alluded to the duality among Black people in *The Souls of Black Folks*, which is the concept of double consciousness and a heightened awareness of Blacks in a

Eurocentric society (Emdin, 2016). Furthermore, code-switching is a limited concept of Du Bois's ideas surrounding the ability of non-Whites to seamlessly transition into conversations with "Standard English" words with cadence inflection to assimilate into society (Emdin, 2016). The ability to alternate between different languages and cultural dialects is the lynchpin of code-switching.

For linguists, code-switching depicts the act of shifting between two languages within a conversation (Emdin, 2016; Gay, 2018; Lee, 2018). However, in today's ever-evolving multicultural and multiethnic world, the term's deeper idea requires changing between other cultures as individuals navigate through life's conversations—selecting communicative styles based on the individuals with whom one is conversing (Emdin, 2016). To truly understand the depths of the practice, one should examine the response of Fox News analysts Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity. Carlson and Hannity appeared to be perplexed when then-presidential candidate, Barack Obama, displayed his ability to modify his cadence and acquiesce to the auditory comforts of the mostly Black crowd during a 2007 speech. In a similar incident, Obama illustrated the propensity to code-switch at a chili-dog restaurant in Chicago, Illinois. Obama communicated a sound and tone that was culturally recognizable to the South Side of Chicago residents while also possessing the ability to address the United States of America with a formal inaugural address to the masses (Konata, 2017).

In the following sections, I present background information related to acculturation, African American English, the transition to code-switching, and language and social identity construction.

Acculturation

Code-switching is a byproduct of acculturation for many African American males. Acculturation is the process in which individuals acquire the traditions and customs of the dominant culture while also maintaining their natural culture (Johnson & Reynolds, 2018). Being exposed to different cultures does not strip the marginalized of their cultural identity; rather, it forces them to adapt to the environment and utilize their cultural practices when it is beneficial among group members. For example, code-switching may be utilized as a tool by marginalized groups, particularly African American males, to acculturate and navigate the collegiate environment. Furthermore, when two cultures interact, one culture tends to govern the other, while the compliant culture tends to be extremely malleable and endures psychological and cultural changes (Johnson & Reynolds, 2018; Lee, 2018). Thus, the result of acculturation may present in different fashions. Some from the marginalized group may completely absorb the cultural practices of the dominant group, some may completely resist the practices of the dominant group, some may adapt to the environment and utilize their cultural practices when they see fit to do so, and some may completely disengage from the cultural practices of both groups (Freire, 1993; Johnson & Reynolds, 2018).

At times, African American males may abandon their cultural identity and willingly adopt the cultural traditions of the hegemonic group. The previously mentioned practices are a form of assimilation referred to as a cultural shift (Knight-Manuel et al., 2016). Another option allows the oppressed group to place a higher premium on their own cultural identity and little value of the cultural traditions of the dominant group; this practice places a greater significance on one's cultural practices and is referred to as cultural resistance (Knight-Manuel et al., 2016). Integration, the process of placing an equal value on one's cultural practices and the practices of

the dominant culture, appears to be a similar practice to African American males willing to code-switch (Knight-Manuel et al., 2016). Some may argue the marginalized group's willingness to acquiesce to the cultural demands of the dominant group underscores the significance of the dominated group's cultural practices. However, code-switching facilitates the ability to manipulate the cultural practices of the hegemonic group while also embracing one's cultural forms of communication.

Seemingly, the ability to acculturate and adapt to the communicative environment is on a continuum for many African American males. Some African American males may seem to be extremely traditional in their colloquial communicative patterns and appear to be in stark contrast to the dominant culture's practice; however, others may be highly acculturated and appear to be fully assimilated in the dominant culture and appear to ascribe to the cultural norms of the dominant group. Those African American males falling within the middle of the two extremes are consistently battling with understanding the nuances in an environment that is not completely theirs from a cultural perspective but allows communicating in a culturally appropriate and familiar manner (Knight-Manuel et al., 2016).

Many scholars suggest commonly held communicative social perceptions can be a result of stereotypes or byproducts of culture. According to Lee (2018), a linguistic perception that one language or form of communicating may be superior to another has been categorically dispelled. Seemingly, intrinsic norms and not a form of empirical value have been linked to a specific language. However, some listeners tend to place values and attitudes towards speakers based on the presented dialect or language. Lee (2018) also found many cultural anthropologists (or psychologists) found some "lower minority" forms of speech possessed integrity, but the speakers tend to be considered less competent and less ambitious. Unfortunately, the previously

mentioned notion results from a stereotypical assessment of an individual and is viewed as a norm among the group. As a result, these stereotypes bleed into educational, political, and social realms of minorities, specifically African American males, resulting in marginalization and discrimination in various contexts, including the education system. Thus, these beliefs may result in increased utilization of code-switching in a variety of contexts.

African American English

African American English (AAE) is primarily spoken and created by African Americans (Green, 2002). While African Americans primarily utilize the language, consumers of the communicative custom also include Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinx, and White individuals. Typically, AAE utilization depends upon the socialization process and interactions with other AAE speakers (Holt, 2018). AAE is not a monolithic communication tool and is arguably an adaptation to Standard English, used by African Americans to assimilate to the dominant racial group's communication paradigm (Green, 2002; Holt, 2018). Furthermore, the levels of social status, age, education, and location may contribute to the speaker's style and usage of AAE. The literature suggests AAE may be considered a dialect of Standard English (Williams, 2014). Ultimately, African Americans have utilized code-switching to vacillate between the two forms of communication while maintaining their authenticity in a given setting.

White-dominated society tends to hold traditional Standard English as the model for measuring intellectual aptitude. Furthermore, there is a falsehood regarding language indicating an individual's intelligence (Wright & Ford, 2019). Moreover, language also tends to be a factor in measuring one's academic success (Wright & Ford, 2019). A study revealed that most faculty members made negative associations with students utilizing "African American English" in the academic setting (Williams, 2014). According to Williams (2014), a large number of the faculty

members believed AAE was a part of Black students' culture but was an inferior form of communication compared to Standard English. Over 90% of participants suggested utilizing programs aimed at improving Standard English among the group. However, the faculty members neither indicated an understanding nor encouraged students to code-switch as an alternative. The previously mentioned study underscores the significance of code-switching for African Americans due to the masses' long-standing beliefs of superior and uniform communication practices.

Communicative practices of Blacks, particularly African American English speakers, continue to be viewed as inferior. Individuals utilizing AAE tend to be viewed as less intelligent (Emdin, 2016). The collegiate environment often reinforces this notion by allowing students, staff, and faculty members to mischaracterize and place false assumptions on African American males because of their preferred method of communication (Wright & Ford, 2019). Presumably, some may resort to code-switching while others may fiercely neglect the practice as a form of resistance. Some view AAE as a cultural marker and utilize code-switching as a tool to acculturate, while others view the language as an inferior communication style, leading to a greater disparity in the post-secondary environment (Johnson & Reynolds, 2018; Lee, 2018). However, some may also view AAE as a useful option in informal settings but neglect to use it in formal academic and occupational settings. Indeed, the use of AAE and code-switching has been examined in academia; however, research is scant on the intersection of code-switching, Black Identity Development, and the feelings of African American males within the post-secondary environment. This study examined the experiences of African American males on a collegiate campus and the role that code-switching played in those experiences.

AAE utilization is far greater than a choice in speech patterns and has social, economic, political, and cultural implications. Also referred to as "Black English," "African American Vernacular English," "Ebonics," and "Negro Speech," AAE reflects the paradigm shift within social, cultural, and educational contexts. Typically, language is a reflection of identity or closely associated with how one chooses to identify. Thus, AAE appears to be closely associated with a form of cultural identity and unity among the group. Furthermore, the choice of language appears to be a marker of distinctiveness within the community but allows all members to use it amongst one another. However, Standard English is widely considered a tool to identify the educated and powerful in academic and occupational environments. This acknowledgment creates a schism and empowers elitists to believe their language of choice is superior to their counterparts.

Furthermore, AAE has become stigmatized and has become recognized by some as a deficient form of communication. Seemingly, individuals utilizing AAE have been incorrectly stereotyped within the social strata, and the negative connotations have invariably impacted the group (Han & Price, 2015). The American Speech-Language and Hearing Association states, "no dialectical variety of English is a disorder or a pathological form of speech and language, and that social dialects are adequate as a functional and effective variety of English" (Holt, 2018, p. 199). While ASHA acknowledges there are no viable pathological issues with AAE, there continue to be prejudices against African American males in the educational and occupational environments, which inevitably impact their success.

African American English is a vernacular, dialect, or colloquialism of American English primarily utilized by African Americans (Emdin, 2016). According to Battle (2012), AAE contains "systemic, rule-governed phonologic, grammatical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics of language" (p. 41). While African Americans widely use AAE, it is not a

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monolithic practice within the culture and may be used by other ethnicities and races. AAE is not homogenous, and factors such as education, location, income, and geographic location impact the use of various individuals. Moreover, the utilization of AAE is influenced by the migratory factors of African Americans and their interaction with other languages.

Transition to Code-Switching

African American males have learned to navigate the post-secondary milieu in several fashions; however, switching from Standard English to African American English has been an observable phenomenon throughout academia (Gay, 2018). Seemingly, the previously mentioned group recognizes the value of their linguistic preference and adapts to the environment. Code-switching, also referred to as style-shifting, is a practice that allows African American men to manipulate their verbal communication patterns and allows them to become biadialectical (Gay, 2018). Exploring the nature of the switch and what prompts speakers to engage in this practice was the study's impetus.

Standard English provides power and privilege to the hegemonic group in social and political settings. Seemingly, students speaking AAE are considered cognitively inferior and limited in their social mobility (Gordon & Parris, 2018). Arguably, some college faculty members view AAE negatively (Peele-Eady & Foster, 2018), and some view African American students as less employable than Standard English speakers (Christensen & Miguel, 2018). However, some educators continue to believe code-switching is an integral tool for African American students in their pursuit of educational and social mobility (Peele-Eady & Foster, 2018).

Language Identity and Social Identity Construction

Language serves as a tool to socialize individuals (Tulviste & Tamm, 2019). An integral component of language socialization relates to how it helps construct social identities. Moreover, individuals are not passive in adhering to social conventions but actively participate in negotiating and constructing their social identities through proper language based on the environment. Communicative practices aid in understanding and developing social competence for members of society. Furthermore, social competence involves using linguistic forms in a particular environment and context and allows communicators to achieve their endeavors. Social processes allow speakers to create situational meaning into linguistic forms, resulting in the construction of social identities (Kobayashi et al., 2017).

Social identity appears to be the byproduct of inferring linguistically constructed stances and social acts (Kobayashi et al., 2017). Moreover, social identity can encompass both social roles and relations; social acts are goal-oriented behaviors of speakers; and social stances include the attitudes and views of speakers (Kobayashi et al., 2017). Language socialization researchers must look at social acts constructed through language routines and patterns to conduct language socialization focused on social identities. The variations in social acts and stances should also be monitored as well. Researchers must then examine the groups' attempts to change or challenge social acts and stances on their goals achieved through specific linguistic forms.

Code-switching may also impact social roles within a conversation. Blom and Gumperz (1972) posit code-switching should be considered a social phenomenon. Blom and Gumperz (1972) explore the utilization of code-switching by inhabitants in Hamnes, Norway, and how the inhabitants switched between two dialects, Bokmal and Ranamal, in various contexts. According to Blom and Gumperz (1972), the inhabitants used Ranamal when conversing with other locals

to communicate cultural solidarity with one another (they used Ranamal). However, they utilized Bokmal when speaking with others thought of as outsiders. Seemingly, the inhabitants used "we code" when communicating with one another and used "they code" when communicating with other outsiders. The locals used Ranamal as a common code and used Bokmal in formal settings, which communicates an uncommon practice. Seemingly, situational code-switching indicates changes in situations with participants. However, the aforementioned does not explain the code-switch impacted by a change in the situation. Metaphorical code-switching does not involve situational change but indicates other superior meanings related to communication by the dominant group (Blom & Gumperz, 1972).

Contextualization cues, similar to code-switching, signal changes in context and are similar (Chernoff, 2015). Contextualization cues may present as changes in rhythm and tempo to shifts in pitch and the selection of codes (Chernoff, 2015). Contextualization allows researchers to examine the contextual effects of code-switching. Vickers, Goble, and Deckert (2015) analyzed the functions of code-switching of Spanish-English adults in senior citizens' programs in their country. The coordinator switched to Spanish to speak about the mistakes participants made in Bingo games while continuing to speak English during gameplay. This instance illuminates how code-switching is also based on contextualization cues that signal boundaries based on activities.

Brief Description of Methods

I conducted a basic qualitative study that included elements of narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I sought to understand the experiences of African American males in PWIs and examined how they used code-switching in these environments. Seemingly, the literature underscores the myriad issues plaguing African American males at various institutions.

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However, the research design and the selection of PWIs in the South aided in illuminating the group's efforts to persist in a hegemonic environment. I describe my methods in more detail in Chapter III.

Conceptual Framework: Black Identity Development

One of the most popular and influential conceptualizations of Black Identity Development was developed by William Cross. Cross's observations of Blacks during the 1960s shaped his impetus for the Black identity model. A plethora of African Americans began to modify their attitudes, social behaviors, and self-images during this time (Cross, 1995). The observation of the psychological stressors impacting African Americans during oppression was largely attributable to the birth of the model (Cross, 1995). While some scholars suggest racial identity was a byproduct of the times (the 1960s), Cross suggests individuals adhering to this notion have a limited perspective on the issues at hand and the model. The process of Nigrescence pre-dates the 60s and is traced back to slavery, a time where White slave-masters attempted to erase all remnants of Black identity and authenticity in their slaves (Cross, 1995). Slave-masters challenged their slaves' identity by encouraging them to become defensive about their "Blackness," which encouraged slaves to question how they should think and feel as Black people. Therefore, Black became tantamount to slavery, and the process of questioning one's Blackness began but did not end with slavery. Indeed, Cross's model of Black Identity Development is widely considered a seminal work in the field of racial identity, but his mainstream approach views identity development through a linear lens. Cross's generalized stages do not account for other worldviews and seemingly lack a perspective on the experiences of the Black individual.

However, Sellers et al. (1997) proposed a more comprehensive theory of Black Identity Development, applying both mainstream and underground elements of relevant models. The authors' paradigm is a multidimensional model consisting of four dimensions: racial salience, the centrality of the individual's identity, the regard with which an individual holds the group associated with the identity, and the ideology associated with identity. Sellers et al. (1997) posit each dimension embodies a distinctive way racial identity may be displayed in an individual. Using Sellers et al.'s (1997) Black identity theory as my conceptual framework helped me understand the research group's nuances. Furthermore, Sellers et al.'s (1997) identity theory examines Black Identity Development through a socialization process. The socialization process leads to identity formation through a fluid model of racial development. Racial identity theory served as a method to help individuals understand and recognize the difficulties associated with the Black experience. I present and explain Black Identity Development in greater depth in Chapter II.

Researcher Experience

Assumedly, education provides bountiful opportunities to individuals willing to endure the rigors associated with the discipline. Unfortunately, Black males are stymied at alarming rates as early as grade school, and their post-secondary trajectories are considerably encumbered by substantial environmental and social factors (Strayhorn, 2012). I am an African American male pursuing a doctoral degree at a Minority Serving Institute (MSI) in the South. I have also attended a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) and a PWI in the South. I have post-secondary experiences at an MSI, a PWI, and an HBCU. Furthermore, I am currently a post-secondary administrator on the campus of a PWI in the South, which provides an additional perspective on some of the issues plaguing African American males in their scholarly pursuits. I

believe my previous experiences were certainly essential for the study. Strega and Brown (2015) noted, "Some feminist scholars have proposed reflexivity as an essential methodological strategy because it enables us to examine the ways in which our own values, identities, and positionality affect our research and particularly our relationships with participants" (p. 8). Indeed, I am 15 years removed from my undergraduate studies, but I am all too familiar with some of the issues related to isolation, microaggressions, and racial profiling. Although I have experiences as a Black male college student, as do my participants, it should not be assumed that we are a monolithic group. Indeed, there were commonalities found in the participants' stories, but each individual provided a unique perspective specific to his experience in the post-secondary milieu.

As the researcher, I am an insider and an outsider concerning the participants. The participants and I share ethnic, racial, and cultural similarities. However, I am pursuing my Ph.D., and the paucity of Black males with doctoral degrees placed me as an outsider and a potential inspiration for some. Similarly, I find the outsider/insider impasse applicable as a scholar and professional in the post-secondary environment. Civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) proclaimed, "One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 2). Du Bois adroitly articulated the supposed binary dichotomies of the double consciousness. Although Du Bois did not explicitly reference "code-switching" in the previously mentioned excerpt, the exercise is certainly an act utilized by individuals maintaining their double consciousness. Moreover, the metaphorical mask furnished by the double consciousness is a constant reminder of the outsider/insider conundrum present in my life. Thus, I was empathic to the dynamic between myself and the participants throughout the research process.

As a Black man, I am wholeheartedly committed to improving the overall wellness of minorities. I believe it is of utmost importance to assist the previously mentioned population to the best of my ability. My commitment to this population is a personal and professional commitment, a scholarly and a practical promise, and a vow to advocacy. In most aspects of my life, being Black is synonymous with disenfranchisement and marginalization. Double consciousness is conspicuous in the academic milieu. Furthermore, in academia and within the hegemonic society, being a Black man is often tantamount to second-class citizenship.

Considering Black men are vastly underrepresented in the academe and gender and color barriers are prevalent, I consider my identity a marker of my professional commitment and promise as a scholar, practitioner, and advocate for Black people and all people of color. I believe cultural competence is a lifelong journey, and the realization of this beckons me to refuse to become complacent. Yet, as a Black male with firsthand experiences with many issues unique to the Black population and minorities in general, I am motivated and humbled by the prospect of paying it forward.

Significance of the Study

The educational environment in the post-secondary institution has not consistently afforded African American males positive outcomes, as noted by their low retention and graduation rates. Moreover, academic institutions, specifically PWIs, tend to be shaped by the perceptions and ideas of the hegemonic group; therefore, the communication efforts of the marginalized do not appear to be a factor in helping the educational outcomes of African American males. Examining the differences and similarities in the educational experiences of African American males presented some of the factors impacting their educational trajectory.

Moreover, discussing the code-switching practices of the group and the impact on their experiences may encourage academic institutions to modify their current approaches.

The attrition rates of academic institutions significantly impact their bottom line, and retaining students is a financial priority (Winslow & Davis, 2016). While an abundance of PWIs showcases their diversity efforts, financial incentives seem to be correlated to completing African American males' academic endeavors. Moreover, the symbiotic relationship between a student's ability to persist and an institution's willingness to commit is noteworthy (Tinto, 1997). Indeed, an academic institution can attempt to create a meaningful social and academic experience, but understanding the nuances of the African American male experience and how code-switching may impact their educational pursuits may aid in understanding how to provide proper assistance and programmatic solutions to this group.

The literature underscores issues impacting African American males in the post-secondary environment. However, studies that examine members of the group's experiences in the post-secondary environments at PWIs, and the intersection of code-switching as a viable option to achieve their academic endeavors, are few. Thus, understanding how academic institutions and African American males can successfully coexist could provide a better understanding of how the two bodies could work together to improve graduation rates and reduce attrition. The subsequent institutional change may lead to better educational and social experiences of African American males and a greater understanding of code-switching as a potential tool.

Overview of Chapters

In this research study, I examined the experiences of African American males at a PWI and the role that code-switching plays in those experiences. The focus on African American

males' collegiate experiences provided information regarding institutional supports, barriers, and code-switching used by group members. Some of the social, psychological, and economic factors related to the academic trajectory of African American males were clear. However, examining the impact of code-switching by speaking with group members was an integral component to truly understanding some of the educational issues that impacted them. While African American males have other issues affecting their academic endeavors, I explored the relationship between code-switching and their overall academic experiences at their PWI.

In Chapter II, I review relevant literature related to my topic, followed by a description of my methodology in Chapter III. Then, in Chapter IV, I present the study results as emergent themes from my interviews with the participants. Lastly, in Chapter V, I include my summary findings, analysis of my study, and future recommendations for assisting African American males in the collegiate environment.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I examine research related to the experiences of African American males in higher education, code-switching, and Black Identity Development. This chapter begins with a discussion concerning higher educational institutions and their impact on African American males. I then examine the institutional and social supports offered to African American males, including maintaining relationships. Next, I review the literature on code-switching and how the practice provides a potential avenue for educational advancement for the group. The chapter concludes with a discussion surrounding Black Identity Development, which serves as the conceptual framework for my study.

Black Males' Experiences in Higher Education

The literature highlights a multitude of factors related to the educational endeavors of African American males. Indeed, parents' level of education and occupation status are indicators of "cultural capital," which directly coincides with African American males' ability to succeed in the academic milieu (Hurst et al., 2019). Thus, parents' educational competencies are indicative of their children's abilities and perceptions of education. Sanders (2017) posits a mother's level of education reflects a potential student's level of higher education; however, there is a positive correlation between a Black male student's grade point average and the father's highest degree earned. The authors also found that 42% of fathers graduated from post-secondary institutions with an undergraduate degree, while approximately 35% of mothers completed their undergraduate studies. Madyum and Lee (2017) concluded that as female-headed households increased, African American male academic performance decreased, and their reading achievements were directly impacted as well. The parallels between African American males and

their fathers' academic achievements illuminate the significance of positive relationships among the group.

Due to the known importance of education, educated parents tend to encourage their child's educational endeavors. Harris and Harper (2015) assert Black males are not hindered because of their intellectual abilities but are supported and encouraged by other individuals in their peer groups and their parents. Parental support coincides with an individual's ability to succeed; however, certain individuals persist without the support of their parents. Thus, individuals may be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to matriculate through college. Nevertheless, the transference of knowledge about the rigors associated with attaining advanced degrees from parents to their offspring is a factor attributable to African American males' academic success.

Financing an education can be a burden for many and can serve as an additional risk factor for African American males attempting to obtain their degrees. African American males identified financial aid as the main factor in determining their college of choice (McGowan et al., 2016). The dependence on financial aid is imperative for individuals that are incapable of paying for educational expenses. Moreover, individuals on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum rely heavily on funds from financial aid. Funding issues are also present in doctoral programs for African Americans as well. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of African American students and African American faculty members in the United States reflects the lack of funding available to academically and intellectually capable students (Harris & Harper, 2015).

Accommodating African American male students by providing environments that foster social engagement and academic enrichment are instrumental towards the betterment of the entire college experience (Sanders, 2017). Recognizing the social element of the individual's

being and surveying opportunities to create a comfortable, social, and intellectual environment

may allow students to flourish. Therefore, the institution's ability to establish a significant social

environment is seemingly intertwined with the student's academic success. Some African

American men have adjusted well to the college environment, exhibiting high levels of self-

esteem and ambition (Sanders, 2017). Sanders (2017) stated that cultural pride, determination,

and a strong sense of confidence were identified as attributes of success for African American

students. Moreover, the previously mentioned traits allow African American male students to

seamlessly transition into the social settings of institutes of higher learning.

Educational Hierarchies and their Impact

The idea of hierarchies and power is grounded in divisive strategies; therefore, creating

discussions surrounding commonalities for marginalized groups could prove to be paramount. As

Black people continue to matriculate through the educational landscape, they may recognize the

thinly veiled hierarchies within the school system and examine how code-switching may be used

as a useful technique. Howard (2016) suggests,

> the call for reimagining a different way of doing schooling where Black and other
>
> children of color are concerned. The data continues to paint a deeply disturbing picture of
>
> how Black children are 'seen as a problem' in many U.S. schools. Black children are at
>
> greatest risk of being funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline.

By analyzing how hierarchical systems pose academic challenges, advocates acknowledge the

educational system's shortcomings and the potential impact on all parties involved. Furthermore,

the school-to-prison pipeline poses a grave hindrance to the educational trajectory of Black

males. Unfortunately, hierarchies within the educational system are not catered to the cultural

needs of marginalized groups; therefore, code-switching is a viable option for circumventing the

system. Similarly, Swarr and Nagar (2010) speak to the impact of hierarchies and their effect on schools and communities. Swarr and Nagar (2010) affirm,

> The hierarchies of place position a "community" that is racially homogenous and otherwise undifferentiated. But mapping a community from an understanding of the differentiated and heterogeneous colonial spaces of "containment, internment and exile" creates the possibility of a deeper and more nuanced misunderstanding of the subjects who are positioned to stand outside of modernity, presumably outside of citizenship, displaced from land in the same way that, for instance, the "deplorable subject," the "admissible subject," "the present absent subject," the suspect subject are positioned by the state against the exalted national subject within the segregated landscape of traditional modernity.

The racial hierarchy in school communicates a strong message about relationships to marginalized groups, reinforcing the notion of code-switching as a requisite for academic success. Unfortunately, the hierarchies result from the White hegemonic group's privileges which significantly impact disenfranchised groups. Black Lives Matter (BLM), a racial justice movement promoting and advocating for the livelihood of Blacks, also aims to encourage discussions surrounding educational equity. Thus, the status quo could be stripped of its authority, and a true sense of equity could potentially exist.

Discriminatory practices exist within education and contribute to the schism within society. Furthermore, power and privilege are largely attributable factors related to injustices surrounding academia and various aspects of life. Although various pedagogical practices aim to address educational opportunities for all groups, the reinforcement of unjust practices reiterates the concept of dissimilarities between majority and minority group members. Moreover, the

pursuits of minority groups, particularly Black males, are greatly impacted by their environment. Seemingly, marginalized groups are subjugated to a myriad of injustices offered by the dominant culture. Thus, hegemonic culture, directly and indirectly, influences the lives of several minority groups. Although injustices are ubiquitous and persistent, resiliency is key, and some minority groups, particularly Blacks, continue to achieve despite the prevalence of disparity.

Familial Support and Academic Preparation

Familial support is paramount for an abundance of African American males (Flennaugh, 2016). Strong parental attachment tends to be associated with positive emotional and academic adjustment (Hope et al., 2018). While some students may view financial support as an integral component of academic success, minority students may view encouragement and assistance with coping with new forms of racism as necessary forms of familial assistance.

Similar to collegiate student/professor relationship development, familial relationships are linked to the participants' feelings of preparedness. Additionally, feelings of isolation and unpreparedness are commonalities in academic discussions. A plethora of students struggle with the transition into college, and African American male students report feelings of isolation, invisibility, and supervisibility (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Consequently, the feelings of despair may continue to hamper the lives of Black male college students and continue to impact attrition rates significantly.

According to Tinto (1993), a student's familial background is largely attributable to the scholar's educational success. Assumedly, a student's educational outcome is largely ascribed to their parent's support and the preparation they afford. According to Tevington et al. (2017), over 85% of White students believed their parents would assist them with the collegiate educational experiences compared to 76% of African American students. Moreover, 72% of White parents

believed they had a sufficient amount of information regarding the expenses associated with attending college, while only 58% of African American parents felt they had a sufficient amount of information regarding the educational expense (Tevington et al., 2017). Furthermore, the comparatively smaller number of African American students completing their education in the post-secondary environment is a byproduct of their lack of knowledge about the cost, which further cripples the new generation of Black scholars. Black students tend to have a smaller network of individuals with 4-year college degrees (Flores et al., 2020). However, as the United States continues to see a shift in the number of Black males attending and completing their academic studies, these students will be able to provide greater insight into the journey, challenges, and successes of African American males in the post-secondary environment. Less than 20% of Black adults over the age of 25 with a college degree, compared to less than 30% of White and more than 40% of Asians, will utilize their personal network with gaining insight into navigating the collegiate admissions process (Quaye et al., 2019).

African American males' freshman to sophomore years prove to be pivotal, and this period is seemingly related to their academic persistence efforts. Compared to their White counterparts, African Americans rate the significance of familial relationships as relatively high (James et al., 2016). Parental encouragement is related to goal commitment for Black students (Roberts, 2013). Moreover, research indicates parental encouragement may be the single most important factor influencing the persistence of Black students (Roberts, 2013). Encouragement from family members, coupled with a strong support system, may ameliorate the ill effects of discriminatory experiences in the educational environment and continue to serve as a motivating factor for minority students pursuing their academic degrees. Thus, familial support serves as a form of positive reinforcement for the experience of minority students.

Before entering the post-secondary milieu, a plethora of African American males lack the resources needed to enter and succeed in the collegiate environment. Over 50% of Black students have access to a complete range of science and math courses necessary for college readiness, compared to over 80% of Asian American students and over 70% of White students (Flores et al., 2020). Flores et al. (2020) assert that African Americans are more likely to enroll in remedial courses in college than other racial groups due to substandard standardized testing scores. Indeed, the tests are inherently biased; however, some may argue the tests and the scores reveal a level of under-preparedness by the group. In 2015, over 60% of Black students took the ACT and met none of the benchmarks. Poor test scores only further complicate the admissions process for the group and appear to be a barrier before stepping on campus (Valant & Newark, 2017).

According to the Department of Education, opportunity gaps are pervasive between African American and White students. According to the data, schools routinely offer African American students a less rigorous curriculum, impacting their ability to be admitted into post-secondary institutions (Smith et al., 2016). Furthermore, the disciplinary actions by administrators tend to be more severe toward African American males, resulting in more suspensions than their contemporaries (Thomas et al., 2011). Moreover, African American students are the most likely to have the lowest paid teachers with the least classroom experience (Smith et al., 2016). Lastly, this group also tends to receive the most instructors from alternative-teacher certification programs. Unfortunately, the previously mentioned results impact African American males from a systemic perspective in the educational environment.

Historically, school performance tends to be an early indicator of many educational and occupational opportunities for African American scholars. Thus, early childhood education is integral to school outcomes, economic stability, health, and social mobility (Quaye et al., 2019).

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The educational achievement gap is substantial when social class is equal for African Americans (Knox, 2018). On average, African American children score lower than their Asian American, White, and Latinx contemporaries on tests and subsequently receive lower grades. Consequently, many become truant, fail courses, and drop out of their educational institutions at a younger age. However, others continue to progress through high school but are less likely to be enrolled in honors programs, which ultimately impacts their ability to be accepted into competitive post-secondary institutions at the same rate as their contemporaries (Valant & Newark, 2017).

Palmer and Scott (2017) assert under-preparedness is a factor related to Black males' lack of collegiate academic success. The lack of academic preparation stymies African American males; they are challenged in K-12 by the combination of poor school conditions and discriminatory practices. Unfortunately, African American males are routinely placed in remedial classes at disproportionately higher rates, which cause behavioral problems (Palmer & Scott, 2017). In effect, students begin to drop out of college in grade school due to a lack of mastery in reading, writing, and math during their earlier grade school years (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the low number of Black males with college degrees limiting the number of mentors for this group, coupled with the lack of academic preparation and expectation of the group, hinder the group's academic aspirations.

A research study illuminated the perspective of African American, Hispanic, and White students in Indiana regarding their perspective on private and public higher education institutions (Smith et al., 2016). The authors correlated academic success and exposure to college preparatory curriculum for all three groups pursuing 4-year degrees. Thus, African American males' cognitive abilities do not appear to be the reason for the inability to achieve at an optimal level consistently at the post-secondary level. Unfortunately, a plethora of institutions continues

to use standardized tests as a measurement of aptitude and admissions into college environments. However, research consistently acknowledges how minorities tend to underperform on standardized tests. Although the standardized tests tend to be used as a factor in collegiate admissions, research shows no significant indications of collegiate academic performance of African American students and White students when Black students SAT scores are significantly lower (Flores et al., 2020).

Some of the same issues impacting African American males' academic trajectory accompany them from elementary school to the post-secondary environment. A lack of preparation, lower African American male student enrollment, and racism are all attributable factors related to African American male scholars' support and preparation (Brooms, 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Indubitably, the issue of preparation is plentiful and includes familial support, the students' efforts and academic engagement, and prior educational experiences. The lack of preparation coincides with the group's lack of confidence in their academic talents while attempting to transition to the post-secondary environment. According to McFarland et al. (2018), the 6-year African American male graduation rate of 34% is a cause of concern and is an area of exploration for examining their collegiate experience.

Relationship Development and Maintenance: The Significance of Institutional Support

Relationship development is on a continuum. Seemingly, pre-college and current relationships may hamper or foster the academic development of African American males. Parenting and the formation of peer relationships have a multifaceted connection and are seemingly interconnected in African American male educational successes (Flores et al., 2020). Administrative support and mentorships are also beneficial to Black males' academic

achievements (Jackson et al., 2013). Developing supportive relationships within an egalitarian post-secondary milieu may inspire African American males to achieve at an exemplary level.

College degree attainment is an arduous educational task for African American males. Moreover, identity development, social relationships, and academic rigors further challenge the academic efforts of the previously mentioned group (Travers, 2019). However, through relevant research efforts, Black males are provided the opportunity to chronicle their journey by providing narratives and illuminating the struggles of maneuvering through the post-secondary environment by gaining a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy (Brooms, 2016; Goings & Bonner, 2017). Furthermore, increased academic engagement by African Americans leads to an increase in their ability to succeed academically and helps counteract the deficit narratives prevalent among the group (Goings & Bonner, 2017; Wood, 2014).

Student engagement tends to increase completion rates for Black students (Winslow & Davis, 2016). Supportive campus relationships and opportunities for involvement at PWIs with cultural and ethnic opportunities are positively correlated to the African American students' persistence (Hope et al., 2018). Indeed, individuals across all groups tend to experience various types of issues adjusting to the collegiate environment, but Black males enrolled at PWIs experience higher levels of depression, feelings of isolation, and an overall feeling of dissatisfaction with their collegiate experience. Sadly, the previously mentioned issues seem to be among the largest factors related to the group's dropout rates (Elliott & Brenneman, 2018). According to Harper and Harris (2015), 92% of Black students identified feelings of alienation and loneliness as a primary reason for leaving college. Furthermore, an inhospitable campus environment created by the White population at a PWI also leads to feelings of alienation (Elliott & Brenneman, 2018).

The integrative process into the campus environment is integral to the success of African American males. Assimilation into the environment can be a task the group struggles to accomplish. Unfortunately, the lack of professors of the same race, few students of the same race, institutional biases, and questions regarding their ability are compounding issues illuminating questions of cultural competency (McClain et al., 2016). Nonetheless, African American males acknowledge the significance of White professors serving as allies positively impacting their post-secondary experience (James et al., 2016). Black students recognize the importance of other students from the same race who may ease their feelings of isolation and alienation.

The campus and culture of an institution significantly impact the experience of minority students. The values and beliefs of an institution are reinforced by the common practices and beliefs of university faculty, staff, and students. Moreover, the previously mentioned elements of the institution's culture may not benefit everyone and may serve as an encumbrance for a student's academic development (Emdin, 2016). While cultural barriers may be present for several groups, African American males must learn to work through comfortable and uncomfortable cultural experiences as PWIs. An abundance of Black students move between learning and adapting to the language and cultural environment of the institution, which may also conflict with the cultural practices of their home environment (Schwartz et al., 2016). Therefore, acquiescing to the demands of both settings creates an understanding of the importance of cultural shifting and adapting to the demands of both environments (Griffin et al., 2016).

Academic institutions can significantly foster both academic and social engagement for their students. Engagement tends to serve as a predictor for academic success for minorities (Sanders, 2017). The frustration of a lack of student engagement opportunities at PWIs can be a

challenge for the success of African American students. Furthermore, PWIs often attempt to engage minorities through a single approach and neglect to promote involvement through various developmental approaches (Griffin et al., 2016). The previously mentioned tactics may be perceived as patronizing antics lacking the genuine efforts of alleviating the educational efforts of minority students. Nonetheless, student engagement may serve as a pro and con for African American students by illuminating the institution's willingness to create a culturally competent community but also exposing students to instances of racially charged issues.

Unfortunately, a plethora of colleges and universities have failed to retain and graduate African American males. First-generation African American males from low-income households appear to be significantly impacted and are among the lowest within the group to graduate from college (Brooms, 2016). Despite the relative progress of the group over the years, improvement is needed in the educational success rates for African American males in the United States (Brooms, 2016). Contrarily, HBCUs experience the greatest percentage of academic success for African American males, illustrating the importance of the institutions concerning the academic endeavors for African American males.

High achieving African American males encounter a plethora of challenges in the educational environment. HBCUs have been consistently celebrated for providing nurturing and culturally appropriate environments geared for the group's overall success. Moreover, continued research is needed to address the role these institutions play in promoting access and degree attainment for high-achieving African American males. According to Strayhorn (2012), some African American alumni indicate their early experiences with the negative stereotypes significantly influence their preference to attend an HBCU. Seemingly, HBCUs provide

environments with opportunities for positive interactions essential for African American males' academic and professional growth (Palmer et al., 2018).

The educational environment also consists of the relationships developed with faculty members. According to Schwartz et al. (2016), many minority students are naturally reticent to question instructors, which leads to difficulties fostering relationships. The exchanges between faculty members are tied to the educational success of the students. Unfortunately, too many African American students do not believe non-Black instructors see their unique abilities and view them as a monolithic group, incapable of consistently achieving at a PWI; therefore, these cultural assaults may influence a student of color's decision to leave the college campus (Schwartz et al., 2016). Many non-Black faculty members on college campuses further complicate some interactions with African American students by adhering to cultural and communicative barriers (Schwartz et al., 2016). Unfortunately, stereotypes continue to reinforce and shape the perceptions of the student and faculty relationship; therefore, both faculty and students must develop an understanding of the social and cultural underpinnings of a functional relationship in the post-secondary environment. Research supports the idea that relationships with faculty members play a significant role in the persistence of African American males towards graduation.

Indeed, the cognitive abilities of African American men aid them in persisting towards graduation in the post-secondary environment. In addition, integration into the campus community, self-efficacy, and commitment to educational goals greatly impact this group in the collegiate environment (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2013). Moreover, Winkle-Wagner and Locks (2013) posit that social and academic integration, as well as financial aid, are integral to the success of students of color in the post-secondary environment. The ancillary variables

impacting African American males hamper their progress at alarming rates (Winkle-Wagner &

Locks, 2013). Thus, educational institutions should consider abandoning their antiquated

practices of focusing solely on academic performance as a sole indicator of success in the post-

secondary environment.

African American male students' backgrounds and environments are more integral to

their collegiate experience than grades received while they are enrolled (Flores et al., 2020).

African American and White students studying at the same PWI with similar co-curricular

involvement earned similar grades during their junior and senior years; however, African

American students tend to report negative judgments regarding the institution and lower feelings

of their overall holistic wellbeing (Flores et al., 2020). Interestingly, the judgments by the

African American students did not negatively impact their grades, but it is noteworthy to

understand the campus experiences of this group and how they may impact their overall

experience in the post-secondary environment.

African American males tend to deem academic success a phenomenon that forces them

to choose between their ethnic identity and academic endeavors (Harris & Harper, 2015).

Unfortunately, educational institutions buttress this assertion by reinforcing the social and

political forms of alienation experienced by the group (Webb & Linn, 2016). The environment

on a college campus, particularly a PWI's environment, significantly impacts underrepresented

populations by creating an unwelcoming atmosphere and challenging forms of social and cultural

isolation (Harris & Harper, 2015).

Academic Achievement, Advancement, and Persistence

Students of color tend to be less likely to persist in the post-secondary environment than

other racial/ethnic groups (Stern, 2016). Furthermore, African American males are specifically

lagging in tangible measurements of academic achievement (Knox, 2018). Inequalities in race

and class contribute to the group's lack of achievement and chronic unemployment, which

results in a lack of advocates and role models for African American males (Lopez-Tamayo et al.,

2016).

While the factors related to the collective academic success of a group are noteworthy,

researchers must also examine individuals who have experienced academic success. The insights

by individuals who have maneuvered through the post-secondary environment must be measured

against those in the failing and low-performing group. An examination of the two provides an in-

depth analysis of how to manage the environment despite low teacher expectations, insufficient

preparation, lack of racial and cultural representation, and racially and culturally unresponsive

campus environment. Unfortunately, the odds for success do not appear to be in this group's

favor; however, academic success is possible if all avenues for success are pursued.

Code-Switching

The Switch

The proverbial "switch" of linguistic codes is an accessible tool that some individuals

willingly and freely employ. Sports aficionados often share the axiom, "He/she can turn the

switch whenever he/she needs to do so." Correspondingly, minorities and other marginalized

groups, particularly Black males, routinely cover themselves under the cloak of the King's

English. Seamlessly transitioning among multiple identities within numerous environments is

requisite for effective code-switching. Emdin (2016) argues,

> Some of the most successful people in the world have an uncanny ability to fit in across
>
> multiple social settings. They read the codes or rules of engagement in a particular social

field, identify which ones have value, adopt them, enact them, and through this process,

form powerful connections to new people.

The practice of code-switching is typically utilized by individuals who fully understand the context of their environment and alter their means of communication to converse with various individuals in a particular milieu. Emdin does not designate depleted income and/or socioeconomic status as a requirement for code-switching. He argues,

Code switching is a practice that has taken root in fields like linguistics, sociology, and cultural anthropology, and that focuses on where and how a speaker alternates between two or more languages or dialects in the context of a conversation or interaction. In many ways, being a code switcher requires the same process as being a social chameleon. The major difference is the explicit focus on language by scholars who study code switching. (Emdin, 2016)

Emdin is not requesting urban youth to fully assimilate to the norms and culture of the hegemonic racial group. A plethora of Black males understand the significance of recognizing their local colloquialisms and codes while concomitantly accepting the cultures of the dominant racial group and acquiescing to the need to understand and respond to their language in certain instances.

Code-switching is a skill and/or behavior that allows individuals to function effectively in various social settings (Drayton, 2014). Unfortunately, minority students, especially Black males, are often unaware of the significance of code-switching in the post-secondary milieu. According to White and Ali-Khan (2013), "Many minority students enter the university without the discursive 'codes of power' that they need both to find academic success at the college level" (p. 24). The authors continue, "Because language is so strongly rooted to culture and identity,

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many minority students see the adoption of academic discourse (also referred to as academic literacy) play a part in their respective success or failure academically and socially" (p. 24). Thus, code-switching is a viable option for Black males to engage in throughout their academic endeavors.

Cultural competence and cultural capital are also ancillary aspects of effective code-switching. John Wink (2011) suggests, "Cultural capital is a process of powerful practices: ways of behaving, talking, acting, thinking, moving, and so on. These practices are determined unconsciously by the dominant culture and are used to promote success for specific groups in our society" (p. 39). The hegemonic racial group consciously and unconsciously utilizes their privilege by forcing marginalized groups to believe code-switching is requisite to survive and advance in the post-secondary environment. Indeed, the practice of code-switching appears to be a response to the linguistic efforts of the dominant group; however, Black males should consider the benefits of slightly acquiescing to the desires of the dominant racial group without sacrificing or disregarding their identity and cultural practices (Emdin, 2016).

Freire (1993) posits the elites avoided denouncing popular education because they wanted the people not to think. He continues and suggests that the oppressor class "… cannot think with the people, neither can they let the people think for themselves" (Freire, 1993, p. 132). Seemingly, oppressors must maintain their position as the elite group within the social order. Code-switching may be a resourceful tool for Black males to utilize in the post-secondary environment. Seemingly, code-switching allows the users to freely think of the appropriate context to utilize the practice, which ultimately diminishes the power of the dominant class to control an intricate form of social group communication. Freire continues by discussing the different theoretical practices of the humanist revolutionary leaders and the elites. He says, "…

the road to revolution involves openness to the people, not imperviousness to them; it involves communion with the people, not mistrust" (Freire, 1993, p. 139). He concludes by discussing the characteristics of anti-dialogical theories used to maintain oppression by oppressors. These characteristics include but are not limited to: Conquest where the oppressor controls the people to keep them passive; Divide and Rule, which involves dividing the masses to maintain the status quo; Manipulation, where the oppressor uses manipulation to conform the masses to their objectives; and Cultural Invasion, where the invaders, "… impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression" (Freire, 1993, p. 152). Code-switching allows individuals to utilize an elaborate form of communication and threatens the status quo by creating a viable alternative form of communication. Accordingly, Black males who understand the nuances of code-switching may apply it as a tool to help them persist through the academic rigors of the collegiate environment.

Code-Switching and Double Consciousness: A Historical Perspective via DuBois

Formally educated Black men appear to be a paradox in today's society. Some individuals in the hegemonic racial group have a flagrant disregard for Blacks' being and their intellectual abilities, yet college-educated Black men defy these negative stereotypes. Accordingly, some Black men seem to ponder if they truly fit the description or depiction of what a man and/or American should be. Civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) openly discussed double consciousness and an allegorical Veil in *The Souls of Black Folks*. Du Bois closely examined the plight of Blacks in *Of Our Spiritual Strivings* and *The Coming of John*. Both chapters illuminate the past and ever-present issues related to matters of identity and oppression for Black people.

In describing double consciousness, Du Bois (1903) proclaimed, "One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 2). Du Bois adroitly articulates the supposed binary dichotomies of the double consciousness. Although Du Bois did not explicitly reference "code-switching" in the previously mentioned excerpt, it is without a doubt used by individuals maintaining their double consciousness. Moreover, the metaphorical mask furnished by the double consciousness is a constant reminder of the insider/outsider conundrum present in the lives of some Black people. Similarly, some Black men maintain insider/outsider privilege within their communities.

Correspondingly, Du Bois's concept of the Veil acknowledges the social and cultural complexities of Black folks while recognizing the racial divide impacting their ability to be recognized as equals among the dominant group. Moreover, the Veil serves as a physical and psychological representation of the cloak of divineness impacting Blacks in various aspects of their lives. Du Bois (1903) expresses his thoughts regarding the Veil, explaining,

> He looked now for the first time sharply about him, and wondered he had seen so little before. He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh. He felt angry now when men did not call him "Mister," he clenched his hands at the "Jim Crow" cars, and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his. A tinge of sarcasm crept into his speech, and a vague bitterness into his life; and he sat long hours wondering and planning a way around these crooked things.

John Jones was a fictional character who served as a representation of Black men in the South during the 19th century. He grew up in Southeast Georgia but traveled to the Wells Institute to receive formalized education and is met with the harsh realities of racism and the prevalence of the Veil. John's introduction to oppression occurred within the confines of the Veil; however, his maturation brought a sense of awareness to White men's discriminatory actions and behaviors. Although John's latter experiences were flagrantly oppressive, his departure to college was a mix of subtle forms of racism from Whites and praising from some of the Black community members. Du Bois (1903) says,

> The white folk of Altamaha voted John a good boy,--plough-hand, good in the rice-fields, handy everywhere, and always good-natured and respectful. But they shook their heads when mother wanted to send him off to school. 'It'll spoil him,--ruin him,' they said; and they talked as though they knew. But full half the black folk followed him proudly to the station, and carried his queer little trunk and many bundles. And there they shook and shook hands, and girls kissed him shyly and boys clapped him on the back.

The White citizens of Altamaha revered John for his physical abilities but adamantly opposed formalized educational enrichment. Contrarily, some of the Black citizens of the town embraced and encouraged his educational endeavors. Collectivism is embedded in the fabric of an abundance of African American families, and group accomplishments are pushed to the forefront (Flennaugh, 2016). Nonetheless, John later establishes education as a tool to counteract some of the negative influences of the Veil. The proliferation of educated Blacks serves as a threat to the continued supremacy of the hegemonic group. Judge Henderson is widely recognized as the White patriarch of the town. He also garners respect in the village based on his occupation and his social status. Judge Henderson says,

Now I like the colored people, and sympathize with all their reasonable aspirations; but

you and I both know, John, that in this country the Negro must remain subordinate, and

can never expect to be the equal of white men. In their place, your people can be honest

and respectful; and God knows, I'll do what I can to help them. But when they want to

reverse nature, and rule white men, and marry white women, and sit in my parlor, then,

by God we'll hold them under if we have to lynch every nigger in the land. (Du Bois,

1903)

Indeed, Judge Henderson's rhetoric is laced with privilege and power, and his disdain for John's

desire to seek equal treatment in America is evident in their interaction. Unfortunately, Judge

Henderson's beliefs are often a representation of a significant amount of individuals in the

dominant group. Education serves as a platform to challenge the status quo, and critical

pedagogues create conversations involving the unequal practices of the dominant culture and the

subsequent impact on marginalized groups. Furthermore, social change results from actions

taken by the oppressed to alleviate their state of affairs.

DuBois connects the concept of the Veil and the double consciousness to race and social

injustice for Black people. DuBois (1903) discusses the relevance of navigating two distinct

identities and communities and says, "to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an

American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of

opportunity closed roughly in his face" (p. 2). Seemingly, Blacks can safely assume a true

identity among individuals in their communities and utilize the language commonplace in their

cultural surroundings. However, an effort to "switch" and sound similar to individuals in the

dominant racial group is a necessity, according to DuBois, to assume the prestige offered by

certain academic institutional environments. Thus, the story of *The Coming of John* illuminates

the issues Blacks have consistently faced with code-switching in academic milieus and how the

Veil and double consciousness are an ongoing battle in the lives of African American males.

Is Code-Switching Acting White?

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) hypothesis contends that academically successful and

intellectually gifted African American students must cope with the idea that they are "acting

White" as labeled by others (Harris & Harper, 2015; Webb & Linn, 2016). Moreover, they

suggest high-achieving African American students must develop coping strategies to deal with

their success while maintaining their place in Black culture. The existence of a White hegemonic

culture within the school system led Fordham and Ogbu to believe Black students were in

constant conflict regarding their academic competence. However, Blacks are not hindered

because of their academic abilities but supported and encouraged by others in their peer groups

(Harris & Harper, 2015). The denunciation of Fordham and Ogbu's theory supports the assertion

of African American students' refusal to recognize the perception of inadequacy; rather, students

prefer to embrace their cultural identity and continue to achieve scholastically. However, some

students acknowledged the stigma of "acting White" and the internalized conflict associated with

the anxiety of fighting stereotypes coupled with achieving academic success (Webb & Linn,

2016). Therefore, the constant battle to assert one's identity is mentally fatiguing even as it

compels African American males to constantly attempt to balance societal and personal

expectations of their academic performance.

Code-Switching vs. Code-Meshing

Unfortunately, occasionally discussions surrounding unity focus on the sum of the parts

and neglect the group's individuality. For example, America has routinely been referred to as

"the cultural melting pot." The previously mentioned phrase reinforces assimilation and

completely neglects multiculturalism and individuality. On the other hand, "the cultural salad bowl," an appropriate metaphor, distinguishes America's mix of cultures while acknowledging our distinct individualities. Similarly, the argument for code-switching and code-meshing focuses specifically on assimilation and accommodation. Code-meshing is the act of combining colloquial and vernacular language in conversation and on formal assignments (Young, 2014). Seemingly, code-meshing is tantamount to accommodating the formal English language rather than attempting to assimilate into the dominant culture's form of communication. Young (2014) posits, "For many successful African American students, carrying two cultural backpacks can become an unbearable psychological, social, emotional, and intellectual burden" (p. 59). Thus, code-switching is an attempt to fit in, while code-meshing is an intentional attempt to blend two separate forms of culture and linguistic communication styles. Young (2014) continues, "If we hold a group in low regard … we hold their language in low regard. That is why vernaculars are disfavored language forms – they are language varieties spoken by the disempowered, disenfranchised, disfavored of the nation" (p. 55). Seemingly, combining the language of the disenfranchised with Standard English creates an opportunity to communicate with a larger group of individuals. Moreover, code-switching is arguably a tactic used to acquiesce to the oppressive tendency of the dominant group, while code-meshing allows individuals to infuse their culture and vernacular into the standard forms of communicating with the hegemonic group. Formal educational and professional environments tend to be conducive to code-switching; however, opponents of the practice strongly encourage the utilization of code-meshing to debunk the notion of an inability to articulate one's thoughts or intellectual ineptitude solely based on the use of Standard English (Young, 2014).

Arguably, a paradigm shift in our communicative patterns has certainly impacted the perception of code-switching and code-meshing. According to Young (2014),

Many successful, middle-class African Americans regularly use African American English at work and everywhere else. And an observable facet of American culture is that African American English speakers in politics, sports, and entertainment have lucrative careers and money-spinning salaries. So, from a certain counter-perspective, now that African American English is a more global dialect, as linguists point out, than Standard English, and, since, as Jay-Z put it, 'the mainstream done crossed over to us,' it could be argued that it's African American English, and not Standard English, that is more likely to bring about economic success.

Examples of the abovementioned notion include the late Stuart Scott's famous catchphrases on Sports Center and the addition of "bling" into Merriam Webster's dictionary. Undoubtedly, code-meshing and the meshing of African American culture and language have significantly impacted and influenced Standard English; however, there still appears to be pushback from certain areas regarding the standard use of English in certain contexts and environments. Young (2014) suggests,

Yet, despite the enormous financial potential that exists from using African American English in the global marketplace, what's apparently important about the warning Edwards et al. gives is that learning Standard English provides a measure of protection against racism. That is, African Americans are allowed to participate as members of a stratified society based on how well they keep their end of a racial bargain.

Young (2014) continues,

> That is to say, they must limit their display of African American cultural styles and use of
> African American language to sites that are near-exclusive to African American people,
> and they must keep those out of the academic, economic, and professional spheres.

The educational landscape is a systemically racist environment. Some scholars question the effectiveness of code-switching by the disenfranchised by arguing the practice reinforces two separate but valid forms of communication. Gilyard (2011) says, "perhaps the most serious flaw in the code-switching paradigm is a general quiescence about power" (p. 130). The author continues by suggesting that African Americans challenge the existing status quo by not giving up their preferred use of language at any particular time (Gilyard, 2011). Young (2014) supports this notion and states, "If we cannot ask about the function of racism in and about our classrooms for educational purposes, where can we ask it? Instead of letting prejudice be the dog that wags our classrooms, why not shake a stick at it? This is another reason why race is important for us to discuss" (p. 62). Seemingly, navigating between two languages reaffirms Standard English is the superior form of communication in academic and professional environments. However, a mastery of African American language and the meshing of Black culture into the Standard English language ultimately aids in modifying the existing method of communication. Unfortunately, some still attempt to identify the identity and language of Kunta Kinte while conveying the message through the perspective of Toby (Young, 2014). Embracing code-meshing as a byproduct of a racist society may ultimately aid in changing the existing practice of code-switching by Black males in academia.

Scholars suggest former President Barack Obama illustrates the task of seamless code-switching in the professional and academic environment. Obama, a two-time Ivy-League

graduate and a native of the south-side of Chicago, Illinois, publicly embraces his role as a code-switcher and code-mesher. In an interaction with a waitress at Ben's Chili Bowl, a popular restaurant in Washington, DC, Obama responded to a waitress's question about returning his change simply by saying, "Na, we straight" (Young, 2014). Similarly, Michelle Obama, former First Lady and wife of Barack Obama, referred to her husband as her "baby daddy" (Young, 2014). Both exchanges by the Obamas underscore the significance of code-meshing by prominent African American leaders in the public eye. Indeed, both Michelle and Barack Obama willingly and thoughtfully exhibited a form of code-meshing which ultimately made them appealing to wider demographics of constituents. Young (2014) further explains, "Obama's African American English helped him get elected not once, but – check it out – twice! And he hasn't gotten fired for talking Black. In fact, he gets mad positive attention for his use of African American English" (p. 63). He continues, "'Na, we straight' has become the basis for sociolinguistic analyses of Obama as a code-mesher and code-shifter … He certainly does not leave behind African American English in his speech or in his published writing" (Young, 2014, p. 63). Young (2014) underscores the importance of the codes in the Obamas' rhetoric while simultaneously incorporating an element of code-meshing in his text. Furthermore, Young's use of "mad" does not denote any form of anger or disdain in the sentence; rather, the word "mad" is an adjective akin to additional or praise. Interestingly, the Obamas and Vershawn Young skillfully and purposefully utilize the art of code-switching and code-meshing in their professional and educational exchanges with the masses. Moreover, the abovementioned question the clandestine operation of code-switching while acknowledging Black people can use their codes in mainstream dialogues.

Conceptual Framework: Black Identity Development

I used Sellers et al.'s (1997) model of Black Identity Development as the conceptual framework for my study. The authors' method is considered an underground approach, differing from the mainstream perspective, which focuses on the universal process of group identity and examines the individualized self-concept of racial identity. The impetus for Sellers et al.'s work is based on the perspective of Black racial identity and the need to create a focus on an Africentric view for identity development. The mainstream theories tend to assert Black Identity Development begins with a focus on anti-Black attitudes. The authors' theory creates a valuable framework for understanding both individual and collective social change. The authors' multidimensional model establishes a construct for understanding the fluid progression of Black racial identity development. A clear understanding of Black Identity Development was essential in understanding the evolution of Black students as they matriculate through the collegiate environment. Moreover, these experiences help develop a sense of how to assist this group as they navigate the post-secondary milieu and assume their identity.

Sellers et al.'s model of the 4-stage progression of Black Identity Development underscores the significance of identity transformation for African Americans. The four dimensions are racial salience, the centrality of an individual's identity, the regard with which an individual holds the group associated with the identity, and the ideology associated with the identity. The first dimension, racial salience, examines the extent to which an individual's race is an important aspect of their self-concept in a particular situation or moment. The next dimension, the centrality of an individual's identity, measures the extent to which being African American is central to the individual's definition of him or herself. For example, an individual stating "being Black is important to my self-image" is an example of an individual in this stage of the process.

The regard for group-associated identity, the next phase in the process, examines the degree to which a person feels positively about Blacks. Lastly, ideology associated with identity explores an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about how Blacks should behave. Sellers et al.'s theory provided a lens to organize and analyze the participants' responses regarding their post-secondary experiences and their involvements with code-switching.

The post-secondary environment appears to be the place reserved for identity development and seeking a greater understanding of who you are (Hernandez, 2016). Unfortunately, Black students attending PWIs tend to experience racism, discrimination, academic challenges, feelings of isolation, and cultural challenges (Harris & Harper, 2015). Black students become conscious of the presumed meaning of being "Black" by some of their White peers. Cabrera et al. (2016) suggest that Black men attending college develop a positive racial identity, which influences a positive attitude and feelings of self-efficacy. These feelings also impact Black confidence and significantly impact their academic success and overall mental well-being (Cabrera et al., 2016). Seemingly, positive racial identity contributes to the educational trajectory of Black males in the post-secondary milieu.

Navigating identities and debunking stereotypical myths is an arduous task for Black male students in the educational arena (Gay, 2018). Furthermore, the literature highlights how Black males' lives are impacted in and outside of the classroom, including how individuals evaluate stereotypes and practice self-efficacy (Nasir et al., 2013). Unfortunately, Black males are routinely viewed in a negative light and are routinely viewed as "gang bangers" or "thugs" because of their style and/or choice of dress (Emdin, 2016). These racialized exchanges represent the symbolic forces that demonstrate the tendency to view Black males negatively without truly understanding who they are as individuals. Moreover, these racist tendencies are a constant

reminder of the plight of Black males as they constantly battle against symbolic forces of oppression.

Summary

Factors impacting the academic trajectory of African American males are aspects of a recurring discussion in the post-secondary environment. Furthermore, conversations examining African American males' social and educational experiences illuminated an underlying theme among many marginalized groups at PWIs. The results of my study will help academicians gain a greater understanding of some of the experiences of African American males on campus and how code-switching serves as a valid tool for traversing the educational milieu.

Based on my literature review, Black Identity Development was a viable conceptual framework to represent some of the factors and experiences of African American males in the collegiate environment. Moreover, the literature review underscored the significant issues impacting African American males' experiences in higher education (especially PWIs) and the essential place of code-switching in those experiences. Accordingly, the focus of my study was to acquire a greater understanding of the experiences of African American males in the American South and their experiences at a PWI to gain greater insight into the issues the previously mentioned group continues to face.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

As a targeted and immensely oppressed group, Black males encounter significant issues related to equity, educational attainment, self-efficacy, and identity (Harris et al., 2018). The stressors related to being an African American male in America and these stressors within the college setting are intuitively taxing. According to McFarland et al. (2018), Black males comprise 4.25% of the population at colleges and universities, suggesting their relative rarity. Behind this dismal statistic are Black college males' experiences and stories related to their identities as Black males, including self-efficacy processes and the ability to assimilate into the post-secondary environment. Furthermore, some current research does not highlight African American males' collective efforts to persist and support one another during their struggles with racially related stressors.

For Black males in college, code-switching can become a way of life, yet understanding the nuances of the practice can play an influential role in supporting Black males' transition to the higher education environment (Allen, 2018). Moreover, a greater knowledge of the issues impacting African American males may aid in addressing stressors and encourage academic success at the institutional level. Furthermore, some individuals from other groups have struggled with understanding and addressing the individual, interpersonal, and institutional factors at play. My study could illuminate the systemic and cultural problems related to academic achievement for African American males at PWIs and acknowledge the nuanced perspectives of Black male college students.

In this chapter, I review the methods of my research study. The chapter begins with a review of my research questions, followed by the specific methodology utilized in the study. I discuss the nature of basic qualitative research with a focus on narrative inquiry. I also describe

my selected population, African American males – students and graduates – of PWIs, and provide the overview of the IRB submittal process. Next, I discuss my data collection and analysis methods, specifically highlighting the distinct analysis methods I employed for the study. The chapter concludes with a review of the trustworthiness, positionality, and limitations of my study.

Research Questions

My research questions were:

- What are the experiences of African American males at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the American South?

- What role, if any, does code-switching play regarding their academic and social pursuits?

- What do African American men perceive as key influences that helped them succeed in the university setting?

Specific Methodology

Basic qualitative research is one of the most common forms of research methodologies used in education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers who rely on basic qualitative research are motivated by an intellectual interest in a specific phenomenon and the wish to further knowledge regarding the topic. Moreover, constructivism is a lynchpin of basic qualitative studies, which allow participants to describe their experiences, explain their worldviews, and attribute meaning to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my approach to basic qualitative research, I conducted interviews and facilitated a focus group. As part of my approach to basic qualitative research in this study, I focused on narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry concerns the stories or narratives of individuals. It is one type of qualitative research that "is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an

ongoing fashion as they fall under the umbrella concept of qualitative" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 22). Human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting (Mertens, 2014). Researchers have used narrative inquiry to provide lived stories from their participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My use of basic qualitative research with a narrative focus created a sense of meaning and understanding by conveying the experiences of African American males and their use of code-switching in the collegiate environment. In addition, my use of basic qualitative research with a narrative focus in this study allowed the participants and me collaboratively to make meaning of their experiences.

Participants

According to Dancy and Brown (2010), predominantly White institutions (PWIs) is a term that describes post-secondary institutions with greater than 50% of the population consisting of White students. As an African American male and graduate of a PWI, my interest lies in the academic trajectory of this group and their educational and social experiences on college campuses. Therefore, my positionality concerning my research interest and my study is an ideal fit, especially since the research surrounding African American males' experiences in the post-secondary environment and code-switching is limited.

Participants in my study were African American males with undergraduate degrees. Respondents ranged in age from 32 to 40. The study was not conducted at a particular institution, but the participants confirmed their graduation from a PWI in the South. I contacted five African American male scholars to participate in the study, and I interviewed each participant in an individual and focus group setting. Participants were recruited by contacting my personal contacts and by open invite. Although the research sample was small, the data provided a contextualized understanding of the African American male participants' experiences at PWIs.

I submitted an application to UNCG's Internal Review Board (IRB). UNCG IRB determined the potential risks involved in the process and assessed the study in light of the overall welfare of potential subjects. After receiving UNCG IRB approval, I contacted the participants and provided a detailed explanation of my research project. Participation was completely voluntary. Respondents were given an informed consent form at the onset of the study; this document detailed their rights and responsibilities as a participant in the study. All individuals were allowed to cease participation at any time, and I was responsible for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity related to this study.

The participants agreed to and completed two 60-minute interviews via Zoom, a focus group with the other participants, and member checks throughout the study. Due to recent concerns regarding COVID-19 and social distancing, the interviews were conducted in a virtual setting. Each participant received a $10 gift card as an incentive for their participation in the study. I developed the interview questions (see Appendix A and Appendix B for my interview protocols) based on my literature review related to college access, student success, and code-switching. Similarly, the focus group questions (see Appendix C) were developed based on the previously mentioned literature and the attempt to create a dialogue among the participants concerning their collegiate experiences and code-switching. The interview protocol and focus group protocol included questions concerning participants' thoughts about attending college, their experiences with code-switching in college, and key influences that helped them succeed in the collegiate environment.

My Relationship with the Participants

As a counselor, I am comfortable creating environments that encourage dialogue and promote individual and collective growth. Furthermore, I believe communication is the

foundation for the development of healthy relationships. Due to the pandemic, I was forced to modify my research methodology and conduct my interviews in a virtual setting. The risks of contracting and spreading the virus led me to contact friends meeting the research criteria. Initially, I planned to visit a college campus and develop relationships with the participants, but the proposed obstacles and challenges proved to be a disguised opportunity. I have a personal relationship with all of the participants, and I initially thought establishing rapport with the participants may be somewhat of an issue. As previously mentioned, I am a trained counselor, and creating an environment with unconditional positive regard was extremely important for me as a researcher. Being an empathic listener was paramount and allowed the participants to share their unfiltered experiences as African American college students. My training, personal experiences, and relationships with the participants created an opportunity to create meaningful and critical conversations surrounding the African American male experience at a PWI. While the participants' accounts cannot be considered the sole example of the Black male experience, their collective voices and the commonalities across their narratives created a compelling case to encourage a closer examination into the efforts utilized to assist this subgroup on college campuses across the nation.

Data Collection

I used interviews and a focus group to determine how the participants viewed their experiences as African American males in the post-secondary environment and how they chose to utilize code-switching in the academic milieu. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), interviews with open-ended questions and focus groups tend to provide qualitative data. The authors continue, "Qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field. Bits and pieces of information from interviews,

observations, or documents are combined and ordered into larger themes" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 17). The combination of the focus group and interviews resulted in more than 20 hours of research.

Interviews and Focus Group

The interviews with the participants were my primary source of data collection, but I kept a reflexivity journal as well. Interviews are a form of recording participants' experiences and perceptions and therefore serve as a legitimate form of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant responded to a pre-drafted list of interview questions (see Appendix A and Appendix B). The open-ended questions were designed to encourage the participants to speak candidly about their collegiate experiences and code-switching. Any close-ended questions were followed by requests to provide detailed explanations to the participants' responses. I spent at least one hour with each participant during both interviews; however, I did not disrupt the interview, and I allowed the participant to continue if he preferred to do so. Furthermore, the interviews created an opportunity to examine the participants' experiences and search for commonalities across their experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. I maintained confidential records and stored the transcribed data on my personal flash drive.

During each individual interview, I recorded the conversation using the audio recording feature in Zoom. I maintained a log including the date, time, the participant's alias, language used during the conversation, repetitive patterns used throughout the conversation, and potential code-switching events. I reviewed the audio recording and focused specifically on the portions of the conversation related to the research questions. While reviewing the actual transcriptions of the interviews, I conducted coding as I searched for recurrent, emerging, and underlying patterns related to the participants' identity construction.

I conducted two formal interviews with the participants. The initial interview consisted of questions focusing on background information and their experiences as a student on the campus of a PWI (see Appendix A). The second interview focused on their academic and social experiences and the intersection of code-switching in the post-secondary environment (see appendix B). During the second interview, I also showed visual representations to spark the conversations surrounding code-switching. The visual representations provided a contextual example of code-switching, which engaged the participants to respond to their understanding of code-switching. For instance, I showed them the scene from "House Party 2," as referenced earlier in Chapter 1, to provide an explicit example of code-switching in the post-secondary environment. The member checks were provided as needed to seek clarification on the participants' responses. Lastly, I requested the participants to participate in a focus group to generate a discussion with the participants on how code-switching may occur in real time. Focus groups used within qualitative studies tend to provide an opportunity to gain insight into the participants' perspectives on understanding social issues (Lune & Berg, 2017; Morgan, 2017). The focus group created an opportunity for participants to share experiences and allowed me and the participants to point to purposeful and intentional forms of code-switching.

The interviews and the focus group allowed me to engage the participants in their understanding of code-switching. The participants were asked to define the practice in their own words and received several examples of the practice present in popular culture. The focus group also provided a safe environment with the participants to share their stories. Moreover, the focus group was used to establish a sense of community with the participants to share their experiences as students at PWIs and code-switching and its impact on African American males in the post-secondary environment.

Focus groups are a valuable tool used to explore the nuances of participants' opinions regarding an issue and encapsulate a particular audience's interpretations (Lune & Berg, 2017; Morgan, 2017). Due to the open-ended nature of focus groups, participants are often offered broad opportunities to provide input from their personal experiences and interpretations, which may result in thick descriptions (Draucker et al., 2014; Morgan, 2017). The distinguishing feature of focus groups is the use of group interaction to manufacture ideas and understandings that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan, 2017). The focus group synergy allows one participant to draw from another or brainstorm collectively, which may lead to a large number of ideas and topics being discussed (Lune & Berg, 2017; Morgan, 2017). I selected the focus group method because it allowed me access to socially constructed views, experiences, and attitudes which aided me in understanding the participants' interpretations of code-switching and their experiences in the post-secondary environment. Furthermore, focus groups access fragments of the participants' biographies and life structures, which helped me gain insights into the experiences of the African American male participants.

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

Data analysis involves sifting through the data and identifying several pertinent themes from the study. Coding the data allowed me to examine how the participants' responses and actions represent their collegiate experiences, code-switching, and key influences. Coding involves analytic, descriptive, and interpretive processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After having the interviews professionally transcribed, I coded the interviews and focus group logs. I found several common themes that resonated across the different data. As part of my coding process, I separated Standard American English from African American English and denoted

instances of code-switching to display how participants used this technique during my interviews and the focus group.

All individual interviews and the focus group interviews were transcribed. All of the interactions were recorded using Zoom, which provided a transcript for each participation interaction. I used Lichtman's (2014) steps to analyze the data for my research study. The steps were: (a) initial coding, (b) revisiting initial codes, (c) developing an initial list of categories, (d) modifying list based on additional rereading, (e) revisiting categories and subcategories, and (f) moving from categories to concepts/themes. Throughout the data analysis process, I intentionally searched for emergent codes and themes presented by the participants. Purposely analyzing the data allowed me to systematically organize the data and categorically create understanding by organizing the codes into themes. The line-by-line coding process began after all of the participant interactions were transcribed. The extracted codes were an example of symbolic data used to further identify consistency across participant narratives. As a form of member checking, the codes were also presented to the participants to verify authenticity. The participants did not challenge the authenticity of the codes but asked for additional clarification about the coding process and the emergent themes. I explained the coding process to the participants and provided supportive information about the themes of the study. Member checking was essential during this analysis process. I wanted to ensure the participant narratives were accurate and allowed the participants to provide feedback regarding the emergent themes.

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

As a qualitative researcher, trustworthiness was an integral and essential component of the investigative process. I am consciously aware of my biases and subjectivities related to my research interests and this particular study. Glesne (2011) asserts, "clarification of researcher bias

and subjectivity, rich and thick description, peer review and debriefing, and member checking"

(p. 53) are specific strategies used to promote trustworthiness within the study. Personally,

clarification of researcher bias and peer review efforts is extremely important. As previously

mentioned, I am aware of my biases, but maintaining specific protocols to address this issue was

essential.

Furthermore, Loh (2013) contends trustworthiness is the underpinning of evaluating a

qualitative study. Credibility, transferability, and dependability are interrelated concepts used to

support qualitative research study efforts. All of the individual interviews were transcribed, and I

provided a detailed account of the focus group and my observations. I provided the participants

the opportunity to review the transcriptions and my observation accounts to ensure accuracy.

Positionality

Presumably, education is tied to meritocracy. Unfortunately, Black males are stymied at

alarming rates as early as grade school, and their post-secondary trajectories are considerably

encumbered by substantial environmental and social factors (Strayhorn, 2012). I am an African

American male pursuing a doctoral degree at a Minority Serving Institution (previously

designated as a PWI in 2017) in the South. I have also attended an HBCU in the South. I have

post-secondary experiences at a PWI, a Minority Serving Institution, and an HBCU. The

participants were PWI graduates at the undergraduate level. I believe my previous experiences

were certainly essential for the study. Strega and Brown (2015) noted, "Some feminist scholars

have proposed reflexivity as an essential methodological strategy because it enables us to

examine the ways in which our own values, identities, and positionality affect our research and

particularly our relationships with participants" (p. 8). Indeed, I am over 15 years removed from

my undergraduate studies, but I am all too familiar with some of the issues related to isolation,

microaggressions, and racial profiling. Although I am a Black male college student, and the participants were also, it should not be assumed that we are a monolithic group. Indeed, there were commonalities found in the participants' stories, but each individual provided a unique perspective specific to his experience in the post-secondary milieu.

As the researcher, I am an insider and an outsider concerning the participants. The participants and I share ethnic, racial, and cultural similarities. However, I am pursuing my Ph.D., and the paucity of Black males with doctoral degrees places me as an outsider and a potential inspiration for some. I find the outsider/insider impasse applicable as a scholar and professional in the post-secondary environment. Thus, I was empathic to the dynamic between myself and the participants throughout the research process. Throughout my study, I maintained a reflexivity journal to help me account for and process the relationship between my experiences as a student and my interests as a researcher.

Throughout my life, I have found code-switching to be a valuable tool while navigating the educational system and professional environments. During the interviews, I intentionally allowed the participants to share their experiences and perspectives on the practice without interjecting and providing my accounts. Moreover, my relationship with the participants could have posed another area of concern. While the closeness of my relationship differed with each participant, I shared a common bond with each individual. Establishing this level of rapport may be impossible with a stranger and allowed the participants to be authentic throughout the interview process. While the participants did not have a relationship with one another before the study, their familiarity and comfort with me facilitated candid conversations with the other participants. To mitigate my personal bias, I documented my positionality concerns in my reflexivity journal. Lichtman (2014) posits,

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Contemporary qualitative researchers encourage researchers to be reflexive about

themselves and what they are doing … Researchers practicing these disciplines

acknowledged the importance of practicing reflexivity to retain a sense of their own

subjectivity and to further nurture the relationships and foster mutual exchanges.

Examining my thoughts in my reflexivity journal allowed me to reduce bias as I documented the

participant narratives.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of my study was the sample size of the subjects is too small to be

generalized to the broader African American male college population. Furthermore, all of the

participants were graduates of a PWI. The perspectives and experiences of the students at a PWI

may or may not significantly differ from students at an HBCU or a Minority Serving Institution.

Generalizing the findings to other academic institutions and geographic locations may further

weaken the findings of the study.

The interview and the supplemental questions may have also been a limitation due to my

familiarity and relationship with the participants. Initially, I believed some of the participants

would view the interview as interrogative and/or my counseling credentials may cause some of

the participants initially to be reluctant in sharing their stories. Historically, African American

males do not tend to speak candidly with counselors or utilize counseling services. Therefore, I

believed the interview process would pose a problem for some of the participants; however, my

relationship with participants aided their uneasiness, and they were candid throughout the

interviews. I utilized a script for the interview questions and a reflexive journal to combat the

familiarity limitation. Additionally, the empirical evidence supporting the code-switching

behaviors for African American males is scant due to the low number of African American

males willing to participate in various studies. Studies examining the practice of code-switching should be conducted in environments where African American English and code-switching are welcomed and encouraged by all participants.

Summary

Considering the statistics related to African American male collegiate matriculation, it is important to broaden the understanding of code-switching and academic success for the abovementioned group. I attempted to explore the nuanced and individualized perspective of being an African American male in the post-secondary environment and how code-switching served as a tool to aid the participants in the collegiate milieu.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The participants were candid and forthcoming about their post-secondary experiences during the interviews. Additionally, the interviews provided an opportunity to directly discuss some of the experiences commonplace for African American males in the collegiate environment. The focus group also offered an opportunity for the participants to share their experiences with other African American males from different PWIs. Based on my analysis of the data, the following three themes emerged:

- The participants relied on close, supportive relationships to nurture and sustain them through periods of uncertainty, isolation, and emotional distress during their post-secondary experiences

- Participants' self-efficacy was both positively and negatively impacted by their faculty and staff members' perceptions of them, with positive perceptions inspiring their persistence and resilience and negative perceptions unexpectedly fueling their desire to achieve in curricular and co-curricular settings

- Understanding the value of a hegemonic way of communicating and the value of cultural language in their own lives, some participants embraced code-switching to help them navigate Eurocentric environments while staying true to themselves

The discussions with the participants provided an abundance of data which ultimately led to identifying common themes across the participants' narratives. Their stories ultimately led to providing a roadmap marked with detailed hazardous images to help readers understand the nuanced experiences of African American males in academia.

My study aimed to examine the experiences of African American males at PWIs in the American South. The participants' individual and collective experiences provided a lens to

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explore the issues impacting African American males' academic trajectory. Moreover, the scholars discussed their code-switching practices or lack thereof and how their communicative methods influenced their post-secondary experience. In this chapter, I discuss each theme drawn from the data and how the conversations provided consistency across the participants' narratives. I conclude the chapter by discussing the relevance of the themes I developed and how the participants' stories are directly tied to the academic trajectory of African American male students.

Participant Biographies

Keith

Originally from a small town in South Carolina, Keith was also supported and raised by a collection of family members. He was also born to teenage parents. His mother was 16, and his father was 18. His grandmother and aunt were primarily responsible for him until the age of 13. While Keith's grandmother did not have a formal post-secondary education, she was a trained nurse and worked in the nursing home industry for more than 30 years until retirement. Keith's aunt received her bachelor's in Elementary Education, and his mother has an associate degree. Keith's father is an army veteran and also has a bachelor's degree. Keith's uncle, another influential figure in his life and a fixture in his educational endeavors, was an English and history teacher at Keith's middle school and ensured Keith exceeded the minimum academic standards set for the students at his school. Keith's mother and father went on to extend his tribe by acquiring the network of his stepparents. Keith's brother and sister are also college graduates. The inherent value of formal education was introduced to Keith at an early age. The collective group of individuals responsible for Keith's success is wide-ranging, but he attributes the love

and compassion shown by his family as an essential component to his development and overall scholarly attainments.

After relocating to North Carolina at 13, Keith went on to enroll in high school and was accepted into the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Keith's scholastic abilities made him an ideal candidate for the program. Unfortunately, Keith was the only African American male in the program and later provided an unfortunate experience underscoring some of the racist encounters he endured as an African American male student. During his high school years, he was a four-year letterman in football, basketball, and baseball. However, his scholastic accomplishments earned him an academic scholarship to Purple University (P). As a student at P, he actively participated in student government, worked as a work-study student at the library, and met his eventual life partner. Keith alluded to his involvement as a student government official created several opportunities to explore services and programs available to some minority students. However, he also agreed the institution's efforts to market services to minorities and other marginalized groups were at best mediocre. Keith's involvements were a combination of his own personal interests, a supportive familial community, and the desire to stay involved with some of his peers at P.

Keith, 39, currently works with his county's Public Health Department. He helps with coordinating the COVID Outreach Initiative to develop collaborative partnerships with local establishments to ensure they are aware of all state mandates and Executive Orders. During our interviews, Keith alluded to his fascination with the healthcare industry. He has a bachelor's degree in Biology with a minor in History and Chemistry. He furthered his education by acquiring a master's in Health Services Administration. Keith's wife is a physician and specializes in podiatry. Their collective educational efforts undoubtedly impact their child-

rearing practices. Keith discussed their intentionality regarding their son's education and social interactions. Some of the opportunities afforded to Keith's son will be a direct result of his and his wife's educational and occupational accomplishments. Furthermore, Keith understands the opportunities presented to his son are somewhat different than the opportunities afforded to him. Keith's personal experiences and distresses related to cultural mistrust and discriminatory practices impacted his understanding of institutional racism. Due in part to his experiences and upbringing, Keith and his wife refuse to tacitly accept these injustices and continue to advocate and address systemic issues impacting their son's academic success.

Moses

Currently, Moses, 35, works as a lead Human Resources expert within a medium-sized office at a federal government agency. His work with workforce development seemingly provides him with a sense of fulfillment, and he has also served as an adjunct instructor at a local community college, educating scholars on the significance of his profession. Moses's commitment to education is highlighted by his individual academic achievements. Aside from earning an undergraduate degree in Political Science with a minor in Biology, Moses also holds a master's degree in Public Education. Moses is exploring the opportunity to further his education by pursuing a doctoral degree in Organizational Development. His academic fervor was instilled and fostered by his family as a child, but his wife shares his vision of inculcating academic integrity and values with their two children. She is a licensed attorney and currently works as the Director of Student Affairs in the law school of the state's flagship institution. While Moses and his wife both graduated with their undergraduate degrees from PWIs, both earned their advanced degrees from HBCUs. Both are aware of the subtle and conspicuous differences present on the campus of both academic institutions. Furthermore, both are intentional about their academic

pursuits and accomplishments because they realize their son and daughter will undoubtedly benefit from their academic and occupational accomplishments.

The impetus for Moses's academic vigor was indubitably the result of his upbringing. During our discussions, he acknowledged the significance of his experiences as a Black male scholar and reminisced on the importance of his family at the onset. Although Moses's parents did not attend college due to financial challenges, they saw education as the avenue to endeavors beyond what they could experience. According to Moses, his parents believed education was a means to survive and achieve academic success. The youngest of five children, Moses was provided the opportunity to see his siblings navigate the educational environment in the K-12 setting and post-secondary milieu. His older brother provided the blueprint for navigating the K-12 setting while assuming the responsibilities of a student-athlete. Moses mirrored his brother's academic and athletic career; however, he continued to pursue both in the post-secondary environment. While he did not fully complete his athletic endeavors, he satisfied his academic goals on the collegiate level. Two of his three sisters also attended and graduated from four-year academic institutions. Moses is the youngest of his parents' children and seemingly benefited by watching his siblings traverse the academic landscape as African American scholars. Admittedly, Moses's older brother views his accomplishments as an impossible feat. According to Moses, his brother believes his accomplishments are somewhat a product of his willingness to compromise his authenticity. However, Moses fiercely rejects his brother's suggestion and simply acknowledges his ability to recognize the environment and adjust was instrumental in his ability to achieve academic and occupational success.

Originally from Titletownsville, Moses grew to understand the significance of race at an early age. During his K-12 years, he was surrounded by other African American students;

however, most of his teachers and administrators were White. While his inner-city demographic make-up primarily consisted of some African Americans, the White population was present and more pronounced on the outskirts of the city limits. Their presence was noted in our conversations as Moses alluded to their recruitment of KKK members within the city. While the racist undertones were prevalent in his city, the support of his parents served as a barrier against most of the town's detrimental and racist acts. His mother was a homemaker, and his father retired as an electrician from the power company. His father was a staple in the community and served as a surrogate father for several younger Black males as he also volunteered as a coach during Moses and his brother's athletic career. Undoubtedly, the relationship with his father and the relationship with his other family members prepared Moses to endure the rigors of a PWI as he departed from his family and hometown.

Phillip

Also from Titletownsville and the youngest participant in my study, 32, Phillip is the product of a dual-parent household. While his father was present throughout his childhood, Phillip's extended family aided in his development as a Black male. According to Phillip, an amalgamation of uncles, aunts, grandparents, and cousins was instrumental throughout his life, particularly during his younger years. Both of Phillip's parents are high school graduates, and he is an only child. While Phillip was conscious of his intellectual aptitude, he also embraced his athletic abilities as he navigated the post-secondary environment. Unfortunately, many teachers and coaches allowed his athletic gifts to overshadow his academic promise. The unfortunate and misinformed belief regarding African American men's abilities is pervasive in the educational system and often present in the community. Far too many believe Black males' talents in Titletownsville lie in their athletic gifts, negating the brilliance nested between their ears. While

this falsehood is consistently acknowledged as truth throughout the city, Phillip's mother and his support system reinforced the significance of acquiring an education.

Phillip went on to earn an athletic scholarship to Southern State University. He completed his undergraduate studies in three years and earned a bachelor's degree in Family and Community Service. With a year of eligibility remaining as a student-athlete, Phillip finished his collegiate athletic career at an HBCU in the South. After pursuing his aspirations as a professional athlete, Phillip chose to attend another HBCU. Phillip acknowledged a difference in his experiences at a PWI and HBCUs. He alluded to a greater sense of community while attending both HBCUs. Seemingly, his experiences as a student at the HBCUs highlighted the biases present on the campus of the PWI Southern State. He was awarded a master's degree in Higher Education and is currently considering pursuing a doctoral degree. Currently, Phillip works as Coordinator for a flagship PWI in the South and attends to the needs of new and transfer students. While he acknowledged a desire to continue helping African Americans and other marginalized groups in his current role, he envisions returning to the campus of an HBCU as a post-secondary administrator.

Phillip is also the father of a young Black scholar. As we discussed my research interests and my passion for assisting Black males, Phillip approved of my efforts as he sees a direct correlation with some of the policies that may impact his son. While Phillip's son does not primarily reside in his dwelling, Phillip is actively involved in all aspects of his life and co-parents with his son's mother. He believes his upbringing impacts his relationship with his son. His offspring is now a member of his family's tribe, and their support is similar to the support provided to Phillip as a child.

Moreover, Phillip has directly experienced the importance of education in his endeavors as a student and higher education professional, and he is intentional with his efforts to introduce the value of learning to his son at an early age. Phillip consistently reiterated his intentionality regarding his educational efforts with his son. He has introduced him to a vast array of opportunities that were not afforded to him, which may inevitably increase his cultural capital and sense of educational attainment. The acquisition of knowledge is paramount and is an integral part of his child's development. Therefore, Phillip uses his past experiences and his current privilege to provide opportunities to his son that were previously unavailable to him. Phillip believes learning is a constant process throughout one's life and affords a variety of opportunities; thus, he believes he is ultimately responsible for placing his son in a situation to flourish and not succumb to some of the matters plaguing African American males in academia.

Ralph

Though born in Florida, Ralph was primarily raised in North Carolina and is the second of three children. A single mother primarily raised Ralph, but his grandmother and aunt were also actively involved in instilling characteristics pertinent to his future academic and occupational endeavors. Furthermore, the presence of three matriarchal figures created a visual foundation by illustrating the importance of solidarity within the place of residence and the community. Although Ralph is not a female, he is a minority and shares some of the same struggles as his guardians. His family is not only a reflection of who he is, but the installation of a certain set of values provided Ralph with the blueprint for success.

As an African American male, Ralph's culture and upbringing certainly contributed to his ability to succeed in an academic and social environment. Collectivism is pervasive in African American families, and group accomplishments are often widely celebrated. Thus, members

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within his family were primarily concerned with the overall accomplishments of the group instead of individual activities within the unit. Ralph's mother did not pursue post-secondary education, but all her children attended and graduated from post-secondary institutions. Ralph's older brother graduated from an HBCU in the South, and his sister completed her undergraduate studies at an HBCU and holds a master's degree from a PWI. Ralph received his undergraduate degree in Communication and a master's of Business Administration from Northern State College, a flagship institution, and received a master's in Information Systems from a prominent HBCU. He has personal ties to both PWI and HBCU post-secondary milieus. Based on my conversations with Ralph, he believes African American males are most often supported by their parents and friends, despite the palpable barriers to their academic and holistic success. He certainly believes his personal experiences, coupled with his robust familial network, were instrumental in his academic success.

Ralph's academic accomplishments are impressive, but his sixth-grade year nearly derailed his educational trajectory. Learning new information and understanding complex concepts were never difficult for Ralph, but he admits his actions as a youth almost altered his course. Ralph was held back during his sixth-grade year and almost repeated the same feat during his seventh-grade year. According to Ralph, the course content was not the problem, but he found himself "goofing off" and negatively influenced by his friends. Ralph's contemporaries did not realize the immediate importance of their education, and Ralph actively participated in the shenanigans. Fortunately, Ralph realized the error of his ways and immediately applied himself in the classroom and earned a scholarship to a private boarding school in Mississippi. Ralph suggested the boarding school was reminiscent of an HBCU. The student body, as well as the teachers and administrators, were all African American. He described the school as a

community dedicated to the academic and social well-being of its students. Ralph also described an incident during a basketball game when his school faced extreme bigotry and racism from a rival school. The neighboring school's student body was primarily White, and during the game, individuals in the crowd hurled objects and racial epithets at the Black athletes. The game was immediately canceled, and Ralph's team escaped without being physically harmed, but the psychological trauma clearly impacted Ralph and his teammates. Reluctantly, Ralph chose to attend a PWI in the South and continued his academic endeavors. Ralph truly understood the detrimental impact of overt and covert forms of racism in the academic setting at an early age. Nonetheless, he learned from his previous mistakes in the classroom and furthered his education by earning a bachelor's and two additional advanced degrees.

Currently, Ralph works as a vice-president at one of the largest financial institutions in the nation. He has fused his knowledge of information system technology and business and utilizes his unique skill set to provide information security for his employer. Ralph also provides individual consultations to small and large-scale businesses in the information technology and security sector. Ralph believes technology is one of the most sustainable and exciting fields for minorities. He discussed his feelings of marginalization and invisibility within corporate America but viewed technology as one of the last corporate meritocracies where his skill set dictated his advancement and not the color of his skin.

Nonetheless, he is still cognizant of the barriers African American men and other minorities face in corporate America. Growing up in less than ideal circumstances, Ralph always had a passion for helping others. Aside from his position as a vice-president, he mentors other African American adolescents and works with other disadvantaged youth in the inner city with hopes of setting them on the path of higher education. He has had the opportunity to start his

own nonprofit organization and serves the community in countless other capacities. Growing up, Ralph believed college was the most logical way out of poverty. Moreover, the way out of his situation was reinforced and indoctrinated by several different avenues, but he attributes the voice of his mother as the strongest entity leading to his academic and occupational success.

Alex

Also from Titletownsville, Alex is recognized as a role model within the city and an archetypal figure in the African American community. Alex humbly rejects the idolization when presented with this assertation and simply responded by saying, "gone head." Alex's humility and charisma are only two of the characteristics many would use to describe him. His commitment to excellence was apparent in the classroom and the athletic arena and is now ubiquitous in his career endeavors. He also displays the same passion and zeal as he rears his two children, a daughter and a son, in these uncertain and tumultuous times. Alex acknowledged the admiration bestowed upon him by others but recognized his uniqueness is the product of several environmental factors and a desire to be great in everything he does. Alex is also the oldest participant, 40, and consistently provided thought-provoking narratives to create dialogue throughout the study.

Alex was the only participant with both parents holding bachelor's degrees. Furthermore, both his parents attended and graduated from one of the most heralded HBCUs in the nation. Without question, their academic accomplishments both directly and indirectly impacted Alex's scholarly perspective and pursuits. He conceded his parent's educational accomplishments were not the norm among his African American male contemporaries from Titletownsville; however, he did not allow their achievements to satisfy his desire for success. His sister also graduated from a PWI. While Alex discussed the impact of having loving and active parents during his

childhood years, he also discussed the importance of his extended family, particularly his grandparents, and their role in molding him into the man he is today. His grandparents were actively involved in the church; his grandfather was a preacher and encouraged Alex to stay grounded in his purpose. Alex referred to his purpose as his calling and credited God with creating his unique journey as he walks through life and continues to be a humble servant. For Alex, his purpose is his anchor in life, and it holds him during troublesome and confusing times. Furthermore, he believes his life and purpose have been dictated by a much higher authority—God. Growing up in the church and his family, he often heard messages about God's intentionality. They were messages about his purpose, destiny, calling, anointing, fate, and mission. He was taught, and he believes that his plan and vision will come to fruition with his spiritual guiding light and faith.

As previously mentioned, the male academically successful Titletownsville student-athlete is a paradox. While many can remain academically eligible throughout their high school playing careers, far too many cannot complete their post-secondary pursuits at the next level. Unfortunately, some are not provided the opportunity due to their grades and the barriers presented by standardized testing; others simply do not complete the task of being a collegiate student-athlete. Discontinuing their pursuits in the athletic arena or completely dropping out of college has been an all too common narrative for the Black male Titletownsville athlete. However, Alex is one of the few Black males to continue his journey as a student-athlete in the post-secondary environment and excel at an exemplary level. While his athletic gifts were noticed early, his parents were adamant about his studies and ensured success was equally valued and noticed in the classroom. Alex's academic achievements were equally exceptional in the K-12 environment and continued to be celebrated in the post-secondary milieu. The regard for

Alex's intellectual and athletic talents are well documented throughout his life, but his college football Hall of Fame induction may be considered his crowning achievement. He managed to amass statistical dominance on the athletic field while concomitantly graduating with honors, cum laude, with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration with a concentration in Information Systems. Some may consider Alex as an aberration, but he would argue he is simply the product of the seeds sewn by his predecessors.

Alex currently works as a Training and Development Officer/Assistant Vice President at a local financial services institution. Since graduating from college, he has undertaken several roles at the bank and has inevitably assumed a leadership position through his diligence and persistent efforts. He also volunteers as a coach for the local high school football and basketball teams. Overall, Alex believes one of his strongest attributes is his leadership abilities. He rejected the notion that leaders are only the ones who hold leadership positions or titles unless we consider momma, daddy, grandma, aunt, uncle, cousin, sister, brother, (and the list goes on) as leadership titles. Alex believes these everyday roles that we take on that often are unconsciously considered secondary to our more professional roles are leadership roles. He wholeheartedly believes our society is built on families, and many leaders first recognize ingenious ideas at home. According to Alex, it is at home that many parents groom their children to lead, not just follow. He realizes this idea of leadership may be too inclusive for some; however, he knows several people who lead behind the scenes and advocate. He and I both agree that several unknown activists and many others never make the news or become historical goliaths, but their acts are noteworthy, nonetheless. Our discussions highlighted Alex's commitment to his community and his intersectionalized identity group. His candor, coupled with his life

experiences, created a meaningful exchange, and his contributions to the study were instrumental.

Winston

Winston was not a participant in my study, but his presence was felt throughout several individual interviews and the focus group. He unexpectedly passed away over 10 years ago, but his legacy lives in the memory of two of my participants. Moses's reverence for Winston was evident throughout many of our conversations. He largely attributes his ability to adjust to the environment at Southern to his relationship with Winston. While Moses and Phillip's time at Southern did not overlap, Phillip also managed to develop a relationship with Winston, and the two were headed towards graduating at the same time. Unfortunately, Winston passed away just before graduating due to an unforeseen health condition. Winston's relationship with Moses and Phillip clearly illustrates the significance of relationship development for African American males at PWIs. Moses seemed to place a greater significance on his friendship with Winston as he discussed their relationship throughout his individual interviews. Moses referred back to their brotherly bond during our focus group, and Phillip immediately interjected and discussed his friendship with Winston. Winston appeared to be a larger-than-life figure, impacting the lives of a plethora of African American men across campus and in the community. His hometown was a few miles from campus, so his relationships were seemingly established before his arrival to Southern. Other individuals were mentioned throughout the interviews, but I believe Winston's presence in the lives of Moses and Phillip warranted a greater explanation into who he was and how he shaped the lives of his fellow African American male scholars. While Winston is unable to receive his metaphorical flowers, his legacy will live on as his friends and classmates continue to touch the lives of others and share their fond memories of their friend and guardian angel.

<center>**Settings**</center>

Fame College (Attended by Alex)

Located in a city with a neighboring HBCU, Fame College is a private non-profit institution known for its liberal arts and humanistic approach to learning. The smallest of the PWIs attended by the participants, Fame currently has just over 1,300 students enrolled during the spring 2021 semester. Despite their emphasis on liberal arts, Alex suggested the majority of their minority students were recruited to participate in their athletic programs. Due to the institution's size, their student support services department does not provide comparable services as the other institutions. Based on the size of their student body, the services provided may be adequate, but there seem to be gaps identified in their efforts to attend to all of the needs of their student body. Fame College is recognized for its athletic accomplishments both locally and nationally, particularly the football team's achievements. Approximately 80% of their faculty members are White, sharing a similar demographic make-up with the student body.

Furthermore, the male to female ratio is 1 to 1. After White students, Black and/or African American students account for almost 20% of the student population. Interestingly, the staff members associated with the athletic department account for the most racial diversity across campus. Due to the apparent insufficiency of some of their student support services, Alex and a group of Black alumni have made concerted efforts to improve the services afforded to minorities by creating a rich network of alumni to offer additional resources not offered by the institution.

Northern State College (Attended by Ralph)

Often referred to as a flagship institution in its state, Northern State College is recognized as one of the premier academic institutions in the nation. From their athletics to their wide-

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ranging academic departments, Northern offers many student support services to their scholars. The availability of services is due in part to the size of the institution. As of fall 2019, just under 30,000 students were enrolled in their undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs. The influx in funds created by their student enrollment creates revenue to allocate to services and programs designed to aid marginalized groups. However, according to Ralph, despite the institution's prestige and financial flexibility, they have consistently missed the opportunity truly to assist African American males and other marginalized groups. While Ralph graduated as an undergraduate 14 years ago, his return as a graduate student in 2017 did not provide much of a difference from his perspective. Ralph suggested the university's diversity initiatives fell short of his expectations, given their ability to fund dedicated initiatives properly. Nonetheless, he continued to highlight their unwillingness to be progressive in their approach to several social justice issues. Ralph believed there was a fundamental flaw among the college's leadership team, and they consistently failed simply to do "what was right." During Ralph's undergraduate years, African American males accounted for around 5% of the student body. Now, African American males represent just below 8% of the student population and are the second-largest minority population on campus. The college employs more women than men (57% to 43%), and African Americans accounted for approximately 12% of the total workforce in 2020.

Purple University (Attended by Keith)

Originally designated as a PWI, Purple University (P) is now recognized as an MSI. Of the four institutions represented in my study, P may arguably be the most progressive in its efforts and policies. Consistently at the forefront of addressing social justice issues, P is garnering recognition for its efforts to break the cyclical nature of systemic racism. Starting in 2000, the university created the minority presence scholarship to attract minority scholars and

concurrently increase the racial diversity numbers for their institution. In less than 20 years, their efforts resulted in a change in the demographic composition of their student body, changing from a PWI to an MSI. With approximately 20,000 students, just below 30% identify as Black, and almost 70% are women. Moreover, P's student body racial diversity is reflected in their faculty and staff members as well. P's Chancellor is an African American male, seemingly an anomaly among PWIs in the South, but aligns with their efforts to support their diversity initiatives. The institution's efforts to also increase diversity with its faculty and staff members indicate their intentionality. Moreover, allocating funds designated specifically to student support services further highlights their attempts to create a more inclusive community. Nonetheless, there is still considerable room for improvement, according to Keith. P has certainly improved their environment for African American males but creating inclusive milieus for marginalized groups is a nuanced process, and progressive institutions must stay abreast of the current needs of their minority groups.

Southern State University (Attended by Moses, Phillip, and Winston)

The second-largest academic institution attended by the participants, Southern State University, has just under 30,000 students. The total student population includes undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. Regionally and nationally recognized for their professional programs, particularly their medical school and hospital, Southern attracts an abundance of students. The institution also partners with their neighboring community college, which creates an opportunity to further push their diversity initiative by admitting students through their transfer program. Like Northern State College, the revenue created by their larger student body and their university hospital allows the institution to allocate funds toward various student success programs. However, according to Moses and Phillip, the institution did not consistently

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create a welcoming environment for African American males. Based on the interviews with both participants, the campus culture was not consistently conducive to creating avenues for academic and social success. The university's athletic programs are also a major component of their identity, particularly their football team. Southern is not a perennial football powerhouse but is consistently mentioned in their conference as a competitive program on the brink of manufacturing consistent success on the gridiron. The team and the school are also considered a vital part of the town, employing several residents and providing a national identity for the citizens of Drakesville.

The Schools

Providing a profile of the participants' post-secondary institutions provided a framework for understanding their experiences. The participants' experiences were unique to them but understanding their institution's demographic composition and institutional make-up sets the stage for comprehending their nuanced insights. Moreover, I was physically unable to shadow or interview the participants on their campuses; therefore, I intentionally sought their feedback regarding their institution. While I allowed the participants to provide information about their post-secondary environments, I also sought factual evidence about their schools supporting their assertations.

<div align="center">

Themes

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In analyzing my interview data, I discovered three themes. In this section, I describe each of the themes.

The participants relied on close, supportive relationships to nurture and sustain them through periods of uncertainty, isolation, and emotional distress during their post-secondary experiences

Relationship development is an ongoing process. The participants discussed some of their collegiate relationships and how those bonds fostered their development. Seemingly, the participants' peer relationships had a multifaceted connection and were interconnected in their educational successes. The foundation of participants' peer relationships was based on the communication abilities of all parties involved. The experiences of the participants and their collegiate relationships highlighted the significance of their relationship development efforts. Ultimately, relationship development was instrumental in aiding the participants in their academic pursuits. Moreover, developing supportive relationships within the post-secondary environment may inspire African American males to achieve at an exemplary level.

Relationship development and supportive bonds were pervasive in my discussions with each participant. While this theme was consistent across the narratives, each participant provided a unique perspective on their relationships and their impact on their educational trajectory. Currently, Moses works as a government official and previously attended Southern State University. Regarding developing relationships, he said,

Between pledging and the guys I hung around before pledging. We had our own lil' community. The Black folks at Southern State, we were 16% of the population. So, I was always around guys that were very popular. When I first got there, I was introduced to a dude that was very popular on the yard. Everyone knew him. All of the Black people knew who he was and as soon as I got there I was introduced to him and I was hanging out with him, so my level of exposure to a lot of off-campus/on-campus and things that the university had to offer from a social aspect, he introduced me to that very early on. Then once I pledged, another group of guys, took the level of exposure up another level and I was very entrenched in everything going on on campus.

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Moses and Winston fostered a relationship based on rapport, which benefited Moses's

development toward his educational aspirations. Moreover, their relationship seemingly created a

sense of self-efficacy for Moses. He continued,

> Winston, that's about how I was introduced to every Black person on campus. I ended up
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> getting rid of my meal plan 'cause Winston introduced me to the lady that was taking up
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> meal cards at the café. Once I got in with her, she was like, "Baby, you don't need no
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> meal card. You can get rid of that. You just come and give me a hug and you good." That
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> was because of Winston. I got out of a lot of trouble because of Winston, because he
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> knew people. He was like, "Man, I got you." … Socially, I don't know how I would have
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> fit in without Winston being there. It would have been a lot more difficult than what it
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> was had I not met him my freshman year.

Moses illuminated the significance of developing a relationship with Winston and how their

relationship manifested into other noteworthy relationships across campus. Although Moses met

other African American males before joining a fraternity on campus, he credited Winston with

providing a foundation for establishing a social status among his peers, which ultimately led to

expanding his social network and aided as he worked to complete his undergraduate studies at

the university. Moreover, the initial relational development encouraged Moses to stay, despite

his initial reticence in an unfamiliar environment; however, his ability to establish a meaningful

and supportive relationship enabled him to remove a potential barrier in the post-secondary

environment.

Phillip also attended Southern State University and forged a similar bond with Winston.

During the group interview, Phillip interjected as Moses shared an account of an influential

figure during his time at State University. The two were never college students at the same time

but were present during Winston's time at Southern State University. While discussing his relationship with Winston, Phillip said,

> Winston was a good dude … He ended up passing away the semester he and I were supposed to graduate together. Me and him had class together the last year, year and a half, and we aligned our schedule together so that we were always in class. He passed away maybe a month or two before we were supposed to walk together. That shit hurt me.

Phillip's discussion regarding his relationship with Winston was prompted by Moses's acknowledgment of the significance of their relationship during the group interview. Moses continued to reiterate the importance of establishing meaningful relationships and the significance of his relationship with Winston. Moses said,

> That was my brother! … Any Black dude that went to Southern State, if you didn't know Winston, you didn't know Black people. He made sure I ate, he made sure I had haircuts, he made sure that if there was a club we were going to, I got in free. Anything I needed; this dude was there. Always there for me, always introduced me to the right people … My uncle passed away the same week Winston passed away, their funeral was on the exact same day and I was trying to figure out a way to tell my mom I wanted to go to Winston's funeral even though her brother was being buried in my hometown. I know that's my uncle, but I don't make it here without Winston. My whole undergraduate experience was with this dude … That was my brother from the first couple weeks of school.

Both Phillip and Moses established a meaningful and lasting relationship with a fellow African American male during their time at their predominantly White institution. Seemingly, Winston

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served as a mentor and a comrade for Moses, significantly impacting his academic trajectory and social experiences at Southern. Winston's presence also indelibly impacted Phillip as he also reminisced about his presence on campus and their shared journey towards completing their undergraduate studies. Although Winston was not a participant in the study, his presence was ubiquitous during my conversations with Moses and Phillip. Both completed their undergraduate studies by utilizing their individual talents, but the presence of Winston seemingly impacted their overall experience, especially Moses's. Arguably, Moses's educational experience differs without the presence of a prominent figure during his freshman year. Moses's adoration for Winston was directly related to the bond the two developed during his time at Southern, and his desire to acknowledge the significance of their relationship was a form of reverence Moses willingly recognized during our discussions. Although Winston was unable to be present in the flesh and receive the plaudits, the significance of his existence was apparent in Moses and Phillip's narratives. Establishing and maintaining strong relationships with other African American males is a hallmark of success for transitioning into the academic and social environment of a predominantly White institution.

Similar to Moses and Phillip, Alex described the imperativeness of developing and maintaining supportive relationships with his African American classmates. Unfortunately, Alex's closest friend during college also passed away, and he credited their relationship with helping to establish the foundation for his current being. Darris, Alex's best friend and "brother," was tragically shot on campus during his junior year. Alex discussed their relationship and the nature of their dyadic friendship related to his maturation during his collegiate years. He said,

> One of the most impactful experiences I had was, unfortunately, watching my closest
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> friend die in college. He was shot and killed on campus, right outside of the gymnasium

and that was probably the most impactful thing, not just in my collegiate career, but in my life. It gave me insight, direction, and it gave me purpose. Had that not happened, I would still be who I am, but I don't think I would be who I am to the level without experiencing that loss … He was a dope dude, man. He understood me as an individual. There are a lot of people that want to be around me for what I can do for them. Some people were drawn to me because of the athlete that I was, people want to be near you. But with him, it was genuine. It had absolutely nothing to do with sports, although sports brought us together because we were teammates. We connected on a personal level.

While Alex acknowledged his individual growth, he recognized the significance of the friendship he developed with Darris. Alex's identity as an athlete was a distinguishing marker for him; however, he posited he was an individual first and foremost, and his identity was tied to his race and sexual orientation. Alex and Darris's brotherly relationship eased the transition into the post-secondary environment for Alex. The transition into unfamiliar environments, particularly collegiate milieus, tends to be easier for minorities when relationships are established with other individuals with similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, the relationship between Alex and Darris was a clear representation of how a collegial friendship transcended the minimum qualifications of an association and manifested into a special brotherhood. Alex said, "I think it is those intimate relationships, not the physical relationships. Those are the ones where you are the most vulnerable and when you are vulnerable, there's where you have the opportunity for the most growth." Alex attributed some of his individual growth to his relationship with Darris. While Alex believed he was ultimately responsible for his fate, he did not negate the importance of developing a friendship with someone who looked like him and shared a similar ideological perspective. Alex and Darris's relationship was priceless and illuminated the intersection of

relational development and individual growth for African American males in unfamiliar educational terrains.

The post-secondary experience tends to be recognized as an introduction to the world of scholarly achievement—a place filled with scholars and a heightened sense of educational attainment among members of the community. While the previously mentioned notions surrounding the environment are true, the collegiate community and ingratiating oneself are equally important for students. Successful social and academic integration into the post-secondary environment potentially increases the likelihood of academic success for African American males by creating opportunities to establish communities and friendships (Jackson et al., 2013). Ralph, an IT professional in the financial services industry, recounted his most impactful experience in the post-secondary environment and said, "Some of the relationships that I established with people. I made some pretty good friends." Ralph's statement underscored the significance of establishing and preserving relationships for African American males. While graduating and completing their undergraduate studies was consistently mentioned as a noteworthy accomplishment for all participants, Ralph's recognition of the need to establish friendships as an impactful experience was telling. Capitalizing on the need to establish relationships while concomitantly assimilating to the collegiate life at a PWI seemingly served as a source of motivation and encouragement for African American males in their post-secondary pursuits.

Similarly, Phillip elucidated the importance of creating and preserving relationships in the post-secondary environment. Based on our collective conversations, the need to establish relationships was a cornerstone to the participants' academic success during their post-secondary environment experience. The need for these African American men at PWIs to create

relationships was exponentially increased due to the lack of representation. Recanting of one of

his greatest successes, Phillip said, "Being able to build relationships and life-long friendships."

Phillip also mentioned graduating from college and completing his educational journey as a

major accomplishment, but his ability to create bonds with his classmates undoubtedly was a

factor in his ability to complete the task of graduating from Southern University. The factors

related to the educational outcomes of African American males at PWIs are significantly

impacted by their ability to create authentic bonds with their contemporaries (Goings & Bonner,

2017). Phillip was a student-athlete at Southern State University and was immediately immersed

in a culture of comradeship with his teammates and coaches. He was also provided academic

support, which served as an additional group for Phillip to establish relationships. Similarly,

Keith recognized the significance of relationship development and received input from others

regarding their perspective on the African American experience at a PWI. During orientation, a

fellow African American male pulled Keith aside and provided an unfiltered perspective on his

experience at Purple University (P). Keith recounted,

> For me, the only time I really had an in-depth conversation, as far as about preparing for
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> the experience at P and for having the right mindset, my homebody, he was an Alpha at
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> P. He's in New York now, but at the time he was going into his junior year at P. Shout
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> out to Broderick, Broderick worked on the campus' SOAR committee. SOAR was like
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> the incoming freshman orientation experience at P. They pretty much designated the
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> weekend in which you come, got a chance to stay on campus in one of the dorms, see
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> what the dorm life is like, go into the classrooms, see what it was like to go into one of
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> the classrooms. I was really like only one of the three males in that group (Black males)
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> in that particular session. He pulled us to the side and was like, "Okay." And it's funny to

think about because he code-switched in that moment and it was slick the way he did it.

He was like, "Okay, everybody is good. When you get a chance, walk around." Then he

gave us that look back and was like, "Aight, nigga. What y'all want to know? What do

you want to ask about? Do you want to know about Greek life, do you want to know

about professors, do you want to know about the hunnies, do you want to know about the

drinks, the parties, the drugs? What's up? Let's talk because I'm going to give it to you

real. I'm going to let you know how it goes down here. What to do and what not to do."

That kind of got me right in the mindset as to the expectations.

Broderick's unfiltered code-switching exchange may be inappropriate to others, but his
interaction indelibly influenced Keith's perspective on his upcoming experience at Purple
University. Keith welcomed Broderick's authenticity, and Broderick's approach seemingly
differed from the traditional orientation rhetoric offered to other incoming freshmen. While the
dialogue and the subjects discussed were probably not mentioned in the SOAR training manual,
Broderick recognized the need for a sense of community for an incoming African American male
scholar. Undoubtedly, the interaction between Broderick and Keith served as an example of the
unique circumstances impacting African American males' academic and social experiences on
the campuses of PWIs. Keith continued and discussed other impactful experiences during his
time at Purple University. He explained,

The impactful experience is a combination of things. The friends that I made. Meeting

people who wanted to make something of themselves. They understood we can party, we

can drink, we can enjoy ourselves, but I have a vision. I have a future that I want to look

out for. There's always that discipline and that reminder that we can do our thing, but I

have to go to the library, first. I got to go knock this out. Even meeting my future wife.

Seeing her discipline in class. Her saying okay Keith, we are going to go out but I have to

knock out this work, too. Seeing and being around people like that that were driven. I had

to stay driven, too, because I didn't want to be that dude that just partied his college

career away and didn't have nothing to show for it.

Keith highlighted a form of educational osmosis consistent across the participants' narratives and

how their collective groups were influential in their educational pursuits. Keith's contemporaries

were eager to enjoy some of the activities commonplace across several college campuses, but

their educational pursuits were consistently at the forefront of their thoughts and actions. Keith's

willingness to accept his contemporaries as friends and accountability partners was influential

during his undergraduate years. Collectivism is a theme consistent across the foundation of

African American families, and African American scholars tend to gravitate towards like-minded

individuals and groups in college to aid in their educational pursuits. Undoubtedly, the

relationships the participants established during their undergraduate years were influential and

served as a tool to navigate their institutional environments.

The participants' stories were complete with the significance of establishing positive

relationships during their collegiate years. Moreover, the participants' responses surrounding

impactful experiences in the post-secondary environment reinforced the need to establish

meaningful and significant relationships. The value of creating positive relationships was

consistent among all of the participants. Noticeably, the relationships established with other

African American males were different from other relationships and were seemingly essential to

the holistic development of the scholars. Phillip and Alex were college athletes and discussed the

camaraderie with their teammates; however, their relationships with other African American

males, as well as the other participants, appeared to be the most noteworthy relationships

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established during their collegiate years. A lack of relational support is seemingly related to retention efforts among African American male college students (Allen, 2018). Thus, fostering an environment conducive to relationship development was a needed tool on the campus of predominantly White institutions to improve the educational experience for this marginalized group.

I transition now to the second theme that emerged from my analysis: **Participants' self-efficacy was both positively and negatively impacted by their faculty and staff members' perceptions of them, with positive perceptions inspiring their persistence and resilience and negative perceptions unexpectedly fueling their desire to achieve in curricular and co-curricular settings.**

During the interviews and focus group, the participants consistently identified their institutional environments as factors related to their post-secondary challenges and successes. The participants expressed concern regarding their educational pursuits and the potential impediments they faced as African American male college students in the South. Each participant provided accounts and descriptions of their collegiate experiences. Indeed, education was the cornerstone of their post-secondary experience, but individual social experiences, coupled with the environment, served as legitimate and influential factors affecting these African American male college graduates.

Similar to collegiate student relationship development, educator relationships are linked to the participants' views of self-efficacy and belonging. Additionally, feelings of isolation were commonalities in the discussions. Interestingly, the participants openly discussed challenging stereotypes as a motivating factor in their push to validate their presence on their respective college campuses. Many students struggle with the transition into college, and the participants

reported feelings of isolation, invisibility, and supervisibility. Consequently, the feelings of despair could have significantly impacted the participants' experiences and their attrition rates. Therefore, instructors must be aware of the importance of cultural competence and should aim to create a welcoming environment for marginalized groups.

Interestingly, Keith detailed instances during his high school years that influenced his perception of educators' beliefs of his intellectual abilities. While educators were present in Keith's family and were actively involved in his educational endeavors, an unfortunate yet frequent incident among African American males occurred. Keith explained,

It was my IB geometry class and I was doing fairly well in the class. I inevitably finished up with a B but I specifically remember one incident where we were taking an exam and we were given a scratch sheet of paper to, you know, if we had an idea of what a formula was from our notes, we were able to take the notes down on the scratch sheet of paper and go to the exam and use that as our scratch sheet. Something happened and my sheet dropped on the floor and I am picking it up and, I guess, my teacher saw me and she thought I was picking up notes from another classmate. Another White classmate, and she thought he was giving me the answers so I could pass. She didn't think that I could do it and she tried to fail me.

While Keith's experience took place during his high school years, the experience was commonplace among African American males. The environment was different for Keith, but the teacher attempted to assert a form of intellectual inferiority complex on Keith compared to his White contemporaries. During the initial portion of the conversation, Keith mentioned the lack of diversity in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which he believed led to the

instructor's false accusations. Fortunately, the presence of parental support, coupled with Keith's perseverance and academic rigor, showcased his intellectual aptitude. Keith said,

> I remember coming home hot. I told my dad, "We need to go back to campus right now because this teacher is accusing me of cheating." I've never needed to cheat in her class, she's not going to rob me of this grade, and at this time I'm playing all these sports. I'm playing football, basketball, and baseball. Coaches were saying don't do this and don't do that, because if you do then you don't play. I remember my dad coming back to campus. We had the principal in there, we had the A.D. in there, and we had the teacher. I said, "If she wants to, she can give me the test right now. I will take it in this office to prove I am not a cheater because she thinks I am a cheater." I'm the only Black boy in the class so she thinks I need to cheat to pass. Nevertheless, the principal says, "Aight, give him the exam again when he is by himself before he goes to practice." I went in there and aced the exam and ended up finishing the class with a B, but that was one of the most vivid examples of when I was stereotyped as "Oh, he's the lone black sheep in here, he's an athlete so he's really not going to know how to do this." … Once I was able to gain that confidence and see my parents and my coaches have my back on that, yea, I was cool.

Keith discussed the importance of support during his dispute with the geometry instructor. He specifically referenced the support provided by his father and his coaches as being integral to developing his self-efficacy at an early age. The participants demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy due to the backing of their immediate support system. Keith also recognized the responsibility of completing his studies as his obligation; however, acquiescing to the procedural changes by the administration and the instructor was possibly an unfair act. Keith was steadfast in his approach to proving his instructor wrong. Unfortunately, countless other African American

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males are stereotyped and may not display a similar form of academic vigor as Keith and resort

to believing the system is designed to fail Black students. While the aforementioned is a

debatable topic, the truancy rates of African American males in high school and retention rates of

African American males in the post-secondary environment support the notion of a faulty

education system (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Indeed, the transition into post-secondary institutions

for African American males could be aided by the utilization of familial support systems, but

educators must be held accountable for reinforcing inaccurate stereotypes.

Keith, arguably the participant most involved in co-curricular activities, also maintained

his institution did not consistently meet the needs of African American males. While he and

some African American students were cognizant of some of the services provided by the

university, he appeared to become aware due in part to his involvement with student government.

Conversations with Keith revealed other African Americans were unaware of the benefits of

joining these organizations and the experiences afforded. Keith revealed the same group of

students were often the same faces seen on trips and other involvements with some of the groups

formed to benefit minorities. The transition from high school to the post-secondary environment

can be extremely difficult for African Americans due to the perceived lack of support institutions

offered to marginalized groups (Allen, 2018). Keith continued to highlight his knowledge of the

availability of resources for African Americans, but he conceded to the institution's lack of a

concerted effort to seek out African American males to utilize the available services. Based on

the participant pool for my research study, Keith appeared to be in the minority regarding

participants in co-curricular activities. There were two football players, but some would argue

student-athletes are similar to college employees. The other two participants shared their

participation was due in part to a combination of a lack of interest and a lack of institutional

encouragement. While these individuals successfully navigated the landscape of a PWI in the American South, far too many are not equipped with the tools to traverse these unfamiliar lands.

Alex's post-secondary experiences also denoted issues related to support from educators; however, he discussed an exemplary experience with his communication instructor. He explained,

I don't think that some of my professors realized that I was smart like I was/am. I don't think they expected, not only my effort, but my intellectual being, I hate to even say it, but for context a star athlete. I just don't think they expected it. I can remember going to one of my classes, Interpersonal Relations, probably one of the most prolific classes I have ever taken in my life, just understanding people. I remember going back to see my grade and she's putting it up and she looks at me and she says, "You're going to give football players a bad name." I was like, "Why do you say that?" She always had this stoic look on her face, people were always afraid of her because she didn't smile. If she smiled, it seemed like a sarcastic smile. She looked me dead in my face and said, "You are the first football player to ever make an A in my class." It just blew me away. For the first time, she looked at me and smiled. It was powerful and I see her today and she will look up at me and come to me and hug me and smile. She will converse with me and it's like that relationship that we have today is based upon the hard work that I put in her class.

Alex discussed the stereotypes prevalent during his post-secondary experience and the unlikely establishment of a relationship with his professor. Interestingly, athletes did not earn As in the professor's class; however, Alex exceeded the instructor's expectations and debunked the notion of academic mediocrity for African American males and football players. Alex suggested the

instructor's attitude was flippant and appeared to be dismissive among his contemporaries. However, challenging her presupposed notions created a lasting relationship. The supportive academic and social networks proved to be imperative for this resilient group of Black male scholars in the post-secondary setting.

Furthermore, the participants' relationships proved to be significant factors impacting their academic success. Alex maintained the course was "one of the most prolific classes he had ever taken in his life," which may be related to the establishment of a significant relationship with one of his educators. The support offered by the instructor was a result of Alex displaying his intellectual aptitude. Fortunately, a bond was established, and an idea was debunked based on Alex's willingness to challenge the status quo in the instructor's course.

Alex and Phillip elucidated their perspectives regarding support for African American males in academia. An assortment of support can significantly improve the likelihood of Black male success in the collegiate environment. However, both participants indicated support from faculty and staff, or the lack thereof were pivotal factors related to their success. Furthermore, the students asserted self-efficacy was related to some of the benefits of transitioning into the college environment. Seemingly, some of the participants were prepared for the academic rigors, but the lack of institutional support undeniably impacted their collegiate experience.

Phillip's story highlighted impending feelings of fortitude and isolation. Unfortunately, Phillip's account was all too familiar, as several other participants shared similar experiences. He recounted,

> I attended Southern State University and most of my impactful experiences, they were
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> negative. I can't even say that they were, some were racially driven, because it's like it
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> also came from people who look like me. I remember a Black professor in a psychology

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department told me I didn't belong there, which was shocking because, you know, being

in that environment, you look to latch on to people who look like you because it's such a

predominantly White institution. This was my senior year and I was on my way to

graduation and he said that to me in my last semester which was shocking because I spent

the last 3 to 4 years proving that I belonged, proving that, and to hear that from

somebody, I thought I could identify with, pretty much, shifted my reality a little bit. It

goes to the cliché saying, "All skin folks ain't ya kin folks." That experience alone made

me think that the game is different. Everybody ain't gonna embrace you. Everybody's not

going to celebrate you, whether you look like them or not. So I can't tell you the exact

mindset it put me in, but it happened at the beginning of my last semester and that's when

I said I need to take this experience, graduate, get into a field where I can have some type

of impact mentoring and educating because I didn't want any other student in this type of

environment to experience that.

Phillip's interaction with his environment, particularly his post-secondary institution, impacted

his career trajectory and his perspective on individuals equipped with aiding him in his academic

pursuits. Phillip's exchange with his professor was not an uncommon experience but seemingly

influenced his perspective of Black professors at his institution and propelled him to seek a

profession that would allow him to provide academic services to other students. Although the

professor was Black, he did not provide the stewardship Phillip expected from a fellow African

American. While Phillip relentlessly tried to prove his worth over four years, this particular

instructor believed he was unworthy of his position as a student at the institution. Seemingly,

Phillip's growth and success were not solely predicated on the desire to develop and maintain a

dyadic relationship with a faculty or staff member. Phillip and his professor's lack of a

relationship was the impetus behind Phillip pursuing a career in higher education. Seemingly, the shortcoming in their relationship created an avenue for other Black male scholars to receive the guidance and stewardship Phillip failed to receive at Southern State University.

Phillip's interaction with his psychology professor indelibly impacted his experience and encouraged him to create significant relationships with other African American males, one which embraced his individuality while concomitantly instilling feelings of educational aptitude and confidence. As a group, the participants shared similar collegiate experiences, but their individual occurrences were duly noted. Phillip articulated his thoughts regarding the treatment he received from a faculty member of the same race. The desire to develop a relationship with someone who may have shared similar experiences in the educational environment was negated once the faculty member suggested Phillip "did not belong." However, he inspired Phillip to persevere and seek a career opportunity that would allow him to help younger African American males passionately pursue their academic endeavors. He also recalled an experience with his peers and debunks the myth of dimwitted African American athletes. He said,

Just being a Black athlete, people having the perception that you are only here because you can run a ball, you didn't earn it … I was in a math class in a summer session and I forgot what was said but it was something to the effect of "if you feel like you can't handle this class, get out of it right now, it's going to be fast-paced." I remember taking the test and you know how people try to do the whole, no you can't copy mine, so us being athletes in the class, the other students, who didn't look like us took that same approach. Covering their test and scooting their desks to the corners of the room, like you're not going to copy off of me. So, cool. The test results come back that next Wednesday, I believe. We took the test on a Friday. The teacher comes back handing out

all of tests with the names and he said something like, "Well, this one test made a 100 but it doesn't have a name on it." Everybody has their paper but me. I raised my hand and said that would be mine. So, from that experience, it was like, "Can you tutor, can you tutor?" I was like, "Na." I remember sitting down and you wanted to scoot your desk by the door. You should have been copying off of me. Now look at you (laughs). You know what I'm saying? It's just that feeling that people think you don't belong here because you play a sport and the stigma that's attached to it. Na, I'm just as smart as you.

Phillip's dialogue highlighted the inaccurate and common perceptions of African American student-athletes on the campus of PWIs. He mentioned attending class with his contemporaries, but their actions suggested a form of intellectual superiority during the test. Fortunately, their assumptions regarding Phillip's intellectual abilities were proven wrong based on his performance on the exam. While Phillip's words and tenor were jovial, the experience is an unfortunate event marring the experiences of far too many African American males in the post-secondary environment. Furthermore, Phillip explicitly referenced his intelligence and sarcastically suggested the students should copy his exam. The misconception of Phillip's abilities impacted his perception of his professor and his peers; however, his experience did not encourage him to abandon his scholarly attainments but emboldened him and reinforced his confidence. Thirty-two percent of Black men begin their academic careers at a 4-year institution, and two-thirds drop out before completing their course of study, which is one of the highest attrition rates among all sexes and racial groups in the collegiate milieu (Mars et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). Phillip acknowledged his status as a student-athlete but did not believe athletes were incapable of excelling in the classroom. Fortunately, the experience did not hamper his pursuits but served as a motivating factor in his academic endeavors.

Alex and Phillip's collegiate experiences as student-athletes share commonalities surrounding camaraderie with their teammates and feelings of isolation as African American athletes on the campus of PWIs. Both shared experiences of notoriety while interacting with their peers and acknowledged their treatment changed once they stepped off the field of play. Furthermore, their experience with their professors differed significantly. While their instructors seemingly tested Alex and Phillip, Alex developed a relationship that allowed the instructor to see past his physical gifts and recognize his intellectual abilities. Initially, Alex's professor only saw him as a football player and had preconceived notions about his abilities in the classroom setting. Although Alex superseded her expectations and seemingly served as an outlier, she acknowledged he would "give football players a bad name." According to Alex, the majority of the football team was African American. While Alex appeared to persevere and earn an A, several other African American football players may have indirectly or directly been mistreated based on the professor's bias towards the group. Unfortunately, the educational experiences of African American scholars tend to be marred by disadvantageous exchanges with faculty members assuming their intellectual abilities are subpar (Schwartz et al., 2016). While Phillip also exceeded his professor's expectations, he displayed his frustration with his instructors and peers. He discussed the experience and chuckled when discussing the aftermath with the professor; however, he clearly expressed a sense of frustration with the situation.

Interestingly, Keith did not explicitly report negative experiences with any faculty or staff members at his institution. He mentioned not having relationships with the administration or faculty members during our conversation but recalled frequently interacting with various faculty members on and off campus. According to Keith, he did not "have much of a relationship with administrators." He continued,

The only time you really saw them (administrators) was during homecoming. You would

see them at the sports banquets or the big alumni dinners. They weren't accessible like

that … Now, the professors, I would see my professors all of the time and I think the

other thing that helped is that quite a few of them were Greek.

Seemingly, the relationships with the administrators on campus were non-existent due to their

absence from the student body; however, the professors created an opportunity to develop a

relationship based on their communal appearances. Keith served as a member of the institution's

Student Government Association and was a member of the NAACP. His membership with these

organizations generated opportunities for Keith to mingle with campus faculty and staff

members. Moreover, his position as a part-time employee in the library also created

opportunities to dialogue with and create sustainable relationships within his environment.

Although the opportunities to interact with faculty outside of the classroom were available for

Keith, he did not develop any lasting relationships with the faculty members, which underscored

the difficulties African American males face with developing relationships with faculty and staff

on the campuses of PWIs. The conversations with Keith underscored the need to establish

relationships with faculty and staff members for African American males as reflected in their

attrition rates at PWIs. Establishing relationships with advocates familiar with available

resources could have helped the participants tremendously and helped retain other Black males.

Unfortunately, none of the participants reported relationships with the faculty and staff members

at their respective institutions. While all participants persevered and graduated, far too many

Black males enrolled at PWIs aimlessly maneuver through the educational process without

receiving direction from faculty and staff members across campus.

While Moses sought relationships with his peers, the lack of a supportive relationship with faculty members was not consistently evident. Moses openly discussed the significance of establishing a relationship with one of the cafeteria workers and how their relationship proved to be beneficial; however, he explicitly states relationships with faculty members were "nonexistent." Fortunately, Moses developed significant bonds with his peers and fraternity brothers, which aided in his academic pursuits. The competition with his fraternity brothers forced Moses to compete with his friends, which simultaneously earned him exceptional grades. Unfortunately, he did not establish meaningful relationships with faculty members during his time at Southern State University. The relationship between faculty members and African American males is extremely important, but establishing some connection while matriculating through the post-secondary environment can be equally vital.

The participants' narratives provided insight into the post-secondary environment from the perspective of an African American male college student. The educational rigors were noteworthy among the group, and the social dynamics produced additional points of consideration for the scholars. The participants provided stories detailed with examples of relationship development and support, environmental adjustment issues, and proving their value as scholars on the campus of PWIs. While the participants' experiences were unique, the commonalities across their stories created opportunities to intervene and modify the existing system and environment on the campuses of PWIs. Furthermore, discussions regarding the impact of code-switching or the lack thereof allowed the participants to discuss their utilization tendencies during their collegiate years and how the practice has evolved in their professional settings.

I turn now to my final theme: **Understanding the value of a hegemonic way of communicating and the value of cultural language in their own lives, some participants embraced code-switching to help them navigate Eurocentric environments while staying true to themselves.**

The discussions with the participants delivered an understanding of their varying perspectives on the usefulness of code-switching. The video clips from "House Party 2" and Key and Peele that I showed during the interviews created opportunities to reference examples in popular culture and allowed the participants to explore similar occurrences in their interactions with others. While the clips had a comedic undertone, the shared experiences were authentic among the participants. Though everyone did not share the exact perspective on code-switching, each participant acknowledged an understanding of the practice based on their life experiences, our conversations, and the visual representations in popular culture. The intersectionality of Black Identity Development and code-switching was present throughout the discussions surrounding their post-secondary and professional experiences.

The immediate responses to the video clips were a combination of humor and reality for the participants. Although both clips, "House Party 2" and Key and Peele, were comedic, the humorous undertones were significantly influenced by the authenticity captured by the directors. While both segments may appear to be a farce to some, all of the participants recognized the communicative game at play between the actors and the recipients of the message. Below are responses from the participants.

Keith said,

I've had that experience before and not so much in the college setting but just being

around someone who code-switches so hard, right. They don't just gradually go into it …

It's one thing if I code-switch with you and here's what I think when it's extreme. When I go from, "Hey, Dr. J.D. How's everything, brotha" to "Well, J.D. How are you today, sir" (change in tone and inflection and laughs). Like, that's too much. I shouldn't have to do that. And that was exactly what he did. He was like, 'I was just telling Duncan that this is the most astute college' (bursts into laughter). You can still do it, but I feel like if you have to change the entire inflection of your voice and everything, that's doing too much.

Alex said,

Yo, the crazy thing about it, man, I do that. I do that because, for those people that, like the White guys, I speak their language. So, the White guys I know, I'm interacting with, I shake their hand. I shake their hand in a way their culture embraces. I mean, I've shook some of their hands and pulled them in and you could tell there is a level of discomfort there. I do what makes them comfortable. I shake their hand … I still pull some of that in because we have that relationship, but the dap is for the boys. It's us. I could not even know their name.

He continued,

I'm going to meet my people where they are. I'm going to speak their language. Some people appreciate it and some people won't. Some people will call it, I guess, code-switching. That individual that I'm speaking with, as long as they feel like I'm being genuine to them, I don't care what anybody else has to say.

Moses said,

That's 100% true! This is real life! We don't need Key and Peele, Obama when he dapped up Kevin Durant. Yo, we recognize each other and I think we respond to that. I

think that's that level of comfort where it's like look, we speak a language, the nonverbal

… I think we respond the same way and that happens on a daily basis and it goes back to

the nonverbals that we kind of recognize from one another. There's some identity there,

non-spoken. If I come across a Black dude and he doesn't respond to me doing that, I'm

like, 'What's wrong with this dude?' This dude's weird, I can't rock with him.

Phillip said,

To me, if you and I were talking and I did something like that (referring to 'House Party

2' scene), I would want somebody to pull me to the side and be like, "Boy, stop tap

dancing." Because that's what that looks like to me. That's beyond code-switching. That

right there to me mirrors imposter syndrome more so than code-switching. Code-

switching to me is, again, just knowing your audience and knowing when and how to

deliver your message. Switching up, being a totally different person, that's imposter

syndrome because you already feel like the person you are does not fit the environment

that you are in. I know I belong. I just need to tailor my message in a way that I know

that everybody who's in this environment with me gets what I'm trying to say or

articulate.

Ralph said,

The first one goes right along with my previous statement about the 'white collar' people

see it as a play you have to make in a game you are trying to win. Another way to look at

it, a word came to mind, called 'infiltration.' The reason you infiltrate is because they

wouldn't otherwise allow you in. So the way I view is, I'm fortunate enough to work at a

company that praises and practices diversity, but for the most part, you have to infiltrate

corporate America and a technique for doing that, it's unfortunate, but you have to Trojan

Horse that thing. You come in and you be the version of yourself that you think they want

you to be, you get in, and then you open the door and start bringing in people with you.

It's funny because I know how that first scene turns out, but you still have people that

will try to use that to their advantage.

He continued,

That's one of my favorite clips because me Austin, we do the tuck all the time (laughs).

"I'm in there, you in there?" It's very funny because it goes to show that, it's like this.

What he is doing is interacting with White people in a certain way but then when he

interacts with Black people, he's more warm, he's embracing them, he's using slang. To

me, what he is doing is, he's looking at them and saying, "I see you." We have a shared

cultural identity and a shared history that this person doesn't have and I'm going to

acknowledge you by greeting you the way I would if this White man won't right here. So,

I think it's pretty dope and funny, of course.

The participants consistently acknowledged familiarity with the content present in "House Party

2" and the Key and Peele clips. The content sparked reactions from the participants and served as

a reference point for engaging in dialogue about the relevance of code-switching. Interestingly,

all participants understood the humor in each clip and recognized an element of authenticity in

each video.

The intellectual abilities of African Americans continue to be a theme of contention in

media. The clips from "House Party 2" and Key and Peele are comedic but underscore the never-

ending struggle of African American men battling the stereotypes of the hegemonic racial group

while maintaining their authenticity within their racial and cultural assemblage. Moreover, the

presentation of African American males is largely attributed to the misinformed representations

of the subgroup, which inherently reinforce stereotypes and impact the institutional policies impacting the collective group (Lee, 2018). Nonetheless, African American men in the post-secondary environment continue to persevere despite the apparent slights present in the media and consistently attempt to recreate their narrative.

Sellers et al. (1997) posited that the socialization process leads to identity development through stage development. The ability to "code-switch" may be considered an advanced understanding of the changes within the environment and the requisite adjustments. While the majority of the participants acknowledged and referenced the ability to code-switch, Alex challenged the premise of code-switching among African American males and provided examples of the practice among other groups. According to Alex,

When I look at people saying code-switching, being fake, being phony, doing this, doing that, I don't buy into that. I don't succumb to that. I look at it as you are adapting to your surroundings. Whenever I am with my daughter, I'm going to be different than when I am with my sister. When I'm with my sister, I'm going to be different then when I'm with my friends. When I'm with my friends, I'm going to be different than when I am at work. At the same time, at my core, I am still the same person. How I articulate my message to the audience changes based upon their ear. I am going to speak to them in the manner in which they will receive it, so I don't buy into the whole labeling things to bring a negative connotation to it and I think that's one of the things that we have to do as Black men is stop allowing people to put negative connotations on what it is we are doing to survive.

Alex did not subscribe to altering how he communicates with individuals but did recognize the differences present in his dyadic conversations with others. He suggested the stigma associated

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with code-switching was partly due to African American men modifying their communicative styles based on the desire to acquiesce to some of the cultural norms of the dominant racial group. Alex continued,

> I guess everyone code-switches. I remember coming down and we reported to camp, got in our rooms, and went around and got our keys and everything and got moved in. Then we had a meeting. Coach is standing on the stage, our families are in there … I remember sitting in there and Coach is standing up there on stage and he's like, "Here at Fame U, there are three things that we focus on. God, family, then football." He said all of the right things, all of the right things, and I'm so inspired. I'm ready to run through a brick wall for this man. Then the parents left and I'm telling you he turned into someone completely different. I was like, did they take your filter with them when they left? Again, it's your audience … Whoever his audience is, he can cater to his audience.

During our initial interview, Alex acknowledged being unfamiliar with the term "code-switching." However, when provided the definition of code-switching and comparing the process to being a social chameleon, Alex understood the process and recognized how he previously utilized the practice during his post-secondary years and in his professional environment. While Alex understood the process, he vehemently denied modifying who he was to fit the desired needs of others. Instead, Alex embraced the act of communicating with other African Americans in a colloquial language that included them regardless of any environmental change. He said,

> I think people just appreciate people just being genuine. I could be in the bank, when I was managing the branch, and someone would come in and I would speak, come up to him and shake his hand, and he was an 80-year-old White guy. Someone else could come in, "Hey, what's up, bruh?" and dap them up. Most people wouldn't react that way in that

setting, but I'm going to meet my people where they are. I'm going to speak their

language. Most people will appreciate it and some of them won't. Some people will call

it, I guess code-switching, but that individual that I am speaking with, as long as they feel

like I'm being genuine to them, I don't care what anybody else has to say.

While acknowledging the duality DuBois references in double consciousness, Alex does not

ascribe to the two warring dichotomies one must battle as an African American male attending a

PWI. He neglected the environment and focused solely on his communicative practices with the

individual and disregarded the perceptions of others in the surrounding milieu. Alex's initial

unfamiliarity with the term seemingly created an opportunity to dialogue about the formal

definition of code-switching. Nonetheless, his unawareness of the term did not negate his

experiences with the practice. Alex understood the concept but adamantly believed attaching

negative connotations to survival mechanisms of African American males was inherently

deleterious and perpetuated the schism between the dominant racial group and his Black brothers

and sisters.

Overwhelmingly, the participants' responses to code-switching as college students were

markedly different as they transitioned into their professional positions. The participants openly

acknowledged an unwillingness to code-switch during their collegiate years. However, most of

the participants discussed their agency as a factor in their willingness to modify their code-

switching practices in the workplace. While discussing his code-switching practices in college,

Alex said, "When I was in college, I was just me. Like it or love it or not, it didn't matter. I was

100% myself." When referencing the authenticity with choosing not to code-switch, Alex was

seemingly in the racial salience stage of Sellers et al.'s racial identity development model. While

Alex understood the act and ability to switch as a professional, he openly addressed his

unwillingness to acquiesce as a college student. Similarly, Phillip and Keith conceded to sharing

similar perspectives on code-switching as college students. Phillips stated, "As a student, I

wasn't really conscious of it that much. When I was in school, for the most part, I was around my

peers so I could speak and deliver things how I wanted, just naturally, because we are around the

same age to understand each other." Similarly, Keith said,

> When it comes to code-switching, I would probably say the majority of times that I have
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> done it has probably been in the workplace. During my time at P, I didn't really think
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> about it because at that age you're not really concerned with code-switching because you
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> are not in that professional world. You just do it, you just say it, you just do it. You're not
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> thinking if I say this or say that, I will lose my job or it will impact my family. So I think
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> as an 18-, 19-, 20-, 21-year-old, you're not thinking of the impact it will have talking a
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> certain way or saying certain slang terms.

Keith suggested his opportunities to not code-switch in the post-secondary environment were

minute because his interactions were primarily with his contemporaries. Similarly, the other

participants discussed their collegiate experiences with code-switching, and their exchanges were

mostly with their peers. For marginalized groups, dialogue with contemporaries may change

when conversing with individuals in positions of power. Thus, altering communicative patterns

tends to be acknowledged as a form of acquiescing with the cultural norms of the dominant

group. While the participants acknowledged their preference to remain authentic in their

conversations with their peers, the consensus to alter their linguistic patterns in their respective

professional careers was attributed to recognizing the individuals in a position of power at the

PWIs were also the same individuals with power and privilege in corporate America.

In America, Standard English is widely considered the criterion for exemplifying the ability to communicate effectively. Furthermore, this consensus often challenges minorities to accept this notion as a fact to achieve their occupational endeavors. However, the participants openly discussed their communicative practices as students versus their style of dialogue as working professionals. According to the group, their ability to understand and engage in conversation using Standard English was widely recognized as a skill to corporations and organizations. As Ralph suggested, "Most jobs require employees to be effective communicators in the oral and written form. Unfortunately, we have to conform, to an extent, at least, initially." Ralph's response underscored the consistent acknowledgment of Standard English as a benchmark for determining an individual's ability to clearly and effectively communicate in corporate environments. While the majority of the participants reinforced Ralph's suggestion, Alex offered a different perspective and detailed an interaction with his supervisor, and said,

> The CEO and President at the bank I work for, I don't switch at all for him. At all. Now if
> we are in a professional setting, if we're in a meeting, if he and I are in a meeting, the
> way I interact with him in a meeting is going to be different based on how I interact with
> him one on one. Because of the simple fact, I'm respecting the position. I'm respecting
> and I understand the hierarchy and I don't want anybody else to look at it and say, "Dang,
> Alex just talks to him any kind of way." And then they don't respect the position. He's
> either going to have to quote-unquote put me in my place or let it go based on the
> relationship … I govern myself accordingly based on the environment we are in.

Alex understood the nature of relationships, and how he communicated with his supervisor was seemingly an earned privilege that may be inaccessible to others. While Alex remained steadfast in his approach to challenge the parameters of code-switching, he understood the bureaucratic

hierarchy present in the workplace and diligently worked to not present as an insubordinate but remained true to his authentic self. The participants consistently battled the task of navigating environments in the workplace, which consistently challenged their authenticity. Gaining access to these previously secluded spaces is a product of hegemony and long-standing practices of excluding minorities, specifically African Americans, from voicing the perspectives of marginalized groups; therefore, the participants learned to transparently and effectively communicate with their supervisors. Ralph, a vice-president in the financial services industry, echoed Alex's sentiments regarding embracing a more authentic version of himself in the workplace. According to Ralph,

> Historically, I have tended to code-switch because I thought that was what was necessary to achieve success or to be viewed as intelligent by the majority. I do it less and less now, to be quite honest with you, for multiple reasons. I work in a corporate environment that asks us to bring our whole self to work and to be authentic to ourselves when we are at work, so I just try to be who I am and try to not necessarily code-switch because I feel like the further along in my career I get, the more agency I get, I feel like I don't necessarily have to conform to anybody's way of conversing or communicating.

Ralph's willingness to code-switch less was a result of understanding the environment and gaining agency. While Keith has always had a voice, others receiving the message he conveyed through speech were not always receptive to the message based on the presentation. According to Ralph, engaging in the practice of code-switching was once a way to prove his intellectual aptitude in the post-secondary environment and other milieus. Unfortunately, the participants recognize fluency in Standard English is widely considered a metric for measuring intelligence. Ralph stated,

I view it as a necessity because, oftentimes, your Blackness is an actual barrier for entry into corporate America. So, the smart ones, I won't say smart, people who recognize that as a barrier, recognize that in order to get through that barrier, you have to code-switch. Unfortunately, it kind of goes back to being called well-spoken. That comes from your ability, in their opinion, to code-switch.

Ralph's perspective on the practice highlighted the maneuverability of African American men in spaces that do not truly welcome their authenticity. Some African American men are valued for their ability, which grants them access and agency, but inclusivity of the environment continued to be a place of contention. Nonetheless, there appeared to be a paradigm shift in some spaces in corporate America, where cultural competency was becoming a welcomed conversation because of the realization of talent prevalent among a diverse group of individuals. While the participants recognized the unjust playing field in the corporate environment, the majority of the participants continued to engage in the practice to achieve their career goals. Moses reminisced of a pivotal conversation regarding race relations and communicating with others with his father and said,

This is what it is. When you go out, not all White people are like this, but you have some that are. You have to know how to feed them and you have to learn to talk to them this way and at the end of the day, you're going to have to learn how to get along with them. You can't just say, I'm only going to deal with Black people. So, I think that was one of the greatest benefits of being at Southern University was because it's like this is corporate America. That dude that you're sitting in class beside, all those four years, he's probably about to walk out and be somebody's manager. I don't believe in that whole kissing butt, but if you can't learn what you have to do to get along, screw that, you're going to respect me but I have to carry myself a certain type of way to get your respect.

The impetus of Moses's conversation with his father was because of an interaction with the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in his hometown as a child. Although the exchange between Moses's father and the KKK took place during his younger years, the message was still consistent as an adult. According to Moses, the KKK openly recruited members in his hometown, and African Americans were not expected to show any form of resentment in their actions or rhetoric. Moses believed his earlier experience and conversations with his father prepared him to transition into his post-secondary environment seamlessly. Moses believed marginalized groups were often required to acquiesce to the cultural norms and practices of the dominant group. While Moses lamented the act of being required to adjust to the communicative practices of the dominant racial group, he understood the practice of code-switching and how his post-secondary experience prepared him for his career endeavors. Moses suggested some African American men are constantly battling the psychological challenges associated with code-switching and assimilation; however, the external challenge of unjustly complying with the demands of the hegemonic group was equally challenging and frustrating.

Moses's experiences underscored the significance of personal relationships. Moses's father, an instrumental figure in his life, provided techniques to ensure Moses's academic success while away at college. While Moses's father was not a graduate of a 4-year institution, he is familiar with hard work and shared his knowledge on completing tasks and achieving goals. His father's lesson was not completely accurate but served as the blueprint for Moses's success. Moses learned to adapt to the environment and sought other relationships to aid in his transition into the post-secondary setting. Winston also established an invaluable relationship with Moses and assisted with creating a network across campus which ultimately helped lessen some of the other factors impacting the college trajectory of African American males. Moses's relationship

with his father and Winston served as clear examples of the importance of relationships for African American scholars. Both relationships were instrumental in allowing Moses to thrive in any environment despite any apparent obstacles. Moses agreed with most of the participants and did not believe code-switching was a tool he used to navigate the post-secondary milieu. However, as a government official, he wholeheartedly agrees with utilizing the tool in his current occupational setting.

Interpersonal communication is a dyadic experience shared between two communicators. The environment and context of the communicative exchange was an integral component impacting the participants' discourse. Alex consistently discussed his apprehension with conforming during conversations and presenting an inauthentic version of himself. Like Moses, Alex discussed his awareness of adhering to the status quo in a conversation with the President and CEO of his company. Alex said,

> When I'm talking to him one-on-one, I say whatever the hell I want to, however the hell I want to. There have been a couple of times I have said some things to him and I know he didn't like it, but at the same time, it was time out for all of the tap dancing and tiptoeing around things … I can walk into a White setting, I can walk into a Black setting and I'm going to fit in. CIAA, MEAC, hood, country club, you know what I'm saying, I'm going to fit in because of the simple fact, I'm always going to be me and I'm going to speak their language. When you're always you, you don't have to worry about people saying that you're acting different. I don't act different; I just speak differently because of my audience. I don't speak to my daughter the way I talk to you.

Alex reinforced his belief in being authentic in his communication but also recognized the significance of the environment during his dialogue. Although Alex maintained that he openly

dialogued with his supervisor, he also understood the context and the environment play a role in how he conversed with his manager. Similarly, he insisted his conversations with other African American males were consistent but may be modified based on the environment. Nonetheless, Alex understood the definition of code-switching but adopted a modified version of the definition by adjusting to the environment based on his relationship with the individuals with whom he is communicating.

The act of code-switching was a practice acknowledged by all of the participants. Apparently, the act was more pronounced in the participants' work environment. While Alex understood the act of code-switching and offered a modified version of the process, he clearly understood and recognized the significance of the act among his contemporaries. Moses, Ralph, Phillip, and Keith all agreed it was a balancing act to maintain their authenticity but willingly played the linguistic game to achieve their career endeavors. Interestingly, their authentic selves were never in question, but their willingness and ability to switch indicates Du Bois's double consciousness notion. As Keith suggested,

> I grew up around men who, you had to be able to do both. You had to be able to still be yourself and be able to come home, chill, and be around ya folks and still be legit. But at the same time, when it came time to put on that suit and tie, and you had to get ready for that presentation or get ready for that interview, you knew that you couldn't just walk in there and talk the same. You just can't. Ya know because the understanding was you just needed to get in there first. You gotta get that foot in the door first. You can't just go in there and just, you can't just show your hand. That's one thing that was always taught to me. Don't show your hand. If you got this ace of spades, don't bring it out too early. Give them the ten of diamonds. Just show them you have a couple of high things, then once

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you get in there, you can kind of lower that veil and show them yourself a little bit. But

until then, it's the game you have to play.

Keith's synopsis of code-switching captured the essence of the practice for the majority of the

participants. He seamlessly discussed the plight of African American men as the group has

attempted to find its place in previously inaccessible places in corporate America. He also

referenced Du Bois's allegorical Veil and how navigating between the two spaces was simply a

game African American men must learn to play to advance within racialized hegemonic

environments. Moreover, Keith drew parallels to spades, a popularized game in the African

American community, and underscored the importance of patiently using one of your best cards,

the ace of spades, in a timely fashion, which was similar to lifting the Veil when you are

comfortable to do so. For the participants and several other African American men, code-

switching was recognized as a tool to navigate foreign areas and allowed the individuals to

remain authentic to themselves while simultaneously adapting to the environment and

individuals within particular milieus.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the various experiences of African American males in the post-

secondary milieu. Indeed, African American males can adjust to the educational and social

dynamics present in the post-secondary environment, but academic institutions may certainly aid

in the transitional process. Undoubtedly, capitalizing on accessible support systems could have

assisted the participants in their transition to college life. Thus, informing faculty and staff

members on the significance of relationship development with the previously mentioned group

could prove to be significant in the future. Despite the institution's greatest efforts, African

American males must willingly acknowledge some personal accountability and continue

fervently to pursue their academic endeavors. Statistically, the educational trajectory for Black males consistently decreases as we ascend the formal educational ranks, but academic institutions must continue to explore opportunities to ameliorate the educational experiences for minority groups.

Keith's story illuminates the significance of social involvement during the initial years of the post-secondary experience for African American students. As Keith mentioned during our conversations, the importance of education was established early during his adolescent years. Keith's relationship with his support system propelled him to receive a scholarship and continue to pursue his academic endeavors in the post-secondary milieu. While Keith experienced stereotypes because of the hue of his skin as a high school student, those experiences did not deter him from attending and excelling at a PWI in the American South. His interactions with faculty and staff members did not significantly shape his educational experience, but his participation in co-curricular activities indelibly impacted his collegiate years. Due in part to his participation in co-curricular activities, Keith's travels and involvements provided an opportunity to establish lasting friendships with others with similar scholastic attainments. Moreover, Keith's communicative experiences were not saturated with code-switching, but he learned the significance of the practice before attending college, utilized the process as needed in the post-secondary environment, and continues to navigate the professional ranks with code-switching as a viable linguistic tool.

Alex is widely recognized for his charisma, leadership abilities, and his athletic achievements. While the previously mentioned are noteworthy, our conversations focused on his academic accomplishments and the significance of his relationships. Alex was the only participant who opposed code-switching; however, when defined, he understood the practice but

preferred to focus on his individual interactions within a given environment. Alex's perspective focuses on code-switching and assimilating to placate the hegemonic racial group. He also strongly identifies with Sellers et al.'s (1997) third dimension of Black Identity Development, regard, which poses a problem for him and his understanding of code-switching. Alex identifies as an African American male and holds his group identity in high regard, and refuses to compromise his authenticity to pacify others. He referenced his relationship with his company's current CEO as a clear example of remaining true to himself while also maneuvering within corporate America. Alex also referenced his relationship with Darris as an integral part of his development during his undergraduate experience. While Alex acknowledged he is responsible for his overall growth and development, he credited Darris with significantly impacting his experience at Fame U. Unfortunately, Alex's institution did not provide an ample amount of resources to aid marginalized groups, but he now uses his post-secondary experience as he assists with creating opportunities for current students to receive assistance through his participation in his alumni network.

Also, a former student-athlete, Phillip spoke of his interactions with students, faculty, and staff members. Phillip's experiences with some of the students were consistent with the narratives of other African American post-secondary students. He discussed his exchanges with his peers after receiving an A on an exam in math and their predisposed notions about his abilities based solely on his race. He also reminisced on his interactions with White and Black faculty members and their overall lack of support for his educational endeavors. While Phillip highlighted his negative experiences, he also acknowledged the significance of the camaraderie he established with Winston and other African American males on campus. Being a student-athlete is a component of Phillip's identity, but he did not allow his athletic talents to

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overshadow his intellectual aptitude. He also acknowledged his unwillingness to modify his code-switching practices during his undergraduate years but recognizes its potency as a current student affairs professional at a PWI. The combination of Phillip's experiences propelled him to persevere through a master's program and assume the responsibility of helping other minorities succeed at a PWI. Phillip's personal collegiate experiences, paired with his desire to create equitable environments for marginalized groups in the post-secondary environment, have led to conversations surrounding doctoral programs to address social justice and equity issues.

Ralph also stated relationship development with his friends was one of the highlights of his undergraduate experience. He discussed the importance of creating lasting friendships during his time at Northern State College. However, he also recognized his willingness to code-switch as a college student tended to be a result of attempting to demonstrate his intellectual abilities in the presence of his contemporaries. As he has matured and assumed a high-ranking position in corporate America, Ralph code-switches less due to his acquisition of agency. Furthermore, Ralph is encouraged to be authentic in his work environment, and he believes excessive code-switching does not clearly display the authentic being he strives to present in the workplace. Moreover, Ralph desires to create a welcoming and inclusive environment, one that celebrates diversity and encourages individuality with its employees.

The discussions and the observations presented themes centered on the importance of relationships, the impact of faculty and staff perceptions, and reliance on code-switching practices. Notably, a major commonality among the interactions with the participants involved being a Black man on a college campus. The participants openly discussed their identity and the assumptions related to their sex and race. Constantly battling stereotypes and presuppositions regarding their ability was an arduous task; however, illustrating their competency by

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matriculating through their programs were measured forms of success at their institution. Furthermore, supportive relationships were identified as an influence in helping the group succeed. While the participants attempted to identify and develop relationships with supportive faculty members, each participant recognized the impact of the unhelpful institutional officials. Additionally, familial support was an identifiable factor related to the academic achievement of the participants. Their code-switching practices also varied as the environments differed for the participants. The themes presented the collective stories of the participants while also acknowledging the significance of their individual experiences.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My purpose in conducting this basic qualitative study was to understand the experiences of African American males in predominantly White post-secondary institutions and examine how they use code-switching in these environments. The participants were forthcoming and candid regarding their collegiate experiences. Each individual provided a unique perspective regarding his experiences, but similarities were prevalent throughout the discussions. Environmental, individual, and societal factors were attributed to their triumphs and shortcomings in the collegiate environment. Interestingly, the participants viewed their educational goals as attainable possibilities; however, each scholar recognized the risk factors accompanying African American men.

In this chapter, I begin by answering my research questions with my findings, which were the main themes. To enrich my analysis of the findings, I connect them to existing research on the post-secondary experiences of African American males on the campuses of PWIs, Black Identity Development, and code-switching. Additionally, based on my findings, I provide recommendations for institutions, faculty and student affairs professionals, African American male scholars, and other ancillary groups assisting marginalized groups in the collegiate milieu. I conclude the chapter by describing how this study affected me.

Revisiting and Answering the Research Questions

Research Question #1

In my first research question, I asked: *What are the experiences of African American males at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the American South?* This question was answered by the thematic finding: **Participants' self-efficacy was both positively and negatively impacted by their faculty and staff members' perceptions of them, with positive**

perceptions inspiring their persistence and resilience and negative perceptions

unexpectedly fueling their desire to achieve in curricular and co-curricular settings.

As I noted in Chapter IV, the participants in my study collectively identified similarities across their experiences in the post-secondary environment. While two participants identified as student-athletes, Moses and Phillip, their student-athlete designations did not prevent them from experiencing the harsh realities consistent across the documented narratives of African American males at PWIs in the American South. When viewing African American males through the lens of ecological systems theory, it is apparent that the individual's perceptions and environmental factors play a role in their educational outcomes and trajectory (Jackson et al., 2013). Based on the participant narratives, their collective collegiate experiences were different but offered useful learning opportunities for the corporate environment.

Unfortunately, America's educational infrastructure does not tend to cater to the needs of African American males. The centrality of race and racism, one tenet of critical race theory, can easily be used to support the notion that American schools are inherently racist because racism is seemingly embedded into every American policy, practice, and system (Hernandez, 2016). Fortunately, Phillip's experience with his psychology professor and his classmates did not deter him in his educational pursuits but served as a reminder of the biases present on the campus of PWIs. Moreover, his experience with the African American professor questioning his authority as a student further complicates matters for Phillip and others like him. African American males frequently seek other African Americans in the academe, particularly African American men, to provide guidance with maneuvering through the educational landscape and serve as an advocate and safeguard against institutional bigotry (Schwartz et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the interaction with Phillip and his professor did not reinforce a common bond among African American men in

the post-secondary milieu but served as a reminder of the consistent threats present during the scholarly journey of African American men. The experiences of African American male student-athletes appear to be unique; however, there are still commonalities consistent with other African American males not participating in sports. The fraternal bonds appear to be common in the narratives of Alex and Phillip, but there are still instances of injustice present in the classroom setting. While student-athletes seem to hold some form of notoriety across campus, their complexion presents a communal experience of injustice consistent with other African American males at PWIs.

According to the participants, the African American male PWI experience was replete with challenges impacting their academic trajectory. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory offers a unique perspective for examining the factors related to the educational outcomes for African American males (Jackson et al., 2013). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory investigates the relationship between persons and their environments by recognizing the significance of shared experiences of individuals within a group. As a group, the participants shared similar collegiate experiences, but their individual occurrences were dually noted. During my interview with Phillip, the participant articulated his thoughts regarding his experience as a college student and the impact of his attending an HBCU, too. He said,

> It's just different, dog. The HBCU experience is completely different from attending a PWI. From the faculty and staff interaction to the interactions with students. It's almost night and day. Look at homecoming. It was a completely different celebration on the two campuses.

Phillip's dialogue highlights the pervasiveness of community on the campuses of HBCUs while simultaneously addressing the dichotomy between his HBCU and PWI experience. Phillip's

post-secondary experiences and the abovementioned statement underscore the significance of the environment impacting the academic trajectory of African American males and their educational pursuits. Often, far too many believe the post-secondary experience is tantamount to visiting an amusement park. The environment is filled with an abundance of pleasurable activities without the associated academic vigor. However, the metaphorical amusement park identifies a potential misconception or purported reality for Black male college students. Almost one third of African American male students begin their academic careers at a 4-year institution, and 66% do not complete the journey (Mars et al., 2016). While the participants discussed their collegiate involvements and provided stories about their experiences at their collegiate amusement parks, each scholar also completed the journey by satisfying their institution's academic requirements. Unfortunately, these men are in the minority, and their narratives provide context to some of the difficulties present in the lives of countless African American male scholars.

Seemingly, Ralph welcomed the environmental change from his high school to his post-secondary institution. The centrality of an individual's identity dimension of Sellers et al.'s (1997) identity theory consists of circumstances and events that push an individual toward a greater understanding and appreciation of one's racial heritage. Ralph's desire to attend a post-secondary institution with a different demographic composition than his high school suggested a greater appreciation and understanding of his Blackness. During our conversations, Ralph consistently alluded to his Blackness as an identifying factor at the forefront of his identity while attending Northern State College. He also discussed how the color of his skin ultimately impacted various interactions with students, staff, and faculty members.

Nonetheless, Ralph felt responsible for using his academic talents to demonstrate his intellectual vigor among his contemporaries. Ralph's secondary and post-secondary

environments were completely different; however, the commonality of race and achievement was present in both environments. As a high school student, Ralph understood the importance of grades and how his education could provide opportunities in the post-secondary milieu. As a college student, Ralph recognized his race impacted the perception of others. While he earned his position as a student on the campus at Northern State College, Ralph realized his identity as a Black man would indelibly affect his collegiate experience. The regard for group-associated identity, another dimension of Sellers et al.'s (1997) identity development theory, examines the degree to which a person feels positively about Blacks. Despite the adversity faced on campus, Ralph's self-efficacy or adoration for African Americans never wavered, and he managed to persevere in the face of adversity. His collegiate persistence laid the foundation for his continued academic success and future endeavors in his work with African American male youth.

The participants' narratives provided an experiential African American male perspective. The educational rigors were noteworthy among the group, and the social dynamics produced additional points of consideration for the students. While the PWIs proved to be a challenging educational milieu, each Black scholar completed his undergraduate requirements. However, the participants' scholastic achievements appear to be an aberration at far too many PWIs. The collective voices of the scholars underscore the significance of the academic and social environment for African American males at PWIs.

Research Question #2

In my second research question, I asked: *What role, if any, does code-switching play regarding their academic and social pursuits?* This question was answered by my thematic finding that: **Understanding the value of a hegemonic way of communicating and the value**

of cultural language in their own lives, some participants embraced code-switching to help them navigate Eurocentric environments while staying true to themselves.

The participants acknowledged their communicative practices during their undergraduate years and their code-switching experiences. However, the majority of the participants recognized a greater awareness and aptitude to code-switch in their occupational environments. Moses's experience as a minority at a PWI ultimately prepared him for his position within the federal government. According to Moses, he relishes the opportunity to interact with fellow Black males in the corporate setting. Moses discussed the dyadic interaction with a fellow Black coworker. Based on Moses's explanation, his interaction with the other Black male suggested some form of unwritten brotherhood and community, though placed among a larger group of their contemporaries in the workplace. During their conversations, Moses consistently referred to his coworker as "bruh." The term of endearment was consistently used with the participants during our focus group as well. However, Moses and the other participants acknowledged using "bro" as a term of endearment for their non-Black male contemporaries. Sellers et al. (1997) posited that the socialization process leads to identity development through racial development, and the ability to code-switch may be considered an advanced understanding of the changes within the environment and the requisite adjustments. Moses and I discussed the subtlety of code-switching, and he chose to utilize the technique in the collegiate and corporate environment. According to Moses, he used code-switching as a tool to navigate the educational and social settings in which he was placed. As an African American male, he learned to use code-switching in the post-secondary environment and continues to use it in corporate America. The ability to code-switch is an example of ingratiating himself with various groups without losing his own identity.

Alex recognized the duality of the double consciousness but did not acknowledge the internal struggle some African Americans face while battling two divergent identities. Furthermore, Alex suggested his individual interactions superseded any environmental factors in his communicative exchanges. Seemingly, Alex's perspective is indicative of the regard dimension of Sellers et al.'s (1997) identity development theory. While he was initially unfamiliar with the term "code-switching," he understood the rationale behind the practice but vehemently opposed the practice in his personal exchanges. Alex believed code-switching was a lesser form of communication between African Americans, which served as another barrier between the marginalized and the dominant group. Moreover, Alex's personal experiences with code-switching serve as his individual perspective on the practice. While the other participants did not subscribe to Alex's ideological perspective, his stance significantly contributed to the discussions of the impact of code-switching on their academic and social pursuits.

For marginalized groups, the conversations among peers differ from conversations with authority figures, and modifying language tends to be an act associated with complying with the cultural norms of the dominant group (Cabrera et al., 2016). In a recent interview with Dr. Jelani Cobb, Shawn Carter, also known as Jay Z, eloquently articulated his stance on modifying his tone and refusing to present an inauthentic version of himself. Jay Z said,

> I walk in every room as myself. I don't walk into any room as anyone else. I'm not cowering, I'm not speaking soft, my voice doesn't change. It sounds exactly the same way. I'm walking as myself and proud. And I speak for us and that gives me a joy. And I'm honored to be in those rooms.

Carter is widely acknowledged as a pillar in the Black community for his presumed ability to remain authentic while concomitantly traversing corporate spaces and acquiring wealth, power,

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and notoriety. The interview underscores the significance of maintaining one's true identity without compromising or self-sabotaging for others. Carter's message aligns with the overall perspective of the group. While some were willing to code-switch, none of the participants was willing to compromise their integrity or whitewash themselves to fit into any space. Authenticity was paramount in the participant conversations; however, the alteration in their style of communication differed in their professional environments. Moreover, the participants seemingly recognized their White college classmates assumed positions of power in the post-secondary environment and assumed the same power and privilege in the professional ranks.

The representations of both Kid and Obama are recognizable figures among a large collection of African American men. During the interviews, each participant recognized a piece of themselves present in the images and chuckled at the exaggeration present on screen; however, the acknowledgment reeked of resentment and disdain for somewhat acquiescing to the cultural demands of the dominant racial group. The images of African American men in media tend to be monolithic and do not consistently capture the depth and wide-ranging abilities of Black men. hooks (2003) eludes to this notion and says,

> Seen as animals, brutes, natural rapists, and murderers, Black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype. As a consequence, they are victimized by stereotypes that were first articulated in the 19th century, but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens in this nation in the present day.

Traditionally, Black men have not been consistently present in discussions regarding the portrayal of African American men in media. Therefore, their visibility is a product of stereotypes and misinformed myths and rejects any form of exemplary characteristics prevalent

within the group. Sadly, popular representations tend to consistently lack a complete depiction of the embodiment of African American men; therefore, representations such as Kid and Key and Peele's Obama become the norm for White America to acknowledge and recognize as standard representations for a diverse group. Unfortunately, many formally educated African American men are left to discuss the dearth of representations present in popular culture.

The ability to master the English language affords minorities entry into previously inaccessible areas (Emdin, 2016). Thus, engaging in code-switching offers opportunities for upward mobility for African American males. While the participants collectively discussed their unwillingness to code-switch during their collegiate years, most participants discussed their practices in their roles as working professionals. Moses referred to the exercise as "speaking the White man's language." Similarly, Alex recounted his perceptions of individuals code-switching and said, "As an ignorant adolescent and young adult, I uttered those same words. I uttered the same B.S. but then I realized, no, they're not talking White, they're talking intellectually. They're not using improper language; they're not using improper words." The recognition of English, particularly Standard English, as a measurement of privilege and power was a common unit of measurement among the participants. Furthermore, the participants seemingly learned to utilize rhetoric in their academic and professional endeavors while simultaneously remaining authentic in their identity and navigating unfamiliar territories saturated with members of the hegemonic racial group.

I assumed code-switching would play an integral role in the academic pursuits of African American men at PWIs in the South. The participants conceded to their understanding of the practice, and one participant vehemently opposed the practice, but code-switching did not appear to be a tool consistently used throughout the academic careers of the scholars. However, code-

switching was arguably used more in their professional careers and recognized as a viable option for sustainability and growth in the professional sectors. However, the intersectionality of code-switching and Black Identity Development also appears to have manifested in several participants' lives. Ralph discussed his unwillingness to compromise his identity for the workplace. While his company encourages diversity and appears to be an environment that promotes inclusivity, Ralph's maturation, coupled with his understanding of Black Identity Development, put him at a supposed impasse. He is working diligently to pursue his career endeavors but is unwilling to compromise who he is as an African American man in corporate America. Similarly, Alex ascribes the same stance as Ralph, but he seemingly adopted the perspective during his undergraduate years. He rejects the notion of code-switching as a viable option but prefers to acknowledge an understanding of the audience as an indicator of how he chooses to interact on a dyadic basis. My initial assumption was incorrect regarding African American men using code-switching as a tool to navigate the environment of a PWI in the American South; however, code-switching seemingly impacted the participants' experience by serving as a tool to understand the effectiveness of the practice while allowing the participants to use the tool in their professional endeavors.

Research Question #3

In my final research question, I asked: *What do African American men perceive as key influences that helped them succeed in the university setting?* Through my study, I found: **The participants relied on close, supportive relationships to nurture and sustain them through periods of uncertainty, isolation, and emotional distress during their post-secondary experiences.**

The participants consistently recognized the significance of relationships as influential elements in their academic endeavors. Relationship development indelibly appeared to impact the participants' scholarly livelihood from their familial relationships to bonds established throughout the campus community. Throughout our discussions, the participants consistently referred to their family members as constant supporters in their lives. Before becoming a college student at Purple University, Keith recalled his exchange with his teacher and the high school administration. His father advocated on his behalf and assured Keith's unfortunate incident did not negatively impact his scholarly aspirations. Furthermore, he spoke of the importance of his uncle acting as a school employee and an overseer of his day-to-day academic dealings. The value of familial support is directly correlated to positive academic outcomes for African American males (Jackson et al., 2013). The support provided by family members served as the foundation for the participants' academic pursuits.

Collectivism is common among African American families, and the prioritization of group success tends to be celebrated more than individual accomplishments (Flennaugh, 2016). However, individual accomplishments placing the group in a complementary position are equally celebrated. The majority of the participants were first-generation college students, and family and friends lauded their academic accomplishments. According to the participants, the support afforded by their family and friends was also a result of sheer excitement for the idea of success waiting in the post-secondary environment. Moreover, two of the participants earned athletic scholarships and completed the academic requirement of their contractual agreement. Understandably, the participants' family and inner circle realized the value of education. Their collective support and celebration reinforced the participants' decisions to venture out into an unfamiliar academic landscape. Unfortunately, the PWIs were not consistently providing the

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same support but created an avenue for the participants to achieve and gather the necessary tools to move toward their occupational endeavors.

Palmer et al. (2018) suggested strong family support systems assist with facilitating a smooth transition into the post-secondary environment. However, the participants recognized their family would not be present on campus, and the need to foster additional relationships on their campuses was important. Supportive social networks are imperative for resilient Black males in the post-secondary setting (Jackson et al., 2013). Parental relationships are significant factors in impacting academic success for Black males (Sanders, 2017). A sublevel of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, the microsystem, comprises the individual's immediate surroundings. Family members tend to be included in the microsystems of students, and the participants alluded to familial support as an indicator of their academic success. The lack of familiarity with collegiate processes is certainly an issue plaguing first-generation Black college students, but support has been found as an attributing factor related to the success of Black males (Hurst et al., 2019).

The participants elucidated their perspectives regarding support for African American males in academia. Regarding support, the participants suggested an assortment of support can significantly improve the likelihood of Black male success in the collegiate environment. However, all participants indicated familial support, coupled with institutional collaboration, were pivotal factors related to their successes. Seemingly, some of the participants were prepared for the academic rigors, but the overall familial support undeniably impacted the scholars' collegiate experience. Multicultural training for faculty and staff and multicultural competence evaluations may aid in understanding the factors related to appropriate support for marginalized individuals (Emdin, 2016; Robertson & Chaney, 2017).

Revisiting My Conceptual Framework: Black Identity Development

The personal experiences of the participants were deeply engrained in the foundational tenets of African American racial identity. Black Identity Development theory is defined as an amalgamation of culture and the psychological experiences of African Americans (Sellers et al., 1997). While universal experiences were consistent across the group (mainstream approach), a more complex and nuanced experience tended to be recognized with each participant (underground approach). The individual oppressive and cultural experiences were consistent across the discussions with the scholars. Moreover, the underground approach aligns with the seminal work of W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness and further validates the process of identity development for African Americans.

The participants' educational experiences were undoubtedly marred by prejudicial and biased treatment. While some participants reported some interactions with supportive school personnel, the overwhelming consensus pointed to a lack of institutional support. Furthermore, African Americans' historical and cultural educational experiences in the United States have been consistently identified as unjust and prejudicial (Flores et al., 2020). While the dominant racial group typically attempts to rectify the appearance of prejudice and bias in the educational system, marginalized groups, particularly African American males, are not consistently offered the tools to achieve at an optimal level in the post-secondary environment. For example, Alex shared his experience and his exchange with his communication instructor. While Alex was allowed to attend the institution and enroll in the professor's course, her inherent bias could have manifested in a self-fulfilling prophecy for Alex. According to the professor, Alex was "going to give football players a bad name." The previously mentioned statement categorically defines an entire group and intentionally lacks perspective on the individual capabilities of each football

player. Moreover, based on the conversations with Alex, the majority of the football players at Fame College were Black. Unfortunately, the professor's assertations clearly communicated a consistent narrative across the stories of the participants. The institutional biases were reinforced by stakeholders and ultimately created an environment that did not consistently support African American men's educational and social needs.

Race affected the perception of self-concept for the participants; however, their cultural influences indelibly placed a positive connotation to defining their Blackness. Sellers et al. (1997) suggested African Americans could develop a strong sense of self while concomitantly combating the stigma present within the larger society. The participants consistently acknowledged the perils present in the post-secondary environment and discussed their overall disdain with some components of the educational system; however, each participant lucidly understood the Black perspective. The scholars discussed their individual experiences as African American males, which were seemingly common across the group during individual and group conversations. While the phases of Sellers et al.'s (1997) Black Identity Development are fluid, the set of ideas regarding race and attitudes were constantly acknowledged by the group and other African Americans. Nonetheless, code-switching was a topic consistently attached to Black Identity Development. While preferences differed on the willingness to acquiesce and code-switch in mixed company, the participants acknowledged an understanding of the communicative tool and recognized its place in the discussions surrounding Blackness and identity development.

The intersectionality of code-switching and Black Identity Development was pronounced in my study. Du Bois's work with the double consciousness and the struggle to maintain and develop one's identity provided invaluable discussions regarding Blackness. However, the

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participants openly discussed their unwillingness to adhere to code-switching practices during their post-secondary years, but some openly acknowledged a willingness to modify their choice of language during their post-academic careers. Seemingly, code-switching and Blackness were intertwined for DuBois. Most of the participants accepted code-switching as a practice prevalent in the African American community but refused to code-switch as a form of accepting the hegemonic racial group as the gatekeepers of their communication style. Furthermore, the scholars refused to gentrify their language to pacify others. They believed their choice in rhetoric was theirs to choose. Thus, their meaning of Black was not only shaped by racism, prejudice, and bias but also incorporated the cultural, historical, and contemporary experiences of African Americans.

The combination of multiple systems of oppression further supports a fluid form of Black Identity Development. Race, the legal system, and the educational system are clear forms of oppression consistently influencing the livelihood of African American men. Sellers et al. (1997) suggested individuals endorse specific beliefs about how one should act within an oppressive environment, and the participants' responses confirmed the importance of their Blackness. Racial identity was an integral component of the participants' self-concept. Sellers et al. (1997) does not consider the four dimensions to be synonymous with racial identity but reinforced the notion of individual beliefs and experiences shaping an identity based on the environment. The educational environment, coupled with the individual experiences and cultural influences, inevitably shaped the individual identities of the participants.

Recommendations

Below, I offer recommendations, based on my study's findings, regarding how Predominantly White Institutions can better serve African American men.

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Shift in Campus Culture (Institutional Change) and Eradicating All Forms of Racism Across Campus

Continued explorations into the nuanced educational experiences of African American men may improve the academic endeavors of the group. Conversations with invested stakeholders and policymakers can potentially create opportunities to change the post-secondary educational landscape. Often, African American male scholars attempt to navigate an educational milieu that is seemingly designed to facilitate failure rather than advocate for their individual and collective success. In particular, academic institutions have consistently advocated for change on their campuses without consistently providing resources to one of the most underrepresented groups present on college campuses. Moreover, recognizing the institutional shortcomings would be the first step in actively contributing to the academic success of African American males across the nation while simultaneously addressing the cultural perspectives of other disenfranchised groups.

The United States' current racial landscape has forced individuals and institutions to reevaluate their policies and procedures. Indeed, the dialogue surrounding racial inequities, conspicuous and inconspicuous racism, and institutional biases were conversations urged by marginalized groups; however, some individuals and institutions are proactively correcting some of their flawed stances and embracing a progressive approach. For example, several institutions in the American South are attempting to remove the racist undertones present on their campuses by renaming buildings that were previously named after former Confederate Officers and slave masters. These acts appear to be a direct result of the social outrage against the criminalization and murdering of African American men across the nation. Interestingly, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) recently removed the Silent Sam monument, representing a

Confederate Soldier and honored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, from their campus and initially vowed to resurrect the statue in a lesser conspicuous area. The initial removal was in 2017, on the precipice of the public outrage regarding the treatment of African Americans across the nation, so their efforts were met with little frustration, but the institution's approach was consistently based on their previous stances. However, the social climate has changed, and the university's actions or lack thereof are garnering further inspection into how systems of racism purposefully or unintentionally target marginalized groups. As culturally competent individuals and groups continue to critically analyze systems of oppression, academic institutions will be forced to examine their past and current practices regarding creating inclusive and celebratory environments for African American men and other marginalized groups.

Regrettably, the dehumanizing and stereotyping of African American males are far too common on the campuses of PWIs in the American South (Harris & Harper, 2015). Navigating the uncomfortable racial environment can prove unbearable, leading to increased attrition rates on the campuses of PWIs for African Americans. Interestingly, African American male attrition and graduation rates are reportedly higher on the campuses of HBCUs (Winslow & Davis, 2016). Institutions should embrace the needs of marginalized groups and create environments that cater to the desires, educational, and social needs of minority groups. For example, increasing the presence of minorities, specifically African Americans, could potentially remedy some of the issues plaguing African American males on the campuses of PWIs. The findings underscored the significance of relationships for the participants and how they felt supported by their familial bonds; however, the support from the institution appeared to be lackluster and inconsistent. The student-athletes reported feeling supported by their coaches, but the coaches' financial stability and success were tied to the availability and performance of the student-athletes; therefore, the

two seemingly had a mutually beneficial relationship. Employing more African American administrators, faculty, and staff members could potentially create an environment conducive to the needs of African American males. The new African American employees could serve as mentors and support persons for these students and aid in maneuvering the educational landscape of a PWI. Furthermore, hiring and retaining African American faculty members could create an opportunity to examine an antiquated curriculum that does not critically challenge students or the institution. Allowing African Americans to see individuals like themselves empowered in their educational environment may encourage them to persevere in the face of adversity and assume a similar position after completing their educational endeavors. Representation not only matters for the student population but speaks volumes for institutions willing to hire minorities to educate and advocate in previously White-washed terrains.

Professional Development and Programmatic Modifications

Student affairs professionals are tasked with providing the support needed to ensure each student reaches their academic potential, including acting as an advocate and facilitating equitable access for all students. Moreover, student affairs personnel are charged with serving as a resource for students and advocating for a safe and inviting community. Mental health practitioners, academic advisors, residential living, multicultural affairs, and new student orientation offices contribute to African American males' individual and institutional success at PWIs (Palmer et al., 2018). The programmatic efforts for student affairs professionals can significantly affect the familial interactive experience for African American males at PWIs. For example, creating several opportunities for families to visit campus and truly experience their scholar's educational experience may produce a greater understanding of the student's transition for the family. Due to COVID-19, many institutions modified their existing approach to

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embracing student and familial interaction, and virtual exchanges were consistently encouraged across many campuses (Molock & Parchem, 2021). Maintaining and recognizing the importance of the existing familial structure while simultaneously creating an avenue for African American male students to pursue their academic endeavors may prove significant factors related to their academic and social success.

Marketing of Student Success Services

The scholars from my study acknowledged their varying degrees of participation in organizations and service groups during their undergraduate years. Two participants were student-athletes, one participant was thoroughly immersed in student government organizations, one eventually joined a Pan-Hellenic fraternity, and the last participant was moderately involved in campus organizations. While each participant's co-curricular activities were unique, all asserted their respective institutions did not create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Indeed, service organizations and multicultural centers were available at some institutions, but the marketing and recruiting efforts were seemingly lackluster. According to Alex, student services were almost nonexistent at his post-secondary institution. He discussed the availability of counseling services, but multicultural centers, Pan-Hellenic organizations, and organizations focused solely on attending to the needs of African Americans, specifically African American men, were unavailable. Fortunately, Alex and other minority alums have since created a minority alum coalition designed to provide a network of minority alums who also advocate for dismissing inequitable practices and policies at their respective institution. Alex's undergraduate experiences were partly related to the impetus of his participation in the alumni group and his fervor regarding closing the equity gaps at his alma mater.

Affinity/Support Groups, Counterspaces, and Other Supportive Mental Health Mechanisms

The implementation of support groups focusing solely on issues germane to African American males may be an invaluable tool to facilitate academic and social growth by post-secondary institutions (Jackson et al., 2013). Furthermore, the support groups may also serve as an option to provide modeling for the African American students in an environment that often lacks racial and cultural representation (PWIs). The creation of focus groups, and other support mechanisms, may serve as an opportunity for administrators and university leadership to introspectively exam the transitional period from high school to college for African American men (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; McClain et al., 2016). The continued reports of experiences with biases, microaggressions, and racism are consistent narratives among African American male students attending PWIs (Smith et al., 2016). Navigating the post-secondary environment can prove challenging for any student; however, adding microaggressions and racism to their experience will exacerbate a daunting task. Providing a process for inclusive support groups for African American males may create opportunities for their overall success to be examined by openly discussing the challenges they consistently face on campus. The development of these focus groups may inevitably serve as a template for creating support opportunities for other marginalized groups across campus.

Often mental health is an overlooked component in the lives of African American males (Jackson et al., 2013). Holistic wellness also includes the mental acuity and well-being of an individual, and the learning environments of African American men can be hampered or alleviated by their milieu (Flores et al., 2020). Consistently asserting one's identity is mentally draining and may hinder African American males' personal development and academic growth.

Therefore, institutions can significantly lessen these feelings of mental unwellness and anguish by providing counterspaces, which serve as places of refuge for students of color attending PWIs (Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Only one of the participants acknowledged an awareness of the multicultural center on his campus, and he said the center was at its earlier stages of providing services to minority students. The other participants were unaware of the services due to their lack of knowledge which may be a product of their institution's timid marketability of the services. Unfortunately, African American men tend to deny mental health issues and reluctantly seek help (Jackson et al., 2013). Compounding the aforementioned with feelings of isolation, African American males are at a greater risk of not pursuing the needed services to achieve at an optimal academic level. Thus, providing environments with encouraging social involvement and academic enrichment could ameliorate the experience for African American males at PWIs (Jackson et al., 2013). These counterspaces may ultimately allow African American men to preserve a sense of community and solace in an environment traditionally counterproductive to some of their educational and social aspirations.

The study highlighted the various experiences of African American males in the post-secondary milieu. Indeed, African American males can adjust to the educational and social dynamics present in the post-secondary environment, but academic institutions may aid in the transitional process. Capitalizing on advantageous support systems could assist Black males in transitioning to college life (Palmer et al., 2018). Thus, informing faculty and staff members on the significance of relationship development with the group could prove to be significant. Understanding the nuances of African American males may be remedied by creating conversations and professional development opportunities to discuss practical solutions to assist the group. Furthermore, creating opportunities to understand the idiosyncrasies of supporting

African American males may lead to conversations with assisting other marginalized groups. These discussions within academia may inevitably lead to adaptations made to the curriculum, collegiate social settings, and the overall environment for underrepresented populations.

Accountability for Campus Constituents

While eradicating the remnants of racism across campus addresses some of the issues impacting African American males from a macro level, examining the individualized experiences between faculty members and students is another dynamic to explore. Institutions should introspectively examine the efforts of faculty members by ensuring their actions are a metric in the tenure and promotion process. Post-secondary institutions' collective efforts should not be stymied by the efforts of individuals refusing to truly embrace equitable advances in education for historically excluded groups. Moreover, bias reporting analysis in conjunction with the tenure and promotion process are also viable options to hold faculty members accountable.

Indeed, holding faculty members accountable for their inability to foster an inclusive campus community for African American males is extremely important, but identifying and selecting Black faculty and staff to assume responsibility and advocate on their behalf is equally essential. Post-secondary institutions, particularly PWIs, should intentionally choose Black faculty and staff to help with relationship development with African American students. The faculty and staff members should be individuals with existing relationships with Black students, should be identified as campus advocates and activists, and should intentionally be identified as potential campus constituents. However, post-secondary administration must be mindful of the "Black tax" and its presence in higher education. Some African Americans assume additional committee responsibilities while juggling their obligations as faculty or staff members; therefore, institutions must be mindful of requesting their assistance when targeting their efforts to African

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American male students. Nonetheless, developing, supporting, and publicizing evidence-based mentoring programs specifically designed to allow Black students to have an increased sense of belonging and to foster campus connections are also identifiable tasks to help Black students thrive.

Embracing Different Communicative Styles

The debate between code-switching and code-meshing is a long-standing discussion in the African American community (Emdin, 2016). However, popular culture has seemingly embraced some of the common colloquialisms in AAE; therefore, the preservation of the once-revered artform is a conversation piece for African Americans. According to Emdin (2016), code-switching teaches individuals to conform to the environment and alter their preferred form of communication. However, code-meshing appears to embrace the cultural differences of individuals and allows speakers to authentically represent themselves in communicative exchanges. Interestingly, popular culture has seemingly welcomed discussions to acknowledge code-meshing as a legitimate tool for linguistic exchanges. Unfortunately, White centric communication is inherently valued and tends to indicate intelligence until it can either be monopolized or filtered into popular culture.

Alex's perspective on code-switching is multi-layered and provides a reference point for discussing the fundamental differences between code-switching and code-meshing. Alex is a 40-year-old African American male and vehemently opposes the practice of code-switching. He never saw the need for code-switching, and his age was not a determining factor in his willingness to acquiesce to the dominant racial group's communicative style. Interestingly, Alex was raised in a home with two four-year college graduates. His parents' post-secondary education success may suggest Alex's access to cultural capital may be related to his personal

views. Alex does acknowledge their perspective on code-switching, but he maintained his views were a direct result of his personal experiences.

The collective conversations with the group provided an opportunity to observe code-meshing directly. Colloquialisms commonplace among members of the African American community were replete in the participant conversations. The practice of code-meshing can be considered an alternative to code-switching and may also be considered an oppressive practice used to navigate unfamiliar environments (Young, 2014). The focus group was a familiar environment for all of the participants. The focus group was similar to the barbershop, a familiar community environment for many Black men, where open dialogue covering many topics is often encouraged and accepted. The age of the participants ranged from 32 to 40, and the act of code-meshing does not have an age restriction. While the participants were aware of code-switching, they were also aware of code-meshing and openly displayed their understanding during the focus group. The participants' other roles allow them to directly communicate with younger African American men and establish fluency and effectiveness using code-meshing and code-switching.

African Americans have long understood the significance of language and communication (Emdin, 2016). The foundation of collectivism lies in the interconnectedness of community, and African Americans have historically embraced the value of group cohesion. From interactions with extended family members to church members, the value in communication and language heavily relies on interaction with group members. African Americans in different social classes are not necessarily constrained to interactions with individuals from a particular social group. Extended family members and others who are not in a particular class and are not immersed in Eurocentric saturated environments may not ascribe to

these preconceived notions of intelligence and communication. Therefore, individuals unfamiliar with AAE or Black vernacular are still provided an opportunity to expose themselves to the dialogue exchanges consistent in a plethora of African American communities. Thus, age and social status are not necessarily factors stripping African Americans from fully understanding the nuances of AAE and code-switching.

Post-secondary institutions, particularly PWIs, should intentionally examine the power and privilege ingrained in Standard English. Creating a culture that does not solely measure intelligence by using code-switching or code-meshing should be a candid conversation with all campus constituents. By understanding the subtlety of the artform and initiating critical and culturally competent conversations with campus constituents, African American males may see an institutional change. Dialogue around a communicative paradigm shift is the first step in changing the campus landscape for African American males longing to thrive in an inclusive campus community.

Final Thoughts

I have thoroughly enjoyed researching, writing, and discussing issues directly related to my educational experiences and the experiences of several other African American scholars. While I have enjoyed the journey, the process has also been extremely fatiguing and disheartening at times. I understand I am not the only Black man with negative experiences in the educational system and my conversations with the participants reinforced my thoughts about the uphill battle African American men continue to face in the educational arena. I am well aware of the dismal statics related to retention and graduation rates at PWIs for Black males, and the anecdotal data provided by the participants place familiar names and faces with the struggle we face. I am nearing the end of my academic journey, but my oldest son is currently

maneuvering this inequitable terrain. He is completing his first year of middle school, and he has already encountered issues of racism, microaggression, and bias within the educational system. Fortunately, he has two parents equipped to advocate on his behalf and one with firsthand experience with some of the issues he is likely to encounter. The progressive nature of society is evident; however, the longstanding barriers within the educational infrastructure are still standing and will likely remain for decades to come. Sadly, I am not sure if I will be present to celebrate the demise of the flawed institutional system of oppression, but hopefully, my sons and later generations of African American men will reap some of the benefits of the seeds I have planted through my work.

The experience of African American males at PWIs in the American South is unique. The similarities across the narratives were identifiable, but I believe additional work is needed to explore the experiences of African American males at PWIs across the nation. Expanding the participant pool to include Black males, Black male students not identifying as African American could also provide additional data for future research. Furthermore, the participants' narratives are noteworthy and create dialogue for institutional change, but faculty, staff, and administrators could also significantly contribute to future research. Allowing the leaders within the institution to discuss their perspectives on the experiences of African American males could be the catalyst for creating an institutional transformation. The collective narrative of all campus constituents is needed to see real and sustainable change. The participants' stories serve as a reminder of the inequitable experiences of African American males in academia but also offer anecdotal evidence to create change in the future.

The qualitative research process has been introspective, laborious, and encouraging. Often, I have been instructed to be completely objective in my writing assignments and disregard

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any personal opinions regarding the subject. This study allowed me to introspectively observe my biases while attempting to explore issues impacting other African American males in the post-secondary environment. While the study provided an opportunity to remain completely subjective, I purposely sought feedback through peer review efforts. Overall, executing the study and shedding light on some of the issues impacting African American males fulfills a personal commitment and allows me to advocate and empower this group.

The entire process was gratifying and fulfilling. Hearing the stories of fellow Black male scholars, the issues impacting their educational pursuits, and providing an account of my findings was rewarding. However, producing a concise report from the abundance of data proved to be extremely challenging. This qualitative research study provided an opportunity to be fully engulfed in my area of interest without regard to subjectivity as an area of concern. I am interested in various aspects of scholarship as it relates to African American males and higher education.

As a Black male scholar on the precipice of completing my requirements for a terminal degree, I fervently support the holistic wellness and continued educational development of marginalized groups, particularly African American men. I feel a personal obligation to pay forward the lessons and opportunities provided to me and build bridges for the next generation of Black male intellectuals. Unfortunately, my Blackness has provided personal and professional inauspicious experiences; however, I have used those experiences as a catalyst in my endeavors. My experiences are the foundation for my fervor in academia, as I realize barriers are still present, and it is incumbent upon me to address issues of inequity. I consider my personal identity in all aspects of my life, and I refuse to misuse my agency in these previously inaccessible spaces for Black males. While the movement towards a more progressive and

inclusive environment is underway, the road to a utopic milieu is idealistic and impractical.

However, I believe seeking perfection will result in receiving progressive and excellent results.

Cultural competence is on a spectrum, and I refuse to sit idly by as history is being rewritten. My

firsthand experiences as a Black male in America have provided related occurrences similar to

other marginalized groups. As an academician, I identify with the tenets of constructivism as it

aims to confront oppression against marginalized groups. Freire supported the dispersion of

critical pedagogical ideas and the liberation of marginalized groups. Moreover, Freire's desire to

pursue educational egalitarianism appears to be deeply rooted in the doctrines of constructivism.

The emphasis on the individual experience and perception of that personal experience is integral;

therefore, constructivism is often considered a culturally sensitive theoretical approach.

Undoubtedly, my personal experiences have indelibly shaped how I view the world and how I

plan to attack institutions and policies of oppression.

My culture and personal experiences certainly contributed to my ability to succeed in

academic and social settings. Often, I refer to the slights and opposition I have received

throughout my educational journey. I have used frustration and disappointment as motivating

incentives. Honestly, I did not recall receiving support and encouragement within the school

system, and I relied heavily on the support of my family. My educational accomplishments were

seemingly a reflection of the sacrifices of my family, and my achievements were a reflection of

our collective efforts. The interviews shed light on the importance of support within the

educational arena. Although the participants shared similar stories and frustrations with the lack

of support from faculty and staff members, I did hear instances of support from some of the

participants before their collegiate endeavors. Interestingly, the participants developed

relationships with coaches during their K-12 years, and some continued to foster relationships

with coaches in the post-secondary environment. While the coaches tend to assume additional roles, they are still considered educators. Therefore, the significance of this relationship is still noteworthy. The conversations with the participants allowed me to revisit my experiences, and I also had a positive exchange with my middle school basketball coach. My basketball coach, Coach Phil, was also my social studies teacher, and we spent a significant amount of time with one another during my eighth-grade year. One day during lunch, Coach Phil sat down to congratulate me on my academic efforts. I finished with the second-highest average in his class, and while I would not receive an award, he wanted to acknowledge the scholastic achievements of one of his basketball players. At the time, I was also one of the starting guards on the basketball team. I cannot recall ever receiving adulation from him to that degree, but our exchange was the only positive experience I can recall inside the school system. For me, plaudits were routine, but they typically lacked authenticity and were usually from African American teachers. The interviews reminded me of my exchange with Coach Phil and the significance of encouragement and support across the educational life span of African American males.

Equity is the cornerstone of social justice and should provide individuals with inalienable rights and civil liberties. Unfortunately, underrepresented groups continue to fight for their constitutional rights while concurrently challenging their recognition among the dominant group. Systems of oppression are ever-present in society; however, challenging the status quo and modifying institutional procedures may lead to societal change. The ongoing political and social discussions regarding marginalized groups, particularly Black men, are encouraging, but discussions without lasting change are unacceptable and nonsensical. Acknowledging the misfortunes and transgressions of the past reduces the likelihood of repeating ghastly historical acts. The social justice crusade is an ongoing battle, but I believe explorations into issues

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impacting the academic and social welfare of marginalized groups will inevitably allow changes to occur in the future.

In the United States, education is purportedly the gateway to fruitful opportunities. However, barriers are consistently impacting the educational strivings of African American male scholars; therefore, critical pedagogues are essential to creating social change in academia. Personal meaning and social change are deeply embedded in the fabric of critical pedagogy. The conversations with the participants highlighted the importance of the work I do with underrepresented groups. As I continue to have conversations surrounding the importance of equity in the educational system, stories from the disenfranchised will continue to buttress the need to change the system and adjust antiquated policies and procedures.

I intended to focus on the experiences of African American male college students attending PWIs in the South, their utilization or lack of code-switching as a tool to navigate the collegiate milieu, and the key influences helping them to succeed. However, the pandemic created an opportunity to expand my research participant pool to include African American male graduates of PWIs in the American South. Initially, I thought shifting the parameters of the participant pool would cause me to modify my research questions and change the overall dynamic of my study. My assumptions were misinformed, and modifying the applicant pool provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of African American males in the post-secondary environment and created an opportunity to discuss the experiences of the previously mentioned group in the professional ranks. We African American males and many others are consistently told college is the training environment for our professional endeavors. While I want my study and the findings to modify and challenge existing policies in the post-secondary environment, discussing the prevalence of the same barriers in the professional ranks is equally

important. Barriers are widespread for minority groups, particularly African American men, and I wholeheartedly believe challenging the status quo in any environment and discussing equity issues will undoubtedly lead to developing inclusive and celebratory communities for all marginalized groups.

The discussion surrounding the participants' experiences and code-switching was a recurring theme throughout all of the interviews. Each participant was at least 10 years removed from their undergraduate years, but their collective experiences in the post-secondary environment and professional milieu were all too familiar. While I initially thought the participants were cognizant of their code-switching efforts in college, all of the participants did not subscribe to my assertion. Some of the participants were aware of code-switching but did not choose to engage in the practice, while others were uninterested in conforming to the environment of the status quo. Interestingly, the participants acknowledged a greater awareness of their surroundings throughout their professional careers and discussed a greater likelihood of code-switching based on their interactions with other individuals in corporate settings. The participants' experiences differed regarding their utilization of code-switching in college, but their collegiate experiences impacted their perspectives on the practice in the professional setting. Seemingly, the experiences of the five participants are interconnected to their understanding and acknowledgment of Black Identity Development. While the participants did not explicitly reference Black Identity Development or their understanding of the concept as a direct result of their code-switching practices, the theory supports the participants' experiences and choices as it relates to becoming comfortable with their cultural customs and adjusting to their understanding of self-efficacy and how they adjust to the environment.

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The conversations about the participants' intellectual abilities were discussions dating back to grade school. According to the participants, their personal beliefs about their academic abilities were never an issue of self-doubt but often came from others and their concern regarding their ability to compete against their White counterparts. As Keith illustrated in his story about the exchange between himself and his high school math teacher, his belief in his ability never wavered, but he was forced to demonstrate his scholarly aptitude because someone believed he had to cheat to thrive in the IB program. Unfortunately, African American men are constantly battling supervisibility in educational environments while concomitantly proving they belong in these spaces (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to these participants, disavowing Fordham and Ogbu's assertation of "acting White" as an indicator for some African Americans feeling ashamed to succeed is an inaccurate assessment. All the participants developed their own unique strategies to navigate the K-12 environment, gained a greater understanding of their identity in the post-secondary milieu, and now openly recognize their identity in any space. While all participants gained a greater understanding of code-switching and how the practice has impacted them individually, each participant also acknowledged how their current identity and authentic self are not compromised based on their willingness or unwillingness to code-switch in a given setting.

Unfortunately, African American men are often seen as a monolithic group and are not consistently allowed to share their individual perspectives on various subjects and issues. Their skin tone seemingly permits others to assume far too many falsehoods without any validity to their assertions. For example, during their undergraduate experience, each participant acknowledged their contemporaries assumed they were student-athletes based solely on their physical appearance. Only two participants were student-athletes, but the unfounded and

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misinformed assertation is commonplace among African American men (Palmer et al., 2018). A myopic perspective of African American male scholars corresponds with how institutions move forward with assisting the group. The variety within this subgroup should be thoroughly explored to offer services further conducive to their academic and social development. Typecasting and pigeonholing African American men are recipes for disaster and will continue to support the statistics related to retention and attrition rates of African American men at PWIs (Palmer et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012).

As I complete the final chapter of my dissertation, I am cautiously optimistic about the future of African American males in higher education due to the country's current structure of power and oppression. I have documented the narratives of the participants and provided legitimate recommendations for modifying current policies and practices to create a more inclusive campus community, but at times, change seemingly moves at a snail's pace, and I continue to witness racial atrocities in the collegiate environment and beyond far too often. I am a UNC alum, but I am forced to face the harsh reality of my once-revered alma mater. As I have grown as a scholar and critical pedagogue, I have learned the significance of confronting racism and discussing the value of equity for marginalized and underrepresented groups. Consistently lauded as the first public university, UNC is in yet another social justice-related conflict. In May 2021, the UNC Board of Trustees denied tenure approval for Dr. Nikole Hannah-Jones. Dr. Hannah-Jones, a Pulitzer Prize winner, MacArthur Fellowship "Genius Grant" recipient, and UNC alum, was seemingly denied tenure due to her work in developing "The 1619 Project." The aforementioned was a critically acclaimed project aimed to "reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative." Despite the outpouring of support from faculty, staff, and UNC's

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students, Dr. Hannah-Jones's tenure application process was prolonged but finally approved in the waning hours at a special meeting that included a closed-door session.

Consequently, Dr. Hannah-Jones declined UNC's offer and will join the faculty members of the Cathy Hughes School of Communications at Howard University, a prestigious HBCU, and serve as the inaugural chair of race and journalism. Furthermore, UNC's actions have resulted in the withdrawal of Dr. Lisa Jones's candidacy to join UNC's chemistry department. Dr. Jones, a prominent Black chemist known for her work in structural proteomics and a highly sought-after candidate for the chemistry department, acknowledged the board's decision as a factor in her decision to withdraw her candidacy.

While UNC and several other PWIs outwardly express a desire to be diverse and inclusive, their antiquated policies and procedures, coupled with inexcusable administrative decision-making, have called their organizational decisions into question. The institution's actions are perpetuating racial bias and are resulting in the cyclical reinforcement of institutional racism. Many Black men see women, who may look like their mother, sister, aunt, or loved one, turned away from earned opportunities, further reinforcing feelings of not belonging in these spaces. Sadly, the disparaging numbers may continue to dwindle for African American men on the campuses of PWIs. While the future of African American males may seem inauspicious at times, I cannot sit idly by and not contribute to this crusade for equity and civil liberties. I am wholeheartedly committed to eliminating systemic barriers to student achievement for Black males in my personal and scholarly endeavors. I hope that this study will bring an understanding of diverse student needs and an interest in collaborating with students and various stakeholders to promote the holistic wellness and academic success of students in a safe, celebratory, and inclusive community.

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First Interview

Background

1. Tell me a little about yourself. How old are you? Are you or were you actively involved in any clubs, organizations, teams, and/or fraternities?
2. Could you please describe your parents' level of education?
3. Please describe your educational classification. (Ex. Undergraduate student, graduate student, or graduate)
4. How are you doing in school? (Follow-ups: Tell me about your grades. What is your or what was G.P.A.?)

Experiences

5. What are some of the most impactful experiences you have had as a college student?
6. What would you say have been your biggest challenges?
7. What have been your successes?
8. Have you ever been stereotyped before you came to college? If so, how do you persist through those stereotypes?
9. Can you think of a time you were stereotyped in college?
10. Where do you experience stereotypes the most? (ex., Social setting, academic setting, etc.)

Retention

11. Have you ever considered (or did you ever consider) leaving college? (If no, then leave it at that) If yes, what helped you to stay in school?
12. What are some of the difficulties that you face, as a student, at a PWI?
13. What do you think are some of the potential difficulties and/or benefits of being an African American male college student in the South?
14. What do you believe leads some African American males to drop out?
15. Are you ever concerned that you will not complete your degree requirements? What's helping and/or hurting you "specifically" in regards to completing your degree requirements? (I know I should avoid closed-ended questions, but I wanted to get a clear-cut "yes or no" response and follow up with an open-ended question. Is this okay?).

Relationships

16. How are your relationships with faculty and administrators on campus?
17. What impact does the kind of relationships with faculty and administrators on campus have on your experience as you attempt to complete your program of study?
18. Do you have any African American male friends who have dropped out of school? (If so) do you know what contributed to them leaving?

Conclusion

19. Given that I'm interested in learning about African American men and higher education, is there anything else you would like to share that I might not have thought to ask?

APPENDIX B: SECOND INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Second Interview

Code-switching

1. Are you familiar with African American English and code-switching? (If not, provide the participant with a working definition).
2. Do you find yourself code-switching? If so, when and where do you most often do it?
3. Do you believe code-switching is appropriate in certain situations and inappropriate in others? If so, could you please elaborate and give specific examples?
4. What are some of the factors influencing your willingness to code-switch?
5. Do you believe African American English and code-switching is a marker of cultural identity and/or pride? If so, please elaborate.
6. What words come to mind when you think of code-switching, AAE, and/or Ebonics?
7. Do you believe AAE is appropriate in certain situations and inappropriate in other situations? If so, please provide examples.
8. Have you noticed a difference in the people with whom you choose to engage in code-switching?
9. What are the three biggest factors that influence your willingness to code-switch?

Focus Group Protocol

Focus Group Outcomes

Outcome 1: To understand how African American males define their educational experiences at PWIs and determine if there are commonalities among the group members. To discuss the experiences, relationships, and events related to their challenges and successes as college students at PWIs.

Outcome 2: To understand how code-switching is or is not used as a tool in the academic and social environments of the participants.

Focus Group Outline
Meeting overview
Consent forms
Participant introductions
Discussion (Reactions to popular culture examples)
Summary
Thank participants for participation (gift cards)
Approximate total time (75 – 90 minutes)

Questions

1. What are your immediate reactions to the examples of code-switching that I've provided? Do you see any similarities to your personal experiences? If so, please provide examples.

2. In what ways, if any, do you see your race and gender impacting your collegiate experiences? Do you believe your institution provided assistance with maneuvering through the environment, or did they fail to assist you in your academic endeavors as a minority at a PWI? Please provide examples.

3. Tell us about your worst and best experiences as a college student as they relate to your position as an African American male.

4. Think about the first time you came to college. What were you thinking? What were your expectations? Who was the first person you met? What were your initial experiences like with students, faculty, and staff? Did you immediately think about code-switching in this new environment?

5. Were there places on campus where you felt most comfortable or safe? Were there groups or organizations present that you gravitated towards? Please explain and provide examples.

6. Do you remember the first time you felt the need to code-switch after arriving on campus? Was it in a formal or informal setting? What type of cues prompted you to code-switch?

7. Have you had any conversations with any students, faculty, or staff members about code-switching? If so, please elaborate on the conversation. Did you feel comfortable talking about the practice with others?

8. Were there any challenges you think were specifically related to being an African American male on campus? Please provide some examples. Did anyone ever speak with you about some of the specific challenges you may face as an African American male on the campus of a PWI? Did you find any elements of code-switching in the conversation?

9. What advice would you offer to an African American male considering attending a PWI? Is there anything specifically related to code-switching you would want to mention?

10. What feedback would you like to give to the college in regards to working with African American males? Is there anything specifically related to code-switching you would want to mention?