While on My Journey: A Life Story Analysis of African American Women in Pursuit of their Doctoral Degrees in the Southwest

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of African American women in pursuit of doctoral degrees in the southwest, their challenges and motivations, and plans for the their next chapter. Drawing from critical race theory and a sociocultural framework, this qualitative study uses Dan McAdams' Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2005) to explore the journeys of these high achieving minority women and how achievement is conceptualized in their stories. Particular emphasis is placed on their critical events, challenges, and alternative futures. Seven separate themes (parental support and advocacy in early education, improved experiences among other African American students, perseverance through struggles/experiences led to purpose, poor department support, family support, impact of spirituality, and relocation and desire to give back) emerged that address three main research questions. Implications for findings and suggestions for future research are offered.

Keywords: Life Story, African American Women, PhD students, Sociocultural Theory, Critical Race Theory

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my beautiful daughter Taryn. She is 5 years old at this time and truly the love of my life. I learned I was expecting her just before I began my doctorate program. So, she has truly been with me every moment of this journey. Watching her grow and develop has continued to inspire me to achieve my highest potential. My life is no longer just about me. As her mother, I will be among her greatest influences. I have the incredible opportunity to impact the life of another human being. This is the biggest and most important blessing I will ever receive. It is my hope that this work will make graduate school for Taryn and her peers a much more comfortable experience than it has been for other African American women. Taryn Sydney, I dedicate this to you. I love you so much!

-Mommy

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CHAPTER 1

While on My Journey: A Life Story Analysis African American Women in Pursuit of their Doctoral Degrees in the Southwest

Over a 10-year span, from 1998 – 2008, the number of PhDs earned by African American women has remained relatively constant, between 3.5 and 4% (Kim, 2011). To compound these low rates and lack of improvement, minority retention programs are continuing to lose support and resources. Though there has been significant support within and beyond academia for affirmative action admissions programs, court challenges have had a dismal effect, resulting in the dilution of resources and a weakening of institutional will (Wilson, 2005). These financial resources include a shift away from programs offering significant fellowship support for minority graduate students, a substantial decline in federal direct investment in doctoral education for minority students, and aid packages focusing more on low-income students and less on underrepresentation (Wilson, 2005). The proposed study will be particularly important for institutions that desire to increase the number of underrepresented students on campus ("This wasn't," 1999).

Background

Much of the research on African Americans and achievement suggests that the great majority of African Americans do not expect to reach high levels of academic achievement (Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Whaley & Noel, 2011). Therefore, they are focused on excelling and setting goals in the arenas that they know have been historically profitable and attainable to their group. Also, academic success may be inconceivable because African American students do not learn about the successes that other African Americans have made to the subject areas (Whaley & Noel, 2011). Those successes are rarely made public. The identities of African Americans that are made public are more often less favorable ones.

African Americans are often portrayed in the media as entertainers, athletes, and criminals (Robinson & Biran, 2006). These characters become models for their viewers and this can have significant impacts. Bandura's (2001, 2002) research on motivational process suggest that a model's similarity to the attendee in terms of race, gender, and other observable parallels, increases the likelihood that the learned behavior will be incorporated into the attendees' behavior-repertoire. The stereotypical images that are portrayed in the news media also have a significant impact because of the media's

assumed credibility (Robinson & Biran, 2006). Unfortunately, many African Americans are more often exposed to these negative images.

Bandura (2001) states that visual media including television are particularly influential modeling agents due to their vast popularity and disinhibitory powers. He suggests that television and other media obscure and distort the relationships between actions taken and the effects they can cause (Bandura, 2001). Since perceived similarity and identification with media characters has been associated with wanting to become more like those characters in other ways, including emulation of appearance and behaviors (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), it is especially troubling that African American women are portrayed in such an unfavorable light so often in the media. Insufficient role models may be another barrier for aspiring women of color who wish to ascend beyond certain stereotypes. The current study aims to contribute to the body of work that explores favorable images of this demographic and their stories.

In summary, this study explores the lived experiences of African American women who are pursuing doctoral degrees. Although African American women and men as well as women from other groups may have some overlap in life stories, the experiences of high-achieving African American women warrants additional research (Patton, 2009). They provide insight to a journey seldom completed by others in their

demographic. They've had triumphs and challenges but have ultimately overcome them all to achieve their goal. The voices of these successful scholars are rarely heard. Based on analysis of interview transcripts, this study documents these voices and explores how achievement is constructed in their life story interviews (Tolvanen & Jylha 2005). Implications of this exploration will inform administrators, policy makers, teachers, parents, mentors, and students of possible interventions, methods of perseverance, support mechanisms, recruitment and retention efforts of African American women.

Statement of the Problem

The minimal number of African American women PhDs is a tremendous challenge with professional, social, and cultural consequences. The professional landscape of college professors and doctorate level researchers is lacking in African American women. Their absence affects education, treatment, and services for underrepresented groups as it takes a certain cultural understanding to educate, mentor, and treat certain populations. Additionally, young African American girls have very few role models to look up to. Identifying what factors contribute to African American women excelling can help parents, teachers, and mentors implement "what works" for today's young African American women.

Significance

The significance of this study is considerable. First, the underrepresentation of African American women earning doctoral degrees is not only a cultural problem; it is social one as well. As the number of African American women who enter into graduate programs continues to rise, the number completing and graduating from doctoral programs has remained the same over the last decade. This is a problem of persistence. There is a growing body of research that supports the notion that African American students have unique experiences in graduate programs at predominately White institutions (PWIs) when compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Allen, 1992; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Fleming, 1981; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; & Jones, 2001). There is a lack of information about how African American women are negotiating those spaces and what can be done to improve the academic journeys for both African Americans and other underrepresented students. The results of the current study address this problem in informing university administrators, faculty, parents, and students of the challenges, triumphs and needs identified by African American female doctoral students.

The current academic landscape of professors also points to the importance of this study. Colleges and universities are disproportionately devoid of African American

women. The exact number of African American women faculty at PWIs differs depending on the source and time of data collection. However, the consensus is that over 90% of professors at PWIs are Caucasian and predominately male at the rank of full professor (Harley, 2008). This professional gap affects education for underrepresented groups as it takes a certain cultural understanding to educate, and mentor certain populations.

This study also contributes to an increase in young African American girls who pursue advanced degrees. Hopefully, these increases will result in more African American women mentors and role models for future generations. The final significance of this study is to contribute to the research and scholarship of African American women by continuing to document their experiences and challenges in higher education (Coker, 2003). This particular work adds to that body of research in being the first study to examine the lived experiences of highly achieved African American women from a variety of professional landscapes, physical locations, and across the lifespan.

Research Questions

The current study was guided by the following questions, which are based on McAdams (2005) Life Story Interview:

1. What have been the lived experiences of African American women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?

2. What have been the primary challenges and motivations experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their doctoral degrees?

3. How would African American women who are currently pursuing their doctorate degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Cultural Theories of Academic Achievement

Cultural incompatibility theories. There are some well-documented cultural theories of academic achievement. Whaley and Noel (2011) identify cultural incompatibly (CI) theories as those that posit that African American youth are academic underachievers because of sociocultural factors. Oppositional culture theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004) and stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995) were two of the theories Whaley and Noel (2011) identified as being culturally incompatible. Whaley and Noel (2011) argue that both theories describe cultural incompatibility in terms of the interaction among identity, stereotypes, and academic achievement. Oppositional culture theory includes notions of "acting White" and "acting Black" based on cultural stereotypes, and taking on one of those versus the other has implications for academic performance (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Stereotype threat theory proposes that racial stereotypes influence the academic performance of African American students with a strong academic identity under certain conditions (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Whaley and Noel (2011) argue that both oppositional culture theory and stereotype threat theory consider the academic setting a source of discomfort for the African American student; albeit for different reasons. Finally, they argue that both theories posit that academic disidentification, a psychological process where students protect their self-esteem from poor performance in a certain area by minimizing its importance to their sense of self, is one means of coping with discomfort associated with achievement-related behaviors and the school environment (Whaley & Noel, 2011). Their review of oppositional culture theory and stereotype threat theory yielded little support for each CI perspective (Whaley & Noel, 2001). The authors concluded that although "acting White" does occur among African American high school students, the occurrence is too infrequent to be labeled a cultural norm. In further review, the authors found that stereotype threat theory was not supported among African American high school students (Cullen et al., 2004; Kellow & Jones (2005, 2008); Stricker & Ward, 2004). However, the theory was supported among Hispanic and Asian American college students (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Gonzales et al., 2002, Shih et al., 1999).

In order to avoid supporting deficit models of achievement and CI theories, the current research will take a different theoretical approach. Analysis of interview transcripts will draw from sociocultural theory and critical race theory.

Sociocultural theory. Life story analyses were analyzed through a sociocultural perspective centering on identity and the social world. According to Mitina (2008), the formation of identity can occur in two different ways: (1) The realizing of the data about oneself; and (2) The constructing of those qualities which the person would like to possess. The first way has led to ascribed identity. The second has led to achievement identity. According to the wide-spread model of achievement identity, contemporary societies are the conglomeration of social groups and "typical identities" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Therefore the contemporary person belonging to more than one group needs to form different identities, and that person's existence is usually described by the model as a struggle for identity; an attempt to overcome division and achieve wholeness and unity (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).

For this study, it was hypothesized that many African American women may experience this struggle for identity as they are forced to negotiate their cultural identity with the majority culture of their academic institution.

The development of an achievement identity from a sociocultural perspective takes place in the participant's environment. This environment includes culturally organized activities, culturally determined structures of participation, and associative actions or "things people do" with other people (Kraft, 1981). In this sense, the

development of an achievement identity comes through participation. Rogoff's (1993) research on informal learning fields provides a foundation for understanding how sociocultural participation develops individual skills, understandings, and competencies. Mejia-Arauz, Rogoff and Paradise (2005) posit that the achievement identity of children everywhere comes from observing and listening-in on activities of adults and other children.

These sociocultural views of participation are based on a belief in "an interdependence of individual mind, interpersonal relations, and social situations that enable learning or development" (p. 473, Heath & McLaughlin 1994,). Rogoff (1993) suggests that members of a given community undergo a process of socialization that might be called apprenticeship; during this apprenticeship process, participants benefit from guided participation provided by community members and within communal activities and events, leading to individual members' processes of participatory appropriation, which allows them to participate fully in shaping and being shaped by their community. In this context, the development of an achievement identity is seen not as an independent, individual process with social aspects but rather as an ongoing process of participation in a community.

According to Eun and Lim (2009), the development of academic identity from a sociocultural perspective can be derived from few recurring themes. The first theme relates to the importance of home-school connections. Studies conducted by Moll and his colleagues (e.g., Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez, 1992) have delved into this theme by exploring how "funds of knowledge" that students bring with them from their homes enhance their learning in formal instructional settings. Home and school are the two most prominent forums where social interaction leads to individual development (Pontecorvo & Sterponi, 2002), and thus bridging these two sites become most important in planning for effective education.

The second recurring theme informs the development of academic identity from a sociocultural perspective as represented by the interactive, collaborative, dynamic, and dialogical nature of teaching and learning (Eun, 2010). Teaching and learning is a process, not a product, and is aimed towards the co-construction of knowledge (Hedegaard, 1995) Sociocultural theories define the essential characteristic of processes of teaching and learning as interactive (Mercer, 2002). The interactive nature of the teaching and learning process is realized as students engage in collaborative activities with shared goals and purposes that are constantly negotiated through dialogs (Eun, 2010).

Viewing knowledge as human creation rather than a given fact that transcends time and space puts an emphasis on the cultural specificity of knowledge. Sociocultural theory defines knowledge as situated in selective cultural contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991), created and developed over time to solve real-life problems that occur within that culture and society (Eun, 210).

The final theme is the integrated nature of development. Vygotsky (1987), in his lectures on the development of psychological functions, noted the interdependent developmental process of these functions. In other words, it is the interrelationship among the psychological functions that develops.

The development of achievement identity can be seen in the classroom dynamic as well. Teachers who adhere to sociocultural theories of development are more likely to encourage dialogic interactions in the classrooms and are more likely to support and use diverse learning activities. Similarly, students who hold theories of learning that are aligned with sociocultural perspectives would participate as active constructors of knowledge rather than passive receptors of pre-made knowledge (Eun, 2010).

In the development of an achievement identity, Rogoff (1995) argues for an understanding of mutually constituting processes.. “For example, it is incomplete to focus only on the relationship of individual development and social interaction without concern

for the cultural activity in which personal and interpersonal actions take place" (Rogoff, 1995). Therefore, it is critical that cultural activity be explored when looking at achievement. The current study will examine that cultural activity through the analysis of life story interviews among African American women currently pursing PhD programs.

Critical Race Theory and Academic Achievement

Critical Race Theory (CRT) presents a second backdrop for the study of achievement and ethnic minority students. CRT is a movement that encompasses various sociopolitical and philosophical perspectives (Parker, 1998). The foundation of CRT is that realities are socially created through the intersection between daily lived experiences and methods for which individuals negotiate those experiences (Crenshaw, 1995; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller & Thomas, 1995). Bell (1995), one of the leading voices on CRT who is also considered one it founders, discussed the tenants of CRT. He used an inclusive statement of "we" to encompass his own contribution to the movement:

> Critical race theorists strive for a specific, more egalitarian world. We seek to empower and include traditionally excluded views and see all-inclusiveness as the ideal because of our belief in collective wisdom. We emphasize marginality and try to turn it toward advantageous perspective building and concrete advocacy on behalf of those oppresses by race and other interlocking factors of gender,

economic class, and sexual orientation. We see such identification as one of the only hopes of transformative resistance strategy. (p. 79).

This statement exemplifies that CRT is a great tool by which those who are oppressed can challenge the powers that be, redefine their history and progress toward the future (Ma-El Allen, 2010). Through the lens of critical race theory, African American women who are progressing toward doctorate degrees have an opportunity to do just that. In this case, CRT will provide useful lens in which to examine the factors that influence achievement in ethnic minority students. Bell (2005) had the following to say about CRT:

> Critical race theory embraces an experimentally grounded oppositionally expressed, and transformatively aspirational concern with race and other socially constructed hierarchies; 'a call for a change in perspective, specifically, a demand that racial problems be viewed from the perspective of minority groups, rather than a White perspective. The narrative voice, the teller, is important to critical race theory in a way not understandable by those whose voices are tacitly deemed legitimate and authoritative. The voice exposed, tells and retells, signals resistance and caring, and reiterates the most fearsome power-the power of commitment and change. (pg. 80).

Here, Bell (2005) emphasizes the importance of having the voices of the oppressed heard. Their stories of challenge and triumph are vital to the nation's history, present, and future. Through their voices, several factors will be revealed that have had a profound influence on their journey. Some of those factors include their school environment, home environment, and peer group influence. Through the lens of CRT, these factors for African Americans in post-secondary education will be explored in the current study.

CRT was chosen as a second theoretical perspective specifically for challenges it raises regarding education and inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In particular, researchers posit that this theory "challenges dominant ideologies that support radicalized inequalities stemming from hegemonic educational practices," (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011, p. 96). Gildersleeve and his colleagues (2011) used a critical race theory analysis to construct a narrative to argue that the culture of doctoral education can be dehumanizing and marginalizing for Latino/a and African American students. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) used a critical race framework to challenge the notion that methodologies have silenced and disempowered people of color and urge those who've been silenced to use other methodologies to regain their voice (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT challenges the status quo and calls for equity. The current study gives a voice

to marginalized women of color in an academic environment historically dominated by Whites. CRT is an appropriate framework for examining the life experiences of African American women in doctoral programs at predominately White institutions because it furthers our understanding of how race and racism interact to shape the social context in which these students must learn (Tuitt & Carter, 2008). This theoretical perspective guides the current life story analysis as their voices are recorded and explored.

The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class

The intersection of race, gender, and class play a part in the development of an achievement identity due to the nature of how children learn. For example, learning through keen observation and listening, in anticipation of participation, seems to be especially valued and emphasized in communities where children have access to learning from informal community development. They observe and listen with intense concentration and initiative, and their collaborative participation is expected when they are ready to help in shared endeavors. This tradition, which Rogoff refers to as "intent participation," is prominent in many indigenous American communities and can also be seen in voluntary organizations, interactive museums, and collaborative schools in middle-class U.S. communities (Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, & Angelillo, 2003).

Evidence of ways in which the intersection of race, gender, and class play a part in the development of an achievement identity is abundant in the literature. For example, variation of observation by children of different cultural communities illuminates how this kind of intent participation can be impacted by these demographic intersections. Bloch (1989) found that young rural Senegalese children observed other people more than twice as often as middle-class European-American children. Navajo students quietly observed teachers more than twice as often as Caucasian students in the classroom (Guilmet, 1979). U.S. Mexican-heritage students whose mothers had little experience with school were more likely to observe without requesting further information, compared with both U.S. Mexican heritage and European-heritage children whose mother had extensive experience with Western schooling (Mejia Arauz, Rogoff, & Paradise, 2004). Clearly, the variation in extent of observation will have an influence on the development of an achievement identity from a sociocultural perspective due the differing levels of participation.

In her analysis of the sociocultural context of Girl Scout cookie sales, Rogoff (1993) proposes three planes of activity within a group, each linked to various aspects of participation: apprenticeship (the community plane), guided participation (the interpersonal plane), and participatory appropriation (the personal plane). The planes

designate the interlocking roles of various kinds of interaction – with one group as a whole, between individual members, and within the individual member herself – associated with the integration of members' abilities, skills, and knowledge into the shared endeavors of the community. The aspects of activity highlighted by Rogoff's planes are the "social medium" in which human development occurs through participation (Rogoff, 1993; Heath & McLaughlin, 1994).

School Environment

Studies have found that African Americans attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) experience less stress. A number of researchers have suggested that the college experiences of African American students vary by the primary racial composition of universities (e.g. Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1981; Smith, 1981). According to this research, African American students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) experience a variety of race-related difficulties compared to their counterparts at HBCUs. Historically, HBCUs were created in response to the segregation barriers that made it impossible for African Americans to attend PWIs (Allen & Jewell, 2002). Freeman (2002) conducted a qualitative study revealing that the main reason students attend HBCUs is that they feel isolated from their cultural heritage, and long for a deeper understanding of it. Roebuck and Murty, (1993) assert that the support of a

nurturing, cultural environment recognizes and values the cultural and academic assets the student brings with them. This in turn provides a supportive environment that eases the transitions associated with college life without the added psychosocial stress of having to deal with incongruence between one's own culture and that of the university (Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

PWIs, on the other hand have been shown to provide a very different environment for African American students. These institutions often struggle to create culturally diverse environments that remain hospitable for all students (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). A great majority of the administrators, faculty, and students at PWIs are White and bring with them their cultural assumptions, beliefs, and expectations (Smith, 1980). Reid and Radhakrishnan (2003) assert that ethnic minority students, mainly African Americans, perceive a more negative, general campus climate than White Americans. Their study revealed that African American students do not believe their instructors respect their ideas and comments in class (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

Tracey and Sedlacek (1989) posit that minority students who are academically successful at the collegiate level generally have a strong support person. Finding a mentor is strongly encouraged in Greene's (2002) article on being a minority in graduate school. She states that it is essential for minority students to have someone to listen to their ideas

and provide objective and critical feedback without the taint of racism. She also adds that White scholars who are sympathetic to the concerns of minority students and tenured faculty members from ethnic minority groups themselves remains scarce (Greene, 2002).

Research studies in which academic outcomes have been examined generally reveal that African American students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) have poorer academic outcomes compared to their counterparts at HBCUs (e.g., Fleming, 1981, 1984). Such differences are further seen in graduation rates of African American students attending HBCUs and PWIs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), between the years of 1997 and 2002, the number of African Americans graduating from degree-granting institutions with bachelor degrees averaged 87% at HBCUs, compared to an average of 9% among their counterparts at degree-granting PWIs (as cited in Greer & Chwalisz, 2007).

Home Environment

A well-known and very controversial report by Moynihan (1965) argued that African American children who grew up in female, single-headed families were at a disadvantage. Several researchers, particularly feminists (see Stack, 1974), criticized the report. Others agreed claiming the report took an approach that blamed the victim (Rainwater &Yancey, 1967; Ryan, 1971). While some research states that two-parent

homes are more academically advantageous for African American youth, other studies reveal mixed results. Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington (1992) found that students from one-parent households have significantly lower grades and test scores that do students from two-parent households. In a study of African American high school science students (Hanson, 2007) found that these young women feel less welcome in science than do White women. However, their interest and involvement in science persists because of the family. Her study revealed that both the mother and father's influence is important.

The importance of social support begins in the early years of education (Guest & Biasini, 2001). Four important factors have been identified as influencing the academic success of African American adolescents: school, parents, peers and neighborhood environment all play roles in African American students' academic success (Newman, Myers, Newman, Lohman & Smith 2000). A longitudinal study with secondary students (approximate age 13) in Singapore revealed a strong relationship between academic self-concept and perceived home environment (Liu & Wang, 2008). Van Voorhis (2011) conducted a study examining the effects a weekly interactive mathematics program on family involvement, emotions and attitudes, and student involvement with urban elementary school students and families. The author found that students and families in the program reported significantly higher levels of family involvement, more positive

feelings and attitudes about math homework, and significantly higher standardized mathematics scores than Control students (Van Voorhis, 2011).

Peer Group

It is suggested for ethnic minorities that one of the first things to do when starting graduate school is to make connections with the minority students in their program and elsewhere in their university, (Greene, 2002). The ability to establish community ties was found to be a reliable predictor of academic success for African Americans (Mallinckrodt, 1988; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). Sedlacek (1999) posits that the establishment of a sense of belonging within the university setting to be an important factor when examining the achievement and retention of African American students at PWIs. In a study of African American males at a PWI, Harper (2006) found that many of them attributed their college success to the support offered by their same-race peers. Oftentimes students struggle with the same problems. Greene (2002) states that peer support can greatly reduce feelings of stress and isolation.

Another study visits the circumstance that arises when same-race peers may not be present. For many minority students attending PWIs, finding other minority students in their department or even elsewhere on campus may be a challenge. Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould (2008) conducted a study on whether friendships with majority-group

peers and minority students would increase minority students' sense of belonging and satisfaction. In a longitudinal study of African American students cross-group friendships with a majority-group peers had a positive impact on African American students' sense of belong and satisfaction at their university (Mendoza-Denton & Page-Gould, 2008). This is evidence that the positive impact of peer relationships can be significant for African American women even with other African American students are not present.

A popular strategy to achieving academic success is to study with classmates in an academic peer group. In the book "Black College Student's Survival Guide," (1997), Kunjufu argues that African American students do not study together especially when compared to their Asian and White counterparts. The author suggests that there are many reasons for this including negative group work experience, having not been taught to study collaboratively, having not been invited to participate in study sessions while in high school, and even electing out of study sessions in college to preserve their "oath of Blackness". That is, an oath that they would not be required to take higher level classes, or if they did take it, they would not be seen associating with White or Asian students after class, in library, or as part of a study group (Kunjufu, 1997).

As the church is often a pillar among the African American community, the discussion of peer group support and African Americans would not be complete without

the mention of spirituality. Kosmin and Keysar (2009) indicate that 76% of American adults identify themselves as Christian. For African Americans, this number jumps to 86% (Kosmin & Keysar, 2009). Interested in the role spirituality in the lives of African American college students, Donahoo and Caffey (2010) researched the benefits gained from their religious and spiritual involvement. To varying degrees, the 25 African American graduate students attributed their successful transitions to college, academic performance, career selection, ability to cope with stress, and desire to accept and improve the lives of others to their religiosity and spirituality (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010).

Conceptual Framework

There are several different components and subsequent themes that emerge from this study. A conceptual framework of emerging themes has been created based on literature regarding African American women and achievement.

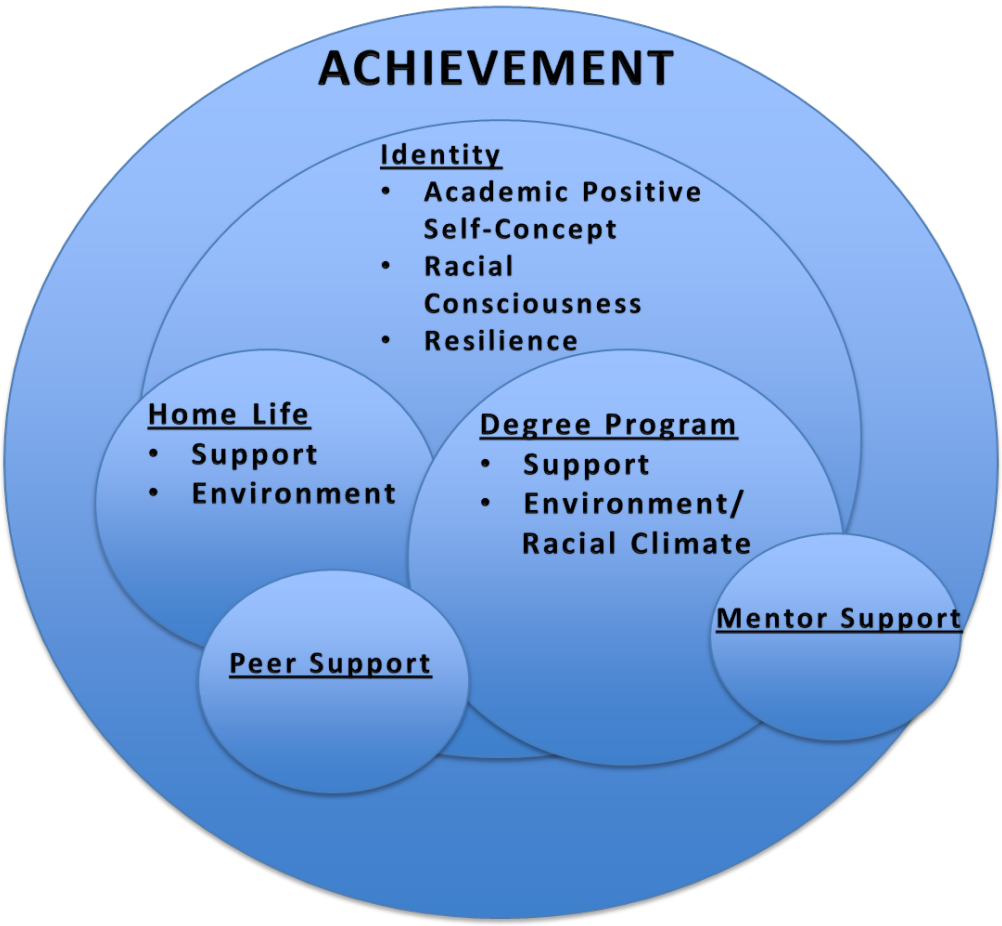

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework. This figure illustrates all of the components of academic achievement and how they interact with one another.

Achievement is comprised of five major components that work together in various ways: identity, degree program, home life, peer group, and mentor support. At the core of achievement is identity. Identity is a complex construct comprised of many factors. However, for the purpose of this conceptualization, this study will focus on only (3) of them: academic positive self-concept, racial consciousness, and resilience. The second component is degree program. The factors of the degree program of particular

interest include support and environment including racial climate and the levels of stress or nurturance that are present in that environment. The third major component of achievement in this conceptualization is the participant's home life. The factors of interest with this component include support, environment, and levels of stress or nurturance that are present in that environment. The fourth and fifth major components of achievement have to do with the level of support a participant receives among their peer group and mentors.

The latter four components all overlap with identity as they each influence the participant's identity. Identity is affected by the participant's environment (e.g., home environment and degree program environment). The participant's peer group and mentor support also influence identity. The components home environment, mentors, and peers each also overlap with each degree program as each of these components can have an impact on the participant's educational environment. All five of these components and their interactions with one another contribute to the influence of achievement.

Identity

Positive academic self-concept. Nasim, Roberts, Harrell, and Young (2005) found that positive academic self-concept surfaced as a good predictor for African American college students at HBCUs. In a factor analysis by Tracey and Sedlacek

(1984), academic self-concept was identified as a non-cognitive (psychosocial) factor that reliably predicted academic success for African Americans. Hurtado (1994) found that minority women consistently lag behind men in views of their academic self-concept.

Racial consciousness. According to Kambon (1992), those who have an awareness of their African identity strive toward African affirmation, empowerment, and preservation and possess self-determination. By being connected to others, these individuals have a sense of self that is strong and purposeful (Kambon, 1992). Robinson and Biran (2006) conducted a study of 96 high school Black students in Florida exploring connections between African identity, study habits, and academic achievements. Their most important finding was that a sense of collective identity, a subfactor of African identity, was positively related to academic achievement (Robinson & Biran, 2006).

Resilience. Resilience has been studied among African American women attending Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). The reported experiences of African American students with faculty at PWIs have varied to include evidence of resilience. While some African American students have reported that their White instructors are supportive, encouraging, and committed to their success. Others report that their White instructor, like other Whites on campus, engage in hostile practices or adopt a viewpoint that is aggressively Euro-American (Feagin et al., 1996).

Coker (1993) reports that in many cases, African American women have a unique stressor while trying to attain their educational goals. In addition to the demands of work, family, and their studies; African American women oftentimes have the added dimension of racism to deal with. D'Augelli and Hershberger (1993) assert that most African American students have experienced some form of blatant racism during their academic career. Through interviews with 36 high-achieving African American students who attended a predominately White "State College," half stated they'd been mistreated on at least one occasion by White professors because of their race (Feagin et al., 1996). According to the Urban Affairs Program (1995), seventy percent of Black graduate students at Michigan State University said that they'd witnessed or experienced acts of racial condescension from faculty members

A number of studies (e.g. Nasim et al., 2005, Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984) found that the ability to understand and deal with racism is a reliable predictor of academic achievement for African American college students who attend PWIs. Other studies cite dimensions of racism such as discrimination, alienation, and being made to feel invisible (Anderson, 1988; Loo & Rolison, 1986). Findings of a study involving educational narratives of African American women revealed that they faced issues of oppression in the educational arena and developed a variety of strategies to cope (Johnson-Bailey &

Cervero, 1996). African Americans who have the resilience to deal with racism adjust and perform better academically (Bandalos & Sedlacek, 1989; Young & Sowa, 1992).

Degree Program

Environment/Racial Climate. If the graduate school the student attended was a PWI, the literature suggests they will likely experience a higher minority status stress. Nasim et al., (2005) states that racial and ethnic minorities at PWIs face an unpredictable and sometimes conflicting and contradictory environment. This stress can hinder academic achievement. In a study of African American students from a PWI and a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), Greer and Chwalisz (2007) found that African American students on the PWI campus experienced higher levels of minority status stressors compared to their counterparts at the HBCU (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). Prillerman, Myers and Smedley (1989) noted that African American students on predominately White campuses experience forms of stress that are common to all college students (e.g., exams, writing papers) as well as forms of stress that are particularly related to their minority status (e.g. racism, discrimination). In this sense, minority status represents a unique source of stress and an additional challenge to success for many African American students at PWIs (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). If the graduate school the

student attended was a PWI, the literature suggests they will likely experience a higher minority status stress. This stress can hinder academic achievement.

Via interviews, Fleming (1981) determined that African American students attending PWIs used more mental distraction or avoidance styles of coping compared to their counterparts at HBCUs. African American students at HBCUs were more likely than their counterparts at PWIs to solve, endure, or alleviate their problems by talking or communicating with other people on campus (Fleming, 1981; Greer & Chwalisz, 2007). The findings of Greer and Chwalisz (2007) give rise to the potential ill effects of minority status and racially disaffirming campus environments on academic outcomes among African American college students.

Steele and Aronson (1995) and Steele (1997) postulate that stereotype threat is an adverse factor contributing to poorer academic performance. "Stereotype threat is being as risk of conforming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group," (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). This psychological process, and others like it, may function to undermine specific abilities related to the stereotype thereby affecting African Americans' academic performance. Students who attend PWIs will deal with stress utilizing more mental distraction or avoidance coping styles compared to their counterparts at HBCUs. African American students at HBCUs will more likely deal with

their stress by talking to or communicating with other people on campus (Fleming, 1981). No matter the climate, achieved African American women cope with stressors in various ways, not allowing it to interfere with their success. Also, their environment has many nurturing elements.

Home Life

Support/Environment. Taylor and Roberts (1995) posited that social support buffers the feelings of psychological distress. Insufficient research was found that examined the impact of support from the graduate students' home life. However, the researcher strongly suspects that a supportive home environment is optimal to the success of graduate students just as it was for adolescents and high school students. Since graduate students are adults, their home life could consist of living alone, with roommate(s), parents, other family members, or a family of their own.

Peer Support

The ability to establish community ties was found to be a reliable predictor of academic success for African Americans (Mallinckrodt, 1988; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). Sedlacek (1999) posits that the establishment of a sense of belonging within the university setting to be an important factor when examining the achievement and retention of African American students at PWIs. In a study of African American males at

a PWI, Harper (2006) found that many of them attributed their college success to the support offered by their same-race peers.

Mentor Support

DuBois and Rhodes (2006) define mentoring as a positive relationship by a non-parental adult who contributes to the life of a young person. For the purposes of this study, mentor support will refer to faculty mentors and/or professional mentors and their relationships to African American graduate students. Allen (1985, 1992) notes that African American students at PWIs who have quality relationships with faculty perform better academically than those students who less significant interactions with faculty members. Nasim and his colleagues (2005) conducted a study with two hundred-fifty African American college students from two predominately White institutions (PWIs) and two historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Among their findings was that the availability of an academic support person was a reliable predictor of academic achievement (Nasim et al., 2005). In a factor analysis designed to identify psychosocial factors which reliably predict academic success for African Americans, Tracey and Sedlacek (1984) found that the support of academic plans to be a reliable predictor. Support persons come in a variety of forms and may provide different levels of support, such as academic assistance and approval, cultural and individual affirmation, assistance

finding available personal resources, and guidance in the process of psychosocial adjustment and development (Nasim et al., 2005).

Findings from a qualitative study conducted by Reddick, Welton, Alsandor, Denyszyn, and Platt (2011) found that students of color in high minority, high poverty high schools found support for their higher education goals through invested teachers, counselors, community member, and peers. However, it was also found that they received unsupportive experiences from these populations as well. The current study seeks to explore these mentoring relationships, both positive and negative impacts of these relationships, and how they were negotiated by successful graduate female students of color.

Themes that emerged from the stories of participants will help to identify common struggles, methods of overcoming those struggles, identity influences, familial influences, degree program influences, peer influences and mentorships. This conceptual framework illustrates the key factors, concepts, and variables to be studied. It is the hope of the researcher that findings that will inspire and motivate today's minority youth as well as serving a call to action for their parents, teachers, mentors, community leaders, and caregivers. To further explore this framework, the current study lists (3) major research questions, with several sub-questions as described below.

Research Questions

Question 1. What have been the lived experiences of African American women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?

Question 1a: How do African American women PhD students describe the chapters of their life as if it were a book?

Question 1b: How do African American women PhD students describe their high, low, turning points in their lives thus far?

Question 1c: How do African American women PhD students describe their most positive childhood memory, negative childhood memory, vivid adult memory, and wisdom events?

Question 1d: What are the most prominent personal ideologies of African American women and how have they evolved over time?

Question 2. What have been the primary challenges and motivations experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their doctoral degrees?

Question 2a. What are the life challenges for African American women who are now pursuing doctorate degrees?

Question 2b. What were the academic challenges for African American women who are now pursuing doctorate degrees in their previous undergraduate and graduate programs?

Question 3c. Who and/or what have been the most influential motivations for African American women who are now pursuing doctorate degrees?

Question 3. How do African American women who are currently pursuing their doctorate degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?

Question 3a. What is going to come next in their life story?

Question 3b. How do they describe their plans, dreams, or hopes for the future? What do they hope to accomplish in the future?

Question 3c. Do they have a life project? How do they describe it?

Summary

This chapter offered a review of the literature in the areas of African American women and achievement. The conceptual framework was introduced. Prior research was explored to support the cultural framework. Finally, the three research questions that guided this study were listed in detail. As Creswell (1994) describes, in a qualitative study, the research question often start with a "how" or a "what" so that the initial forays into the topic describe the phenomena.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Research design

Research questions were answered through a qualitative research design. A qualitative methodology was necessary in exploring these areas as it allows for building a complex, holistic picture, analyzing words, and reporting views of interviewees (Creswell, 1998). The crux of the study was guided by semi-structured interviews utilizing an adapted Life Story Interview protocol (McAdams, 2005).

Sampling decisions. This study is qualitative in method for two central reasons: (1) The first studies related to African Americans in higher education have been framed within a post positivist claim, and have relied heavily on quantitative methods. However, the approach in this study has yielded findings that may best fit this particular population. This distinction of qualitative research is that it strives for deep understanding that comes from "visiting personally with informants, spending extensive time in the field, and probing to obtain detailed meaning" (Creswell, 2003, p. 193). (2) It allows the researcher to obtain descriptions of lived experiences and to seek the meaning of those experiences to form a greater understanding. The basic purpose is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. "Qualitative approaches

allow for advocacy/participatory writing, where there is a strong personal stimulus to pursue issues that relate to marginalized people and an interest in creating a better society for everyone" (Creswell, 2003 p.23).

Data Collection. Participants for this study were recruited from graduate student populations at (3) large PWIs in a southwestern state through a flyer (Appendix A) via email. The study flyer was emailed directly to all of the members in the following organizations in effort to reach the target population.

-Southwestern Public PWI #1:

Graduate Student Listserv

Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) Listserv

Mentoring Program Listserv

-Southwestern Public PWI #2

African American Student Affairs (AASA) Listserv

African American Student Affairs (AASA) Facebook Page

African American Advisory Council

-Southwestern Public PWI #3

Inclusion and Multicultural Services (IMS)

Black Student Union (BSU)

National Society of Minorities in Hospitality (NSMH)

A criterion sample was recruited utilizing convenience and snowball sampling techniques. The initial sample was recruited from the populations identified above. A second set of participants was recruited from a slight but notable change in the call for participants. In the initial email, this short introduction was accompanied by the study flier (Appendix A):

Hi,

My name is Linda and I am a doctoral student at ASU.

I'd like to interview African American PhD students who are in the 3rd year of higher of their program for my doctoral dissertation. I will be asking questions about your life story and the events that have contributed to your success thus far. The interview will be in person and will take 1.5-2 hours. There will be a follow-up phone interview that will take about 30 minutes. Implications of this work will provide an inspiration to young AA girls to pursue higher education and inform graduate programs on how to better support African American students. All identifying information will be confidential. If you or anyone you know fit the above criteria and are interested in participating, I'd love to document your journey! You will be given a nominal gift for your participation :).

Please email me directly for an October interview @ Linda.Manning@asu.edu .

I have attached a flyer as well.

Thank you so much!

Best regards,

Linda

There were hundreds of potential interviewees who received this email via the listservs described above. However, only two potential interviewees responded to the call for participants. In speaking with colleagues and friends, it was anecdotally reported that there may be reluctance to participate due the perceived identity of the researcher. One friend said, "They probably think you're White. Linda Manning sounds White. If it were me, I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing my life story with a White researcher doing work on Black women. I would question her motives and interest." Considering this remark and similar others, the researcher modified the second call for participants slightly by altering the initial sentence. The first sentence in the blurb for the second call for participants read:

Hi,

My name is Linda and I am an African American female doctoral student at [a PWI].

The remainder of the email was the exact same. Within 24 hours, the researcher received over 30 replies from students! Simply identifying that the researcher too, was an African American female doctoral student seemed to make a large impact on the response rate. Many were reported they did not meet the criteria for the study but replied anyway to thank the researcher enthusiastically for doing "this work" and offered many well wishes. Below is an example of a few of these replies:

Hi Linda,

I would love to contribute but I am a second year doc student. Good luck with what you're doing!

Hello Linda,

Though I'm only a MA candidate, I think the study you are doing is wonderful! Best of luck to you!

Hi Linda! First off Congrats on your journey in education and obtaining your phd. I'm an Executive MBA student of the WP Carey program, so I don't fit your profile, but I could not pass up the opportunity to say congratulations!

It has taken me 16years to begin my goal of attaining my mba...my father had his phd in divinity and my mother was an elementary school teacher with her bachelors from Tuskegee...My son is completing his bachelors this April from Pepperdine so education has been the foundation of our family structure.

Just as the slaves knew the value in learning to read and mathematics so they could have the opportunity to demand fair treatment in the market place and beyond. We have a history of valuing education - formal or otherwise.

Congratulations Linda Manning!

This is noteworthy because it supports other research regarding African American students and research participation. Several studies have documented the reluctance African Americans have in participating in clinical research (e.g., Simmonds, 2008, Smith, A. Johnson, Newman, Greene, T. Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Brooks, Paschal, Sly, & Hsiao, 2009; Poythress, Epstein, Stiles, & Edens, 2011). This is due in large part to the speculation of African Americans because of improprieties in the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee. This was a 40-year study that took place from 1932-1972 in which investigators withheld medical treatment from African American men infected with syphilis (Poythres et al., 2011).

In a study designed to examine the relationship between acculturation and achievement scores of African American college students, results found that African American college students provided false information to researchers (Green, Bischoff, Coleman, Sperry, & Zañartu, 2007). Their study found that 20% of their African American participants provided false information, which the authors labeled a form of reluctant behavior. McFarland (2000) concluded that research participants provide false information to appear more favorable or socially desirable to the researcher.

The current research study was not clinical. However, it does require a great deal of transparency on behalf of the research participants. Like clinical trials, the current study requires the participant to be very trustful of the researcher. In asking how they felt about the interview once it was over, each participant remarked on how "comfortable" they felt and how "easy" it was to talk to the researcher. It is suspected that the researcher of the current study received an increased number of willing participants after reveling her ethnicity because participants feel more comfortable sharing very intimate moments of their lives to another woman of color than they would to a Caucasian researcher. One participant remarked, "I saw your ad the first time you sent it out but I thought you were a White girl. I thought, 'there's no way I'm telling my life to some White girl,' (laughs). She'd never understand." This remark confirmed the suspicion of the researcher's friend

and is supported by prior literature on the reluctance of African Americans to participate in research studies.

It is important to note that the researcher did not hold a friendship with any of the participants or initial respondents at the time of the study. The first 10 participants who met criteria were selected for the study. Selected participants received a modest token in the form of a $10 gift card for their time and participation. All participants interviewed met the following criteria:

Individuals must self-identify as a "Black" or "African American" woman

Individuals must be in their 3rd year or beyond of a PhD program

Individuals must be willing to share their life story

Individuals must be willing to commit to participate in two separate interviews, one in person the other by phone.

Individuals must be willing to allow their stories to be digitally recorded by the researcher.

Individuals must self-identify as a "Black" or "African American" woman as this the target population for the current study. The criterion for individuals to be in their 3rd year or beyond of a PhD program was set as an effort to bypass the "honeymoon stage" of graduate school. This is characterized by the initial excitement, enthusiasm, and over

ambition about being in graduate school (Dimitrov, 2008). Potential participants had to be willing to share their life story as it will include high and low points, positive and negative childhood memories, and vivid adult memories as recalled and defined by the participant. They had to be willing to participate in two separate interviews, one in person and one via telephone. Finally, all participants had to be willing to have their responses digitally recorded for analysis.

The recruitment flyer lists a contact e-mail address for the researcher. Once potential participants contacted the researcher, the researcher made an appointment for the potential participant to come into the office for the initial interview. Upon arrival for the interview, all participants were made aware of the purposes of the study were given an information letter (Appendix B) as an ethical imperative. The participants were notified that they would be given pseudonyms to protect their identity and issues of confidentiality (Coker, 2003).

Interview protocol instrument. The researcher utilized the McAdams (2005) Life Story Interview protocol, adapted to address current research questions (Appendix A).

Field-testing instrument. The interviewer field-tested the interview protocol instrument for timing with two graduate students. Two separate field tests were

performed to determine the necessary timing needed for study participants to answer each question, uncover and find answers to unanticipated questions, and ensure that participants understand and respond to the questions thoroughly (Creswell, 1998).

Semi-Structured Interviews. Following the initial screening, participants were interviewed on two separate occasions. On the first occasion, each interviewee participated in a semi-structured interview that ranged in time from 1.5 to 4 hours in duration. This initial face-to-face interview was broken into 3 major parts. The first part of the interview asked the women to think about their lives as if it were a book. They were asked to break that book up into chapters, anywhere from 2 to 7. For each chapter, they were to provide a title and a few sentences to describe what happened in that chapter. Interviewees were then asked to describe specific memories such as their ultimate high, point, low point, turning point, positive childhood memory, negative childhood memory, vivid adult memory, etc. The second part of the interview asked participants to describe their challenges and motivations in their lives overall, as well as those in undergraduate and graduate school particularly. Women were also asked about their personal ideologies including values, religious/spiritual, and political viewpoints. Finally, women were asked to describe what they plan and hope for their futures beyond the PhD.

Each participant was interviewed a second time via telephone following initial analysis. The purpose of the second interview was to follow up on certain themes from the initial interviews. Member checking was done during this time as well as participants were asked to verify their remarks and proper fit into main themes. The duration of this phone interview ranged from 20 to 40 minutes depending on how much the interviewee had to share. Some women were very brief in their responses, while others were much more verbose.

After this initial collection of data, results were analyzed, via line-by-line coding for themes. Participants were then interviewed a second time via telephone to explore and elaborate on themes that were found in the initial analysis. Credibility was enhanced utilizing member checking. During the interview, the researcher restated or summarized information and questioned the interviewee to determine accuracy. At the time of the follow-up interview, the researcher asked participants to verify ideas that emerged in interview transcripts. All participant data was kept confidential. Results from the second interview were coded line by line for analysis.

Data Analysis. In this study, 10 African American women volunteered to share their life stories. These women were interviewed in-person over a one-month period. Initial interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Preliminary analysis was

conducted before the same women were contacted a second time for follow up interviews. Each interviewee was then interviewed again by phone. Their responses to the second interview were recorded via note taking. For analysis, the researcher used a modified version of the Stevick-Colzizzi-Keen method (as cited in Creswell, 2007) to analyze the data. Steps the researcher used for analysis are described here:

Interviews were conducted and transcribed. Participants were asked to verify several experts to ensure accuracy.

The researcher organized transcripts in a large spreadsheet with research questions listed across the columns and research participants listed down the rows. This allowed the researcher to effectively assess similar or dissimilar responses to the same question.

The researcher developed a list of significant statements from the interviews to begin thematic analysis. Each statement was treated with equal value (horizontilization of the data), finally creating a list with non-repetitive, nonoverlapping statements. Significant statements were color coded then grouped into meaning units or themes. Several descriptions of each theme were noted using verbatim quotes. Finally, the research performed imaginative variation to write a composite textural description

phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description of each theme will appear as an introduction to supporting quotes.

The theoretical models used as a framework for this study are critical race theory (CRT) and sociocultural theory (ST). In order to address each research question completely, the women in the study were asked a series of questions from a modified version of McAdams (2005) Life Story Interview.

Methods of validity

Validity involves the association between data and conclusion (Bapir, n.d.). Validity in qualitative research is an important but contested concept. Guba and Lincoln (1989; 1994) assert that member checks are paramount for establishing credibility. However, Sandelowski (1993) argue that member checks used to established reliability counter validity and trustworthiness and should therefore be avoided. Sarantakos (1994) offers other concepts associated with validation in qualitative research such as cumulative, communicative, argumentative, and ecological validation. Cumulative validation involves findings being supported by other research. Communicative validation occurs when findings are evaluated by respondents. Argumentative validation requires that the conclusion should be followed and tested. Ecological validation uses stable methods and takes into consideration the life and conditions of those researched

(Sarantakos, 2013). Triangulation, the act of comparing different kinds of date and different kinds of methods to see whether they corroborate one another and respondent validation (also referred to as member checking) are endorsed by Silverman (2003) to establish validity. The current study incorporates a mix of these methods. Member checking as described by Guba and Lincoln (1989; 1994), communicative validation as described by Sarantakos (2013) and respondent validation as described by Silverman (2003) all involve findings being evaluated by respondents. Therefore, this method was utilized in this study as a test of validity. Member checking was conducted by providing interviewees with subsets of data collected from their interview to verify accuracy of the findings. Cumulative validation (Sarantakos, 2013) was also utilized as findings were supported by other studies.

Methods of reliability

Reliability refers to the ability of results to be replicated or repeated (Merriam, 1998). Like validity, reliability in qualitative research is also widely contested. Merriam (1998) asserts that with qualitative research the focus is on understanding and explaining the world as others have experienced it and the assumption is multiple realities exist. Therefore, there is no benchmark established to measure repeatability or establish traditional reliability (Merriam, 1998). Similarly, Stenbacka (2001) argues that since

reliability concerns measurements, it has not relevance in qualitative research. She adds that this issue of reliability is an irrelevant concept in the judgment of quality concerning qualitative research. Patton (2001) asserts that reliability is a consequence of validity in qualitative studies, rendering individual tests of reliability unnecessary. However, Guba and Lincoln (1985) utilize the term dependability to describe reliability. Instead of focusing on the ability of others to replicate results, the intent becomes having others agree that the results reached by researcher are sensible and consistent with the collected data (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

The present study considers this claim and assesses internal reliability though peer checking. Peer checking was done by a peer of the researcher checking doing a brief analysis of some data, placing them into selected categories, and themes. The peer was given the choice of "none apply" to account for data that he did not feel fit into any of the categories or themes provided. In 90% (9 of 10) of the cases, the peer and researcher agreed on categories and themes selected. In the one instance of disagreement, data was placed into the category selected by the peer following discussion.

Ethics

The researcher utilized informed consent in the form an IRB-approved information letter. The letter communicated participant rights, study involvement, details

of their anonymity, and contact information for the researcher and principal investigator (Appendix B).

Hawthorne effect

The *Hawthorne* effect suggests that when interviewees know they are subjects in a research study, they will alter their usual behavior (Berg, 2004). Stodddart (1986) as cited in Berg, 2004 discussed the idea of the *invisible researcher.* This is the ability to for the researcher to capture the essence of the session without their presence influencing it. In the present study, the researcher acknowledges that the participants may have been adjusting their responses to further the study.

To address the Hawthorne effect, the researcher enacted "Disattending: Erosion of visibility by personalizing the ethnographer-informant relationship" (p. 110) an invisible status variation suggested by Stoddart (1986). As described, the researcher became invisible because the interviewees suspended concern over the research aspect of their identity in favor of liking the researcher as a person (Berg, 2004). This suspended concern was verified when the researcher asked reflective questions at the conclusion of the face-to-face interview. Interviewees expressed a feeling of comfort and fondness of the interviewee which helped them to relax and be transparent during the interview. The

following quotes obtained from interviewees January 10 – February 10, 2013 illustrate this phenomenon:

"This has been very therapeutic. I've had several aha moments… like recognizing that I may be too forgiving. It has me thinking more about whether I want to stay married to my husband. He's been unfaithful many times and I always forgive him. This has been great though. You made me feel really comfortable. Thank you so much." – Janet

"Well, I'm a very private person and felt worried. I wondered if others will be able to identify me. I don't usually share anything about myself to anyone else. But spiritually, I have this feeling of safe exposure with you, so it's been fine." –Denise

"This was great! It was fun. I wanted to be very transparent and I felt open to do so. Thank you!" – Angela

"This has been liberating! It's like therapy. I loved it!" – Vivian

Reciprocity

To address the need for participants to receive something in return for their willingness to provide such intimate details of their lives, the researcher did the following:

Showed genuine interest in the interviewees and their stories;

Gave each participant a nominal gift in the form of a $10 gift card for Target;

Wrote and distributed customized thank you cards for each interviewee;

Offered a summary of completed findings upon request.

Summary

This chapter presented methods that were used in the current study. This chapter described the purpose, research questions, rationale for the selected approach, sampling decision, data collection, and data analysis procedure.

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CHAPTER 4

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to conduct a life story analysis of African American women who are currently pursuing their doctoral degrees. In this analysis, the study explored shared experiences, challenges, motivations, and future goals. The specific aim was to reveal common elements in their life stories that could help guide educators, faculty, administrators, parents, and students in encouraging higher educational pursuits among young African American women.

The first section of this chapter provides a profile of the interviewees. The second section of this chapter provides the results of the analysis of participants' interviews with supporting verbatim quotes from the transcripts. Central themes that emerged from the data are presented.

Description of the Interviewees

Ten female African American doctoral students participated in the current study. Each of them met face-to-face with the researcher to participate in a 1.5 – 4 hour audio recorded, semistandardized interview (Berg, 2004). Selection of the interviewees required that they be currently enrolled as a doctoral student, and in at least in the 3rd year of their

program of study. Criterion also included that they self-identify as an African American woman over the age of 18 and are enrolled in a doctoral program in the Southwestern region of the United States. Each of the participants met the required criteria. Though not a requirement, each of the 10 interviewees were currently attending a public predominately White institution (PWI) at the time of the interview. The type of PhD program in which participants were enrolled in was nonfactor for selection. However, the note of whether a participant was enrolled in a science, technology, engineering or math (STEM) program is differentiated from students who were not enrolled in STEM programs. The distinction is indicated to aid in providing context to some of the results presented.

Seven of the ten participants were between the ages of 25-35. Three of the ten participants were between the ages of 35-45. Three participants identify their hometown in the Western region of the United States. Five participants reported that they are from the Midwest. Two of the women interviewed identified their hometowns as being in the South. Four of the participants were in the 3rd year of their doctoral programs at the time of their interview. The remaining six participants reported being in their 4th (n=1), 5th (n=4) and 6th (n=1) years of their respective doctoral programs. All of the women interviewed reported that they anticipate completion of their doctorate degrees within 1-2

years. Additional information regarding the identity of the participants has been omitted to preserve their anonymity. Each interviewee was assigned an arbitrary pseudonym. The profile of interviewees is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee Pseudonym	Age Range	Home Region	Institution Type	Year in Program	STEM / NonSTEM	Degree	Anticipated Completion
Whitney	25-35	West	Pub SW PWI	5th year	NonSTEM	PhD	Fall 2013
Michelle	35-45	West	Pub SW PWI	6th year	NonSTEM	PhD	Spring 2013
Kerry	25-35	Midwest	Pub SW PWI	5th year	NonSTEM	PhD	Spring 2014
Alicia	25-35	South	Pub SW PWI	4th year	STEM	PhD	Fall 2013
Mya	25-35	South	Pub SW PWI	3rd year	NonSTEM	PhD	Summer 2013
Janet	35-45	Midwest	Pub SW PWI	3rd year	NonSTEM	PhD	Spring 2014
Vivian	25-35	Midwest	Pub SW PWI	5th year	STEM	PhD	Spring 2013
Denise	35-45	Midwest	Pub SW PWI	5th year	NonSTEM	PhD	Fall 2013
Angela	25-35	Midwest	Pub SW PWI	3rd year	NonSTEM	PhD	Fall 2014
Janelle	25-35	West	Pub SW PWI	3rd year	NonSTEM	PhD	Spring 2013

Emergent Themes

Once all data were transcribed and initially coded, seven primary themes emerged. A separate set of themes emerged from each of the 3 research questions. Three themes emerged from the first research question: "What are the lived experiences of African American Women in Pursuit of PhDs in the Southwest?" Three themes emerged from the second research question: "What have been the primary challenges and motivations experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their doctoral degrees?" Finally, one theme emerged from the third research question: "How would African American women who are currently pursuing their doctorate degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?" Each of these themes helped answer the initial 3 research questions used to guide this study.

Table 2
Emergent Themes

Research Question	**Interview Question (Abbreviated)**	**Emerging Themes**
1. What have been the life experiences of African American women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?	Life Chapters - Think about your life as if it were a book with 2-7 chapters. Chronologically, give each chapter a title and provide a few sentences to describe each chapter.	1. Parental support and advocacy in early education 2. Impact of other African American students 3. Perseverance through struggles/Experiences led to purpose

2. What have been the primary challenges and motivations experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their doctoral degrees?	Challenges & Motivations - Please describe your greatest challenge while in undergrad, graduate school and overall greatest life challenge. Do the same for your greatest motivations.	4. Department Support 5. Family Support 6. Impact of spirituality
3. How would African American women who are currently pursuing their doctoral degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?	Future Script - What do you see as your next chapter? Dreams, hopes, and plans for the future? Do you have a life project?	7. Relocation & The desire to give back

Question 1: What are the lived experiences of African American Women in Pursuit of their PhD's in the Southwest?

This question was addressed in asking several sub-questions based on McAdams (2005) Life Story Interview. Respondents were first asked to describe their lives as if they were chapters in a book, saying a few sentences about each chapter. They were then asked to recall certain memories such as their overall high point, low point, turning point, positive childhood memory, negative childhood memory, most vivid adult memory, and wisdom event. Finally, interviewees were asked about their personal ideologies including their personal values, religious/spiritual beliefs, political ideologies; and the development

of these over time. Five separate themes emerged from this question addressing life chapters, experiences in college and graduate school, and overall lifespan development.

Theme 1: Parental Support and Advocacy in Early Education. Nine out of the ten women interviewed reported receiving early support for their educational achievement, mostly from parents and teachers. This support emerged in the form of parental encouragement, involvement, and advocacy in the face of differential treatment in educational settings. These results echo other research on the importance of high expectations and early support for children's academic development (Berger, 1991; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1995; Catsambis, 2001; Duch, 2005; Lawson, 2012; Shelon & Epstein, 2005).

Although this theme confirms existing research, it is in the intersection of gender and race that the relevance of these results comes through. Some researchers have found that African American women are *less* likely to receive parental support in education than other groups. Several researchers have observed that educators make the assumption that families who are economically disadvantaged and/or of a different ethnic, cultural, or linguistic background lack the ability and willingness to meaningfully contribute to their children's education (e.g., Becher, 1986; Chavkin, 1993; Fine, 1993; Lopez, Scribner & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

Thus, it is noteworthy that nearly all of the participants recall both traditional and non-traditional methods of parental involvement and supportive messages about their intelligence received from their parents. They expressed how this affected them both on a socioemotional and a cognitive level. The involvement created a foundation for future learning and the messages became an essential part of who they are—and perhaps provided a grounding that allowed them to resist and move beyond more negative messages about their intelligence that they would encounter in other stages of their academic development.

For example, Michelle recalls the repeated messages she received about her abilities and how these provided a sense of self that she believed was especially important given that she was raised in a single-parent household:

> Everybody kind of would always tell me that I was great and I was fantastic and I was smart. So I think that that really shaped my life differently than other people's lives being raised in that situation would be, because even though my family wasn't, quote unquote the nuclear family, I felt a lot of love and support.

Michelle explicitly recognizes the negative views that others hold of single-parent families but also knows they do not apply to her. The support of an extended family of adults "shaped her life differently" in comparison to others in similar situations.

Participants also recalled that supportive messages were reinforced through specific actions on the part of parents. In addition to expressing pride in academic ability, participants recalled what they learned through their parents' involvement. This involvement was described as parents helping with homework, school projects, volunteering in their classrooms, and celebrating every academic achievement. Essential in building confidence and autonomy for the women interviewed, this collaboration set a foundation for future learning. For the women in this study, the experience of having early parental support in their learning provided them added encouragement to continue achieving higher goals. This confidence from early childhood would continue to resurface throughout their educational journeys. Whitney remembered her parents would be a presence in the school environment:

> I won every contest I entered into in elementary school, including the regional spelling bee four times! My mom and dad were extremely supportive of me academically. They were always at the school for something. My mom would

bring baked goods on holidays and my dad helped in the science room. School was always very big.

Similarly, Alicia remembered her parents' encouragement and how her "studious" abilities allowed her to help others.

My mom began teaching when I was in elementary school. She's now a principal. I was always kind of studious. My best friend always teases me; "You always had your head in the books". People would always ask for my help or whatever.

[Growing up], my parents were always been encouraging of me academically. I was on a good track.

Alicia's and Whitney's experiences demonstrate how early messages and parental support instill confidence in children. The messages on learning and intelligence received by the women in the current study allowed them to continue stretching their abilities. Encouraging and supportive relationships with parents and other adults also foster a greater sense of autonomy allowing children to comfortably explore their environments and return to family for emotional support (Karavasilis, Doyle, & Margolese, 1999). And, although not a requirement for academic success, support in the form of helping with homework and class assignments can be a significant contributor to success, as seemed to be the case for the participants in this study.

Learning requires a focus on how people participate in particular activities, and how they draw on artifacts, tools, and social others in approaching their environment (Nasir & Hand, 2006). The women interviewed for this study described how they were able to use classroom assignments and projects in working with their parents and other adults to help shape their learning. It was the cooperative involvement with these adults that was vital to how they approached their learning environments. For example, Janell recalls how her parents would use household materials to help teach her math at a young age.

> I remember when we first started doing subtraction in school. My mom and dad would use macaroni noodles, candy, straws, whatever we had lying around the house to help me grasp the concept of take away (laughs). It worked!

Janell's parents contributed to her learning process by drawing on items around her environment. Established research has shown that parental involvement in early learning improves academic competency (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 1994; Kohn & Rosman, 1974; Perry, Guidabaldi, & Kehle, 1979; Wentzel, 1991). This held true even after controlling for family background (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999).

Janell's parental involvement included the use of physical tools to aid in her learning. A major theme of sociocultural perspective is represented by Vygotsky's

"genetic law of development": Any function of a child's cultural development appears on stage twice, or in two planes, first the social, then the psychological, first between people and an intermental category, then within the child as an intramental category" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 106). That is, as learners participate in joint activities and internalize the effects of working together, they acquire new strategies and knowledge of the world and culture (Scott & Palinscar, 2009). Wertsch (1991) observed that this human interaction is mediated by tools. Janell's parents utilized tools such as macaroni noodles, candy and straws to help Janell learn the concept of subtraction. This process was a social or "intermental" activity, in that she learned through the social interaction with her parents. It was also psychological, or an "intramental" activity in that she was able to cognitively grasp the mathematical concept of subtraction.

Rogoff (1990) extends Vygotsky's notion of sociocultural theory in introducing guided participation. She writes, "Children's cognitive development is an apprenticeship – it occurs through guided participation in social activity with companions who support and stretch children's understanding of and skill in using tools of culture" (Rogoff, 1990, p. vii). Angela experienced this guided participation with her aunts as she learned to read. Angela recalls:

> [My mother] struggled to provide for me. My dad's side of the family really took care of me. His two older sisters were educators and taught me to read. I would spend the summers with them. We would travel and play games.

Angela's extended family aided in her learning process outside of the classroom and provided support when her parents were unable to do so. According to Vygotsky (1987), children's development takes place with social support in familiar cultural contexts including homes, school, community, and in social interactions with adults and peers in order to develop and internalize skills (Mastergeorge, 2001). For Angela, part of her development took place through the social support of her aunts as they taught her to read.

Hill et al.'s (2004) finding on the importance of parent support reinforces what many participants in this study remembered about their parents standing up with respect to some issue related to race. Seven of the ten women interviewed recalled instances where they received differential treatment based on race while at school in their early years. In each case, the respondents shared how their parents advocated on their behalf. For example, Angela recalled her mother's role in challenging racist content in the classroom:

> I was the only African American girl in the 3rd grade. There were only 3 or 4 in the whole school. This was the first time I noticed I was "the other." I remember

> that sometimes we would have indoor recess. On this particular day, they showed "The Little Rascals." I remember seeing the character Buckwheat and feeling uncomfortable. When I got home, I told my mom that they showed The Little Rascals and she called the school. They never played it again.

Similarly, Denise recalled how her mother advocated for her when she faced racism in her 3rd grade classroom:

> In third grade, a classmate called me a "nigger." I told my mom, my mom went to the school and did something; I'm not sure. It happened again and I pushed the girl. I was afraid I was going to get into trouble but I didn't.

These excerpts illustrate how African American parents played a strong role in support of their child's education through advocacy. This kind of support was key in the early development of African American women, specifically due to the challenges they are likely to face as an ethnic minority, female, and, in some cases, of a lower SES. The very act of their mothers advocating for the women in this study implicitly provided participants with resiliency (Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006), built confidence, and fostered self-esteem. Angela went on to comment, "It was then when I knew that no matter what, my mom had my back. It felt good. I wasn't afraid to go to school."

For the participants in this study, the early childhood messages and support received from parents and other adults helped to build confidence and autonomy for future learning. This theme is critical in that it demonstrates the dual role African American parents play in being both cheerleader and advocate for their children—and how these actions may have been especially important for academically successful African American women. Through their parents' words and actions, the participants internalized both a sense of self-as-learner and a sense of self-worth—that it was important to stand up for one's self and speak out.

Theme 2: Improved experience when among other African American students. Eight of the ten women reported feeling better around other African American students. This notion is consistent with research on African American adolescents in ethnic identity development (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Rotheram, 1987; Tatum, 2003). Adolescence is a critical period for identity development (Erikson, 1968). Because of this, Tatum (2003) observes that elementary school children are often found convening in racially mixed groups. Tatum (2003) attributes this selected segregation to puberty, exploring the question "Who am I?" and for African American students, "Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?" (p. 53). Results of the current study suggest that the emergence of these questions does not end in

adolescence. Here, Mya describes how she felt when making her transition from a predominately White high school to her undergraduate PWI that was populated with a large number of other African American students:

> I went from going to school with rich White people to being around Black people excited about learning. I would hang out at the Black Student Union House. I went to church every Sunday. It was a big part of our culture at [my predominately White undergraduate institution]. I felt alienated in [my] department because there were so few Blacks.

Denise recalls similar feelings when she transferred from a PWI to an HBCU while in college. She delves further here, adding how the diversity helped her with her own identity well beyond her elementary years.

> I went to [a predominately White institution] my first year and I didn't like it. I transferred to an HBCU. It was a beautiful campus. I loved it! This is when I began to really appreciate my identity. I saw Black women in every shade, to ones as light as me, lighter than me, and ones much darker, ones with hair like mine, hair much looser than mine and hair much tighter than mine. It was natural validation… Being here allowed me to really appreciate the diversity among us. I'd never seen it before. We'd take road trips, go to class, and have lots of fun. It

> leveled the playing field academically. Everyone was smart. I made very significant relationships.

Angela brings up similar feelings when coming to graduate school to pursue her Ph.D. Though she is brief, she states very explicitly that she has a better experience when around other African Americans.

> Being around other Black students is better for me. I like being around other Black people. [This Southwestern State] has been a challenge because there are not a lot of Blacks here.

These findings support Tatum's (2003) position that being around other African Americans is key in the development of ethnic identity for African Americans. The development of ethnic or cultural identity is not a fixed occurrence, but one that is variable and is continually informed by the environments in which they inhabit. Ethnic and cultural development occurs as individuals in their cultural communities engaged with others in shared endeavors (Rogoff, 2003). Angela reports that her preference of being around other African Americans is evidence that her ethnic identity is still being developed, or at best maintained. Denise describes being around other African American women a "natural validation" for her. Her upbringing provided little diversity and models for African American culture. Denise was finally able to further develop her ethnic

identity when around other African American students. Mya and Angela described how their experiences in college of being around other African Americans, even if only socially, enriched their experiences overall. Janelle describes her experience when beginning college with a large population of African Americans:

> It was culture shock at [University A] being around all Blacks. I fell in love with it and eventually began to see it as natural. Normal… I felt a big sense of community around other African Americans.

Here, she describes feeling a sense of community, calling the experience "natural" and "normal." Janelle reports that being around a large population of other African American students for the first time finally gave her a cultural comfort and validation she'd never experienced before. Again, this is constituted with Tatum's (2003) work suggesting that ethnic identity formation extends far beyond elementary school. Michelle recalls a similar experience:

> I took this History of Black Women in America class. The majority of the other students in the class were Black. The class just felt different. It felt like a little club rather than a class. The professor was a Black woman, and a Black full professor. Students looked at her like a mother figure or an aunt. They were very

respectful. It was a wonderful experience and unlike anything I've experienced before or since.

Like other women interviewed, Michelle expresses appreciation of African American culture in academic settings. Harris (2012) suggests that this appreciation is especially significant for African American students. She describes the need to be around other African Americans as necessary, far beyond adolescence, high school and even graduate school.

In her discussion of being an African American faculty member at a PWI, Harris (2012) discussed the importance of having an African American professional network in the academy as well as befriending other African American women across campus, in the community, and in nonacademic spaces such as the church, mosque, or gym. She stated the professional networks provide her with insulated and safe spaces not offered by her home department and community networks provide strength necessary for succeeding and overcoming the stigma of being a minority faculty member at a PWI (Harris, 2012). Tatum's (2003) work on ethnic identity and Harrris' (2012) work on the experiences of African American women in the academy support the importance of African American women having an African American network across their educational lifespan.

A consistent thread among African American women who expressed feeling better around other African American students was the idea that their voices would be heard and their presence would be recognized and valued, even if only by their group. There is power in numbers and being around other African American students provides a way to communicate shared experiences and realities of the oppressed, a first step toward justice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The implication here suggests a collectivistic effort toward teaching others rather than an individual social frustration over the educational divide. For example, Angela states:

> When I'm around my non-academic friends, it isn't different per se, I just find myself stripping down the language. They may not know the word "gentrification" but I'll introduce it in conversation. I don't mind the adaptation.

Michelle described the changing of her language when speaking to certain friends "code-switching." However, like Angela and contrary to Burkes (2010), she does not seem to mind.

> I have to code-switch often. I feel like I have 3 - 4 different types of friends. I had to code switch when I was younger because I would intimidate my family or

> friends. I don't code switch much anymore, I just don't elaborate as much. I give short cliff notes answers. If they ask more questions, I give more information.

Kerry recalls this type of "switching" as well. However, in this circumstance she felt compelled to maintain her non-academic identity to better fit into her social environment.

> When I started bar tending at a club in [Urban City] I decided that I would not tell anybody that I had even been to college because I found that that made things harder for me in [Urban City]… People treat you… people there… uhh, people there are in a different space. People there aren't really happy, you know, they're kind of rude and can be angry, especially the sistas…. Anyway I decided I wasn't going to tell anybody I'd been to school because I felt like when I worked at the bank, most of the girls had a high school education and I had a bachelors and I felt like that was part of the reason they didn't like me. I don't know if it was true but I did feel like that. So I was like I'm definitely not going to tell them I have a master's (laughs). So I'm just gonna like… I'm just not going to talk about that. I'll just talk about other things.

In this case, Kerry describes concealing her academic identity entirely among a non-academic group for reasons of social acceptance. Kerry knew she'd be viewed differently, as an outcast from the group, and even incites feelings of intimidation among

those around her. This could have made for a hostile work environment and otherwise unpleasant experience. Therefore, she felt the need to negotiate her identity differently while working at the bar, as her environment informed it.

Mya states that although her language changes as well, she prefers her non-academic identity over the one she's acquired through the socialization of graduate school.

> When I'm talking to my friends outside of school, I have to explain more what I'm talking about. I take out the jargon…. When I'm with my [non-academic friends], it's a different world. I prefer to be in that world. It reminds me of who I am. I don't want to get lost in the ivory tower.

Cultural identity is informed by one's environment and constructed by the tools and artifacts used by social others (Nasir & Hand, 2006). These women find it necessary to negotiate their cultural identities in different circles. When in academic environments, the women in the current study negotiate their identities as academics, in response to their habitat. Here, their identity is informed by an educational environment residing in an academic department of a graduate school. The tools and artifacts used here include academic rhetoric, social discourse within the context of research, and class projects.

When in this academic realm, the women interviewed described *fitting the part* of a graduate scholar. Their identity was informed by their academic environment.

However, when in non-academic environments, the women interviewed described negotiating their environments differently in response to their social others. The women interviewed shared the need to change their rhetoric and/or explain it in more detail when around their non-academic peer groups. In Kerry's case, she chose to keep her academic identity concealed entirely when among her co-workers at a bar. Mya described having to "take out the jargon" when talking to her non-academic friends about her work. In these situations, cultural identity of the women interviewed was informed, or at least influenced by their environments.

Contrary to Burkes (2010), this adaptation was met with a positive willingness. There was a sense of comfort and willing adaptation when relating to other African Americans outside their academic circles. Further research is needed to explore this negotiation of space among African American women.

The women in the current study identified unique experiences when around other African Americans. Overwhelmingly, they reported having more positive social and educational experiences when around other African Americans. This is well supported in ethnic identity literature (e.g. Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney, 1990; Phinney &

Rotheram, 1987; Tatum, 2003). However, findings from the current study suggest that ethnic identity development may continue well beyond adolescence. They also described differential experiences when around African Americans who are outside their academic circles. Here, sociocultural theory helps us understand how the women in the current study negotiate their identities as they are informed by varying environments.

Theme 3: Perseverance through struggles/Experiences led to purpose. Nearly all the women interviewed disclosed major life struggles (e.g., childhood abuse, tragedy, low self-esteem) and their ability to persevere through them. This finding is consistent with the expansive research on the resilience of African American women (Chatters, 2000; Fleisher, 2009; Hill, 1999; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1996; Taylor, Chatters, Hardison, & Riley, 2001). It is important to note that resilience and place are treated as "…mutually constituted, dynamically active, discursive and practical categories of becoming, which are (re)narrated, (re)configured, contested and re-enacted across a multiplicity of geographical scales" (Kaiser & Nikiforova, 2006. p. 931). That is, resilience not something these women around with them from place to place, with the ability to use it as a tool when they choose. Resilience, as part of their identity has to be re-created and reignited as a response to their environment.

The current study furthers the work on resilience to identify how these experiences led many of the research participants to find their purpose and pursue doctoral programs to fulfill it. For example, in describing struggles resulting from growing up in a lower SES home, being the product of a single mother, the experience of a latchkey kid, and difficulty in school, Janet shares how these experiences motivated her to pursue higher aspirations.

> I was a "C" student and didn't apply myself. I had good behavior but was shy. I wasn't/couldn't be social. Ages 11 through 13, I felt by myself. My mom worked a lot and I had to do everything for myself. I'd have to wake myself up, get myself off to school, and get started on my homework when I came home, all while my mom was at work. That experience helped make me more responsible. When I was 13, we moved. I made friends at the new school and began volunteering at a hospital. My grades were better, "B's". My mom got an associate's degree. She told me how it was not having a degree. I saw my mom struggle. I knew I had to go to college. I didn't want that to be me.

Janet clearly shows how she was able to persevere through times when she had to take care of herself at a young age. Adolescence is a pivotal time in a child's development. There are dynamic physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes; as well as a time

for the development of many socio-emotional concerns (Scherf, Behrmann, & Dahl, 2012). Janet spent a great deal of these years alone having to be responsible for herself while her mother worked. She reflects on how this experience helped her grow up and become more self-sufficient. Janet also describes how her struggle and her mother's struggle influenced her to pursue higher education. In a sociocultural framework, the intersectionality of family structure (Janet growing up with a single mom) and SES (Janet's mother having to struggle due to lack of education) helped to shape how Janet navigated her environment. She was in a place were she was forced to negotiate the space of going through adolescence, taking care of herself, and performing in school in an environment with limited parental support and low socioeconomic class. Janet's environment and circumstance shaped her development and set a foundation for later learning.

One of the women interviewed described significant struggles with self-esteem while growing up. Whitney explains what she went through, how she was able to reframe her consciousness, and how this experience influenced her to continue pursuing higher goals:

> For many years as a child, I struggled with low self-esteem. I remember times when I thought I could scrub my Black off and that had to do with how pretty I

thought I was and just kind of my size... I was bullied… in two different grades. I think it was third and fourth or third and fifth. And, that had to do with my low point. It may have been fuel for how I felt about myself but umm, one of the bullies was a boy and he would just tell me how ugly I was and it got to the point where I would just stay in at recess and I wouldn't go outside and my teacher couldn't figure out why I didn't want to go outside. But I would just stay in so I wouldn't have to deal with him. For the other one I was a little bit older and it was girl. She didn't really say much to me. She just stole my sandwich everyday (Whitney laughs). Well I guess it wasn't stealing if I was just handing it right over to her, but I was scared of her (Whitney laughs). So, and my mom never taught us about fighting and she would always say, "If someone hits you, run and tell the teacher." I'm like, well that's stupid. So we're just supposed to let them keep hitting us... so we never really knew much about fighting or defending ourselves but umm, yeah so that was a low point for me, not wanting to go outside. On top of that I was already feeling like I wasn't pretty and I didn't want to go outside. I didn't want to hang out with people, umm if they didn't really; I guess it didn't really feel like friendship. Like I felt like if I was with the pretty girl and it was clear that someone was already giving them compliments and I wasn't getting

compliments, I didn't want to be there. Not because I didn't think this person was pretty. Just because it just fueled the feelings I already had about myself… “The defining moment was when we had a homecoming dance and I said, "I’m going to go out and I'm going to be pretty for this dance and I'm going to wear what I want to wear and I'm going to be confident. I started to realize that beauty was about confidence… I remember around that time I would look at celebrities and tried to figure out what about them made them so pretty and I realized there's kind of this ideal beauty but some of it has to do with the confidence that you have. So you have all of these models that have different looks and on first sight, you wouldn’t say hey that's a beautiful person but the confidence they have and the way that they wear the style, THAT'S what's beautiful about them so I tried to translate that into that moment for that dance so I said, "I'm going to wear this. I'm going to feel good in it. I'm going to be happy about it, and it's not about anybody else... When I received the pictures back, I was like "That's it! I did it!" So that would probably be my second chapter just kind of knowing that I now have the power to transform what I think about myself and transform what other people think about me. This realization definitely had an impact on wanting to continue to reach my

goals. (LM: In what areas?). In school, in my life socially, everywhere. I finally had the confidence I'd been lacking all of those years.

Struggling with low self-esteem was a serious battle for Whitney. This experience is not unique. For African Americans in general, self-esteem is associated with emotional health, mental health, life satisfaction, and coping with discrimination (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Fischer & Shaw, 1999; Utsey, Ponterotto, Reynolds, & Cancelli, 2000). Prior research on the self-esteem of African Americans has found that self-esteem is positively related to body attitudes including fitness evaluation, feelings about weight, and appearance attitudes (Akan & Grilo, 1995, Lennon, Rudd, Sloan, & Kim, 1999; Parker, Nichter, Nitchter, Vuckovic, Sims, & Ritenbaugh, 1995). Transcripts from Whitney's interview are consistent with this research on self-esteem and African Americans.

Whitney struggled with her appearance most of all. She admits that much of her self-consciousness regarding her appearance stemmed from being around so few other African Americans. She stated, "It's hard to feel good about yourself when no one around you looks like you." The experience of being a social and numerical minority wreaked havoc on her self-esteem during those very critical years of adolescence. As identified in the prior theme regarding a higher comfort level around other African Americans,

Whitney described how her insecurities about looking phenotypically African American were quelled when her environment encompassed a larger population of other African Americans. Moreover, Whitney described how her perseverance through that terrible struggle served as an inspiration to pursue larger goals. The perseverance gave her the confidence she'd been lacking while growing up. It is this self-confidence that has prepared Whitney for the place where she is today, within a year of completing her PhD and self-proclaimed beauty. "Now, you can't tell me nothin' (laughs). I know I'm beautiful!" she said in the interview.

In Fleisher's (2009) article on the resilience of African American women in an urban community, he states that socio-cultural adaptation occurs in response to pressure. Participants in the current study demonstrate this adaptation as they persevered though their various experiences of adversity to remain focused and continue in their success. For some of them, it was through their perseverance that they were guided straight to their ultimate purpose. This was the exact situation with Angela. She recalls:

> In [2007] my best friend Tamara was murdered by her husband, who then killed himself, in front of their three sons. Tamara and I had been friends since the 7th grade. We shared big moments (graduations, I was in her wedding and in the room for the birth of her first son) and small (late night girl chats, skipping

school, shopping, cooking together, making up dance steps)… After years of suffering emotional and physical abuse from her husband, she had finally decided to leave him… The morning I got the call about her murder, I was sitting at my desk at work. The news came as a shock and I was actually having difficulty comprehending what I was hearing on the other line. It was only until I heard the words, "It's on the front page of the paper," that I begin to feel the weight of the news sink in. Because I'm a researcher I suppose, I still wasn't convinced until I had more data, hard facts. I googled the [local newspaper], and sure enough, my sister's apartment, cordoned off with yellow police tape, was prominently displayed on the front page. An insert showed a picture I had recently received in the mail of her and my nephews. In that moment, there was no more denial. I felt like I had been socked in the stomach. As if I was the wind was knocked right out of me. When I could finally scream, my boss came in and asked what the matter was. All I could muster was, "He killed her, he finally killed her." It took a lot to peel myself off the floor that day and in many days since. My best friend's murder was definitely a turning point in my life. I realized that time was precious and that whatever I was going to do with my life I needed to get to the business of doing it. It wasn't that I had been wasting time or slacking off in any way (I was in a

> Masters program and generally enjoying life) but I had been up to that point much more focused on the journey and not the destination. But I felt that there was so much that she would not be able to do, dreams left unfulfilled. I determined that the best way for me to honor her life was to live mine fearlessly. I have earnestly tried to do that in the years after her passing. I think my response to her life and death has demonstrated that I am extremely resilient and eternally optimistic… My research focus switched to domestic violence and advocacy.

Angela's purpose emerged from her environment and interaction with social others (Rogoff, 2003). Specifically, her identity continued to be developed based on her interactions with her friend and the circumstances that surrounded her death. Hancock (2007, p. 72) stated, "Individuals develop and navigate their identities in ongoing ways based on their family, school, and neighborhood interactions at the individual and institutional levels." Though her academic identity was already influenced by interactions with her educated aunts, supportive teachers, and prior life experiences, the tragedy of losing her best friend brought another paradigm shift. Angela's academic identity and overall purpose was once again modified by this experience. Her doctoral research shifted to domestic violence and advocacy. Also, she vowed to begin living her life with intention in a way that she never had before.

A tragedy like losing a best friend to domestic violence is incredibly heart rendering and could easily incite feelings of hopelessness. However, Angela and other women interviewed drew from their socio-historical resilience and assigned meaning to this environmental stressor that would propel them into something greater. Angela assigned meaning to her loss that emerged as motivation. Through her resilience and optimism, she was able take what she experienced and transform it into higher educational pursuits in preparation to enact real social change.

The women in this study all shared times of tragedy and sorrow. Their stories and evidence of continued academic success is consistent with the literature on the resilience of African American women. This theme is significant in that it explores achievement beyond resilience. This takes empirical data on resilience further and illustrates how resilience is transformed into higher academic pursuits for these African American women. For Whitney, overcoming her low self-esteem gave her the confidence to pursue higher goals, including educational aspirations. Angela's grief over losing her best friend to domestic violence motivated her to change her research focus to domestic violence and advocacy. She also promised herself to begin living life with intention and purpose in a way that she had not before. Sociocultural theory informs how these women were able to further develop their identity after drawing from experiences in their environments. This

development is ongoing (Hancock, 2007) as evidenced by the women in the current study. Adaptations to their purpose continued even later in their educational career. They each went through considerable struggles while on their academic journeys. However, through their resilience, participants were able to transform their situation into a desire to pursue higher educational and overall life goals.

Question 2: What have been the primary challenges and motivations experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their doctoral degrees? Three themes emerged (Theme 4, 5, & 6) that address this research question. Participants stated that their most significant challenges are related to a lack of department support in their graduate programs. Overwhelmingly, they reported being most motivated by their families and spirituality. Several women reported a strong self-motivation that has impacted their persistence as well.

Theme 4: Poor Department Support. Many of the women expressed a lack of support from their graduate departments. This lack of support included lack of mentor support, lack of engagement from faculty, differential treatment, and lack of financial support. These findings support the current research on African American students' experiences at PWIs (Johnson-Bailey 2004; Merriweather Hunn 2008; Miller, 2004; Robinson, 1999). However, results from the current study reveal that graduate

departments may have appeared to be supportive during recruitment, but this support was not sustained throughout their time in the program. Denise describes the differential treatment she has faced in her doctoral program after being recruited.

> I was recruited by [my current institution] in 2007. I am now in the spring semester of my 5th year. It has been really challenging. I've not been treated well. I was the only student who didn't have an office for a long time. I was finally offered a very dirty cube space. When I complained of the condition, they asked a newly hired Black girl undergraduate student worker to clean it up. She was directed not to ask me questions. The faculty want control. Power is really important to them. They instill in students, "you are powerless"; our opinions are not sought and not valued. They are questioned. Socially, it has been isolating... However, spiritually there is a calling in my life. God has my full-undivided attention. I need to be focused and not be distracted.

It is interesting here that clearly efforts were made to recruit Denise, an African American female, into their doctoral program. Yet once she arrived, she was met with an environment that was uninviting, at best. This raises considerable concern. Though there may exist an institutional charge to increase the number of diverse students in graduate

programs, faculty and administrators may still lack the social capacity to nurture a multicultural environment.

Denise experienced blatant differential treatment by her department when they offered all of the other classmates an office space except for her. When confronted, this differential treatment was then transferred to the African American undergraduate student who was assigned the task of cleaning up a dirty office space. This is insulting to both students and an embarrassment to the department. Unfortunately, Denise was one of many who shared similar stories of maltreatment after being recruited. Angela describes the poor support she's experienced from faculty in her doctoral program when sharing her professional plans:

> I have a clear idea of what I want to do but others (professors) have tried to pull me in completely different (and self-serving) directions. Verbalizing that I may not pursue a career as a tenure track professor has been controversial. Expressing my desire to be both a scholar and activist has also been risky. But what I know for sure is that I am pursuing the work I am supposed to be doing. That keeps me motivated to keep going. I have also learned to seek out professors who share or value my ideas, whether they say so in public or not. I have also learned to respectfully disagree with and distance myself from professors who are not

> supportive of me or my ideas. In this way, I have created a safe space in which to take risks and keep moving forward with my research.

Angela has been met with opposition when sharing with some faculty her aspirations of wanting to be a scholar and activist did meet their expectations of becoming a tenure-track professor. This suggests that the faculty in her program value their own agendas over the student's. Johnson-Bailey (2004) deduced that for African American students in graduate programs, having faculty support was essential in their persistence. Faculty respect and support was definitely lacking for Angela and other women interviewed, yet they have persisted. This persistence has likely been met with stress and pressure not experienced by their Caucasian counterparts (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

Vivian was recruited to her STEM PhD program by her advisor. She recalls the department being very excited to have her. However, this excitement changed when she revealed to them that she was expecting a child. Vivian shared:

> When I was pregnant, my advisor said, "Did you have this planned the whole time?" He's very Me, me, me. He was difficult.

Once more, we see how the level of support changed once the student was accepted into the program. Vivian's advisor was excited to have her until he learned that her agenda did not meet his expectations. No prior research was found to support this phenomenon.

Other women described experiences that seemed more directly related to their race. In Mya's experience, she recalls her chair applying negative racial stereotypes to her behavior. As a result of constantly being misunderstood, Mya felt forced to find support outside of her department. She stated:

> My Chair said I have a negative demeanor. She would tell me to smile more. It was like, "You need your negro happy." They played into stereotypes about Black people. My support came from outside the department in women and gender studies.

Mya's experience highlights how race intersects with position in creating a no-win situation for many students of color. A central tenet of critical race theory is that society is based on a "White-over-color ascendancy" that advances White supremacy (Espino, 2012, p. 32). That is, the societal notion that Caucasians are superior to African Americans gives Caucasians legitimacy that is not afforded to African Americans. This legitimacy is magnified by the fact that Mya's chair has institutional power over her as a student. Mya, an African American woman, is being challenged by her chair, a Caucasian woman of power in her department. Due to Mya's position of being a student who is also African American, she does not feel she has the legitimacy or power to challenge her chair's negative stereotypes (Gildersleeve, et al., 2011). Therefore, she felt compelled to

seek support elsewhere, in departments (women studies, ethnic studies) that were founded on challenging racial and gender oppression.

Several other participants recalled that they did not receive information about fellowships and other funding opportunities from faculty members. Johnson-Bailey (2004) stated that the persistence of African American in graduate programs hinges partially upon the receipt of continued funding. The women interviewed in this study report that their initial year or two of graduate school was funded as part of their recruitment package. However, when that funding was exhausted, they were not given information on how to obtain additional funding. Vivian stated explicitly, "I received no information from faculty or staff about fellowships or other funding opportunities. I wish I had." This lack of knowledge about funding adds to the cultural stress of being a graduate student. This could have been easily remedied if faculty and administrators were diligent in communicating with all students regarding opportunities for funding their education after their initial year or two in the program. Angela describes how this lack of information affected her experience:

> I was not made aware of fellowships. The posts that came out, they already had people in mind. I ended up telling faculty, "I need funding." Department support

overall was poor. It was financially poor, emotionally poor, just poor. I felt and still feel very little support.

Most of the women interviewed in the current study expressed lack of support in each area that has been cited as essential for persistence: respect from faculty, support from faculty, mentoring, and continued funding (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). It is remarkable that they've continued to be successful. However, retention literature begs the question: How many more African American women could PWIs in the Southwest graduate programs retain if holistic supports were put into place?

Vygotsky's sociocultural approach is based on the concept that human activities are mediated by language and symbols, take place in cultural contexts and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). The graduate departments may lack the socio-historical development necessary to support a diverse group of students. Their activities, or lack thereof supporting these graduate students may be a reflection of their lack of cultural contexts in their historical socio-cultural development that would have provided them the cultural competency necessary for this task. That is, they don't have the socio-historical background that would have prepared them to support ethnic minority women.

The women interviewed for the current study have demonstrated resilience. Their perseverance may be due to repeated experiences in learning to successfully navigate through oppositional environments. These assumptions require verification; however, the sociocultural perspective helps us understand the sociocultural mechanisms to which graduate departments and students use to navigate their respective spaces. For the graduate departments, their inability to provide support may be a result of their lack of experience in working with African American women. As such, these individuals navigate their spaces around ethnic minority students with an uncertainty that transforms into negligence. For the graduate students, their ability to persevere through this limited support may be a result of their socio-historical background of resilience. Their spaces are then navigated with adaptation and the ability to improvise when needed.

Native Informant. Related to the "Poor Department Support" theme, several interviewees described being assigned the role of "native informant." This term, coined by hooks (1994), describes a student who is the only African American student in a setting and expected to have knowledge of and/or represent the views of all African Americans. Angela states explicitly, "I've often felt I had to be the spokesperson for Blacks. I've gotten more used to it but I don't know that I'll ever be comfortable. Janet shares a similar experience stating, "I took a Black writer's course. I was the only other Black

student in the class. I felt like I had to be the spokesperson for all Black people. It was awkward."

Graduate programs in PWIs have a high concentration of non-ethnic minority faculty. Among the women interviewed for the current study, most of their doctoral departments did not include any African American faculty members. Limited experience with underrepresented students, combined with a severe lack of minority faculty members often leads to ignorance when supporting students of color. Rogoff (2003) argues that development takes place as people in their cultural communities engage with others in shared endeavors. This engagement is limited to the communities people come from and the type of engagement they experience. Many of the participants in this study reported that their doctoral programs had little or no interaction with diverse students or communities; this deficit was clearly reflected in how they interacted with African American women doctoral students.

Notably, there were two participants who reported positive experiences of support in their graduate programs. Alicia, a student in a STEM field reports a very positive experience that has remained positive long after recruitment. She stated:

My advisor is really good. He gives me calls for proposals, in diversity, for grants. I received it and it's been NSF funded… My advisor also suggested a mentor to

me who ended up giving me an internship last year. I've been fortunate but I've talked to a lot of people who haven't been that lucky in that department.

Kerry is the only woman interviewed that reports having a supportive doctorate program in a non-STEM field. She shared:

> My experience in the PhD program has been really good. I was talking to a girlfriend who went to [University B] with me… I was telling her that even though I am the only Black person and there's no Black faculty or anything like that, I've had great support. It's been great. I can't complain about anything in terms of the program. There's always been summer support. I've always had a RA or TA line. I had a fellowship the first year. I've gotten a publication. I haven't had a hard time. I've learned a huge amount and I've been pushed harder than ever. This was true for all the students who showed that discipline. I definitely see differences with students who aren't as engaged in the program, umm, but I since I had a fellowship the first year, I kind of felt I was at a disadvantage because other students got RA lines and I didn't have any experience. I just put myself out there. I started going to all the colloquiums, made sure I was there and eventually, I didn't know how to go about doing it because I don't have family to ask so I was just like 'How do I become an RA?'

(laughs), I was green, like I want to be an RA. So, umm luckily, my advisor picked me up. I had her for a class and she thought I was a hard worker and picked me up for 3 years and that 3 years has been, I've grown so much as a scholar, so much you know. At first I was afraid to run [certain programs] but now I'm comfortable… and I teach stats. It's just that growth so I can't complain at all about my support.

There may be things we can learn from departments that African American doctoral women attending PWIs consider supportive. Alicia reported she was given information regarding funding and a mentorship opportunity. Kerry also reports receiving continual financial support, being pushed, and picked up by a faculty member to work on a funded project. In both cases, these women gave the impression that their departments had a vested interest in their success as evidenced by multiple methods of support. Kerry also discussed the importance of engagement. She took the initiative to reach out to faculty for support. There is a lesson here for students as well. There are benefits in taking initiative and being proactive when seeking support from faculty.

This theme supports literature on the challenges of African American students in graduate departments at PWIs. However, an additional phenomenon emerged illustrating that these women were treated very favorably when being recruited but unsupported after

joining the program. Despite the increases in the enrollment of African American students in graduate programs, it is disconcerting that faculty and administrators of PWIs continue to struggle with supporting these students. Results from this study confirmed previous research on the climate of PWIs for African Americans. This is unfortunate because it reveals that in 2013, this remains a problem.

What may be even more troubling is the apparent bait and switch that seems to be taking place in this era of heavy minority recruitment. The results of this study indicate that attractive recruitment offers (bait) were given to influence their decision to join their respective doctoral programs. This was then followed by an unsupportive environment (switch) once they arrived on campus. There is a broad charge, and even financial incentives for graduate programs to increase their number of underrepresented students. In response to this charge, graduate programs are aggressively recruiting this group, often enticing students with attractive initial financial packages. This sends a message to underrepresented students that certain graduate departments are particularly interested in their decision to join the program. Implicitly, it also sends a message of supposed sustainable mentor and financial support. Several women interviewed including Denise, Vivian, and Mya all reported being recruited and given initial financial support. Once

they arrived, the chilly climate ensued. The existence of bait and switch tactic by graduate departments is an area that necessitates further research.

Theme 5: Importance of Family Support and Self-Reliance. Overwhelmingly, interviewees identified family members and themselves as their primary sources of support. One participant credited an ex-boyfriend for motivation and prayer. Respondents did not identify faculty mentors, professors, or other personnel in their graduate programs. In examining the causes and cures of attrition, Tinto (1993) noted that graduate students' involvement with external communities, such as family, negatively affects their persistence because it takes them away from their academic community. However, for the women in the current study, their connection to family has sustained their persistence. For example, Alicia states "My mom has been my biggest support. I talk to her everyday. She's wonderful when I'm going through tough times and helps keep things in perspective." It is important to note here that Alicia's mother lives in a different state. Yet, she relies on these daily long-distance phone calls as the primary support in her doctoral program. Several other women identified family members such as their mother and father (Janell, Mya), mother only (Vivian), and even local family (Denise) as primary sources of support.

Other participants have stated that their primary source of support has been themselves. Many report that their departments have not been supportive, their friends lack the understanding for what they are doing, and they feel isolated from both their academic peers and families. When I asked Whitney about her primary source of support throughout her doctoral program, she stated:

> Me. Once I realized that I'm the only person that can make anything happen, so I have to stay on the up and up I mean I have my days and everyone has their days of when I feel down and depressed but you keep going. That's not something that you, you know put this haze over everything you do. No matter what is going on, I know I have to still keep going. (LM: So you've been your biggest source of motivation.) Yeah.

Janet expressed a similar kind of self-motivation stating, "I tell myself to keep it moving. Do all that you can do. My support system right now is me." Denise reports having a relationship with family members who live locally, but still relying a great deal on herself:

> My local family has been the most supportive. I have a cousin who is a minister. I've established minimal relationships with friends because I don't feel like I fit in here. I've become self-reliant.

Similar to the previous theme, this theme speaks volumes about the lack of support departments are providing for African American graduate students at certain PWIs in the Southwest. The lack of department support that emerged in Theme 4 tells us that students could not rely on those they work with closest as a support. Theme 5 tells us that these women had to rely primarily on themselves and oftentimes long-distance relationships with family to help them get through their journey. For these women, graduate departments have failed them in providing a supportive climate that aids in their success.

Guiffrida (2006) speaks to this exception for collectivistic cultures. He emphasizes that for certain groups, holding close ties with family and community is germane to persistence in graduate study. For the women interviewed in the current study, abandoning their connection to family as Tinto (1993) suggests in favor of immersion into their academic culture may have proven to be detrimental to their persistence in their respective graduate programs.

Notably absent in the discussion of support these African American women are receiving in their doctoral programs is any mention of mentoring, a factor crucial to success for African American students in doctoral programs (Merriweather Hunn, 2008) but often missing particularly for African American women (Blackwell, 1983). The majority of

women in this study lacked this crucial factor of successful persistence. Yet, they have matriculated through their respective programs with plans to finish in the next year or so. It is important to note that two of the women interviewed reported having a supportive graduate program. Both women reported receiving continual funding from their departments and faculty mentorship. These exceptions provide opportunities for researchers to examine the dynamics that are taking place in these departments. Learning of such dynamics may help to better improve professional development for the faculty and administrators in other departments with a cross-cultural focus on student support.

Survival and self-reliance are characteristics these women have picked up over time. Challenges they have faced in regard to the intersection of race, gender, socioeconomic status and family structure forced them to navigate resilient identities (Hancock, 2007). In some ways, what the interviewees learned is a "culture" of survival. What was instilled in them was a system of meanings and practices related to how to survive, cohesive across time, which students brought with them from place to place (Gutiiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). These women were able to construct resilient identities in response to these difficult circumstances. In spite of poor support from their graduate departments, the development of this survival mentality has persisted and been instrumental in their journey.

Theme 6: The Importance of Spirituality/Religiosity. Data collected by Kosmin and Keysar (2009) concluded that 81.6% of American adults believe in the existence of God or some higher power. Interview transcripts from the current study showed that nearly all participants believe in God or a higher power and the majority credit God or this higher power as playing an important role in their journey thus far. Angela states, "My primary source of support is God. I pray a lot. It is because of Him that I'm in this place. I know He will carry me through the end of this journey." Vivian adds that her educational journey is an ordained assignment, stating "God is setting me up for something." Mya shares in this belief. She credits God for her success and adds that her experiences are part of a larger purpose:

> God is in everything. He delights in pleasure/making us happy. There is one God. He has a plan for us all… I am so lucky, so blessed. My whole life is beyond me. Nothing has been a struggle. I feel like I'm always taken care of. There is a plan for me, a divine purpose from the Creator/God.

Janet shared similar ideas:

> I am spiritual. God is the highest power. I read the Bible daily. I believe in serving and reverencing Him. God has a plan for my life. My plan is to seek out

His plan and fulfill it. He has me right where I need to be. It's His Divine order, not mine… My spirituality has definitely deepened as I've gotten older.

It is well documented that religion and spirituality have been at the center of African American communities and highly significant in their life experiences (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Frazier, 1962; Long, 1997; Taylor & Chatters, 1991). In a recent study, Donahoo and Caffey (2010) explored the particular benefits college students gain from their religious and spiritual involvement. Their results concluded that church involvement, religious practice, and attention to their spirituality helped them deal with their academic challenges. Students in this study attributed their successful transitions into college, academic performance, career selection, ability to cope with stress, and desire to accept and improve the lives of others to their church involvement, religious practice, and spirituality (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010).

The women interviewed the current study, to a large extent, expressed similar views. They attribute their success, perseverance, motivation, and destiny to their religiosity and/or spirituality. Data from this study reveal that these behaviors were cultivated in the early years of these women, and culturally constructed by their environments. Many of them report growing up with a belief in a higher power and these beliefs have strengthened over time.

Though spirituality was a salient theme throughout the life story analysis of these women, it is brought in to address this research question of challenges and motivations specifically. The impact of spirituality really emerged when asked about the most significant motivations while in their graduate programs. The findings that emerged support research identifying religion/spirituality as being an integral part of African American culture (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Frazier, 1962; Long, 1997; Taylor & Chatters, 1991) and important for students (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). However, these results go beyond this existing literature in introducing the idea that obtaining a PhD is part of a divine plan. There were no studies found that examined the motivation to obtain a doctoral degree as part of a divine assignment from a higher power. Considering the importance of spirituality in the African American community and the simultaneous lack of African Americans attaining higher education, this finding is worthy of further research.

Question 3: How would African American women who are currently pursuing their doctorate degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?

Theme 7: Relocating & the desire to give back. The final questions of the interview addressed the participants' future plans. There was some variation here. Some expressed being open to a career in academia (50%), others wanted careers outside

academia (50%), some had plans to return to their home cities (30%). Some respondents reported not being able to "see past the dissertation" and weren't sure of their next steps (30%).

Though unsure of their destination, most expressed plans to move away from their current Southwestern city (90%). This is notable in that it may speak to respondent discontent of their current location. Janet expressed:

> I plan to move to a new city. In [this Southwestern city], I feel like I'm limited because of the color of my skin. I recently had an interview. The director came out, took a look at me and said she'd be right with me. She made me wait 15 minutes. When I didn't get the job they said the reason was I didn't have the experience they were looking for. I always pay attention to what people say. My experience didn't change from when you saw my resume and when you saw me in person. I'm thinking of moving to New Orleans. It's a wonderful place and feels like home. I'm not the right color for [this Southwestern state].

Many of the women interviewed echoed the poor cultural climate in many cities in the Southwest. Janet identified very specifically an example of the racial discrimination she's faced in her professional environment. Kerry expressed a chilly climate in her university community:

> I do think the Black community at [this Southwestern PWI] is very different from any other institution I went to. This is the most unique. I don't know if it's the case because we're in a different region and there fewer concentrations of Black people, or if it's [the university] or I don't know if it's because everyone is coming from somewhere else. I don't know what this energy is but it's different. I feel like sometimes on campus, people don't speak. Black people don't speak at all. I've never seen that before.

Kerry's experience is interesting because she does not describe the overall racial climate as being unwelcoming; rather she identifies the African American community in this region as providing her with a different social experience. Sociocultural theory helps us understand that we are an amalgamation of our interactions with our environments and social others (Rogoff, 2003). In this sense, it is easy to see how the African American community of the PWI may be more reserved with one another. The small number of African American students in graduate school, and even more so in each department physically isolates them from one another. This isolation impedes the building of community and impacts the social culture. To illustrate, an HBCU has a concentration of African Americans to facilitate communities and reinforce a social culture (i.e., saying hello to one another in passing). Whereas many graduate programs at PWIs admit a very

limited number of graduate students. This vastly impacts the environment, which in turn will impact our interactions with one another. This is what seems to have happened at the PWIs of the Southwest as reported by the women in the current studies. The lack of community has seemed to erode cultural interactions with one another.

Other factors may be in place that affect the off-campus environment, deeming it an unfavorable final destination for African American women doctoral students. To provide context, the Southwestern state in which Janet and many of the other participants are attending their doctoral program has a blemished history regarding the treatment of African Americans. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was great controversy over a Martin Luther King holiday. After several trips to the voting polls and national boycotts, the people finally voted the holiday into effect in 1992. Politically, they have voted Republican in every presidential election since 1952 with one exception. They were the last state to accept Medicaid (creating a state-program equivalent) (Nordlinger, 2009) and there has been a firestorm of immigration debates across the region. Banning a holiday that honors one of the most famous civil rights leaders in US history, a political climate that has historically showed ill-support for ethnic minorities, reluctantly accepting a health care program that benefits millions of underprivileged citizens, and having

constant debates over the reluctance of immigration has given this state a questionable reputation for many African Americans.

Janet and Kerry's experiences in this region illuminate how race intersects with position in creating a poor social and professional environment for African American women. Derrick Bell, the father of critical race theory, writes that liberalism in American society is a façade, a place where racial inequalities will never be rectified and only addressed to the extent that Caucasians see themselves as threatened by the status quo (Bell, 1992). In their position as African American women, they do not have the power to impact the status quo. Janet understands that racism in this region is alive, well, and here to stay. Bell (1992) illuminates that the inequalities she faced will only be addressed if Caucasians feel forced to do so. She recognizes her place, and perhaps the place of other African Americans in this region, that their presence will never necessitate that kind of intimidation. Thus, she is interested in seeking residence in a city where African Americans have much more legitimacy, New Orleans.

The consistent future plan that every participant discussed was a desire to give back to her community. According to Winters (n.d.), the desire to "give back" is deeply rooted in the African American history, describing they "give, when there's no money to give" (p. 109). Gasman (2010) reports that HBCUs are more likely to produce students

who work in non-profit organizations, volunteer in their communities, and give back to society compared to PWIs. Winters (n.d.) explains that the plight of African Americans has improved some, placing philanthropy in transition. Today, African American communities are moving from a mode of survival to one of self-sufficiency and economic empowerment (Winters, n.d.). Angela hopes to spread this empowerment through her future plans. She shares:

> My goal is to help people understand that their experiences are not disconnected from policy so they can be better advocates for themselves. I want to keep my options open, maybe go into politics or work for a state agency. I want to be somewhere where I can be authentic.

Angela's goal of helping under-advantaged people become advocates for themelves is informed by critical race theory. She hopes to challenge the notion that the experiences of Caucasians are normative and disparagement of the experiences of people of color (Taylor, 1998).

Mya shares a similar goal to empower groups that have been historically disenfranchised. She states, "I plan to do something in real estate to help the lower class." Here, she recognizes a need in the African American community and desires to use her

position as a certified realtor to empower disadvantaged groups to build better lives for themselves and their families. Kerry states:

> My younger cousins often call me for advice or direction on things like, how to get into college, financial aid… At [the high school I went to], things have gotten much worse. I want to start a mentoring program where I talk to the young girls about opportunities. I really like young people in high school. I'd like to help out in that area.

Kerry's experience and knowledge of inner city high schools accentuates her understanding of how race intersects with class in creating disparaging educational outcomes for high school students in her hometown. The charge of critical race theorists in education is to challenge the continued inequalities that people of color in education experience (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Kerry is responding to these challenges by empowering students with knowledge and support. Her mentoring program will work to provide a voice for the women in her former high school and enable them to successfully navigate a historically oppressive educational environment. This will give them the tools necessary to pursue educational goals necessary for a healthy occupational outlook.

An outcome of a study on African American students from impoverished rural communities involved youth leaving the community to attain more education and to

establish a career path that could not be supported by the home community (Farmer, Dadisman, Latendresse, Thompson, Irvin, & Zhang, 2006). Focus groups stressed the importance of "educating out and giving back" (p. 5). The students reported that it was necessary to leave the community, become educated, and return due to the lack of economic, educational, and employment opportunities that existed in their home communities (Farmer et al., 2006). Results from the current study certainly suggest a similar drive to bring their education back to the community.

In this theme, both critical race theory and sociocultural theory help inform the future goals of the women interviewed for this study. A critical race framework brings light to the reason so many participants desire to relocate from this Southwestern region. Many of them have experienced racial contentions in their professional or social landscapes. They believe that for this region, racism is embedded into the society and will perpetuate until the cultural landscape is changed (Bell, 1992). A sociocultural framework allows an inspection of how these women negotiate their experiences in bringing meaning to a future project. The women interviewed have each expressed their identities, experiences and social memberships as a platform to contribute to their community (Hancock, 2005). The intersection of race, gender, and social status (as a scholar, researcher, licensed realtor, etc.) provides the women in this study perspective.

They have experienced some of the same challenges that the younger generation will encounter. However, their development through these experiences has afforded them the power to identify with and connect to the next generation of scholars.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women in doctoral programs in the Southwest through a life story analysis (McAdams, 2005). I was particularly interested in the way achievement identity was constructed in the life stories of these women. The goal of this work is to inform and inspire parents, teachers, schools, university faculty and administrators to create healthier learning climates for underrepresented students. It is the hope that this work will also inspire African American girls to pursue higher education, regardless of their background, family structure or life experiences. Prior to continuing the discussion of results, it is important to note the limitations of the current study.

Limitations

The current study included life story data from ten African American female doctoral students. The small sample size will limit the study's transferability. The study will include participants from major universities in a Southwestern state and will serve as a starting point to provide insight into the African American population, especially in this region. However, it is important to note that these women will only represent a small

proportion of African American doctoral students. Their stories are not intended to serve as a universal role for all African American women in higher education. This study will not include data on the experiences of African American men or participants from any other underrepresented group.

Also, the study excludes students who are in first professional degree programs such as the MD, JD, and DDS. Methodologically, observer effect should be noted. The researcher is an African American PhD student speaking to other African American PhD students. Therefore, it is possible that information shared would be modified if shared with a researcher who was demographically different that the interviewee. To minimize observer effect, the research interacted with interviewees in a natural, unobtrusive, nonthreatening manner that was professional but casual. Also, since this study is particularly interested in how the interviewees think about their lives, their experiences, and particular situations, interviews were modeled after a conversation between two trusting parties rather than on a formal question/and/answer session between a researcher and a respondent (Bogden & Bilken, 2007).

Seven themes connected the experiences of the 10 African American women in doctoral programs who were interviewed about their life stories. This chapter summarizes these findings, presents implications and offers recommendations for future research.

Question 1: What are the lived experiences of African American Women in Pursuit of their PhD's in the Southwest? This broad question yielded 3 emergent themes from the women interviewed: Parental support and advocacy in early education, improved experiences when among other African American students, and academic perseverance through major struggles.

Parental Support and Advocacy in Early Education (Theme 1) emerged in the form of parental support, involvement and advocacy. The women interviewed were encouraged by their parents and had parents who were both highly involved in their learning, and were strong advocates for them, especially in cases of racism. For these women, their parents and family members were the first to invest in their academic success. The experiences of the women interviewed were closely related to existing literature, and lead to suggestions for both parents and teachers. Parents and other adults should reinforce the importance of education, and be engaged in their child's educational development early on—just offering praise and encouragement is important. Parents should celebrate academic achievement on every level. It is essential that parents are

advocates for their children through adversity. This especially comes into play when children experience differential treatment from other adults. Results from the current study suggest that this advocacy makes children feel supported and empowered.

Teachers must promote interactive learning. In early years, teachers should encourage parents to read aloud with their children. Reading aloud with an adult plays an important role in developing children's oral language skills, phonological awareness and print knowledge. Parental reading aloud is also an indicator of children's later academic success. This suggests that the practice may be further linked to children's development of broader academic skills and behavior such as persistence and the ability to sustain attention (Lawson, 2012). Encouraging parents to read aloud to their children is only one method teachers should use to promote interactive learning.

Teachers could also promote interactive learning by encouraging collaborative work between students and parents in homework assignments. Epstein (2001) and her colleagues (Epstein, Salinas, & Jackson, 1992) did this with their Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) program. They developed a homework approach to promote student learning involving family members in homework assignments. This approach was replicated by Van Voorhis (2011) with a focus on math. Consistent with the initial study and other replications, results found that the TIPS interactive homework

process generates more positive feelings for students and families about math than does "other" homework. The homework assignments in TIPS were interactive, included clear objectives for learning, instructions for completion, and explicit instructions to the student for involving family members. Homework was assigned once per week or twice per month to permit time for family members to become involved (Epstein et al., 1992). Results from this study and its replications indicate that providing clear instructions for family involvement in homework was associated with higher levels of parental involvement in homework.

In addition, attitudes about homework by family members were more positive with the use of TIPS compared to controlled conditions (Van Voorhis, 2011). This study has been replicated across several subjects showing applicability. The researcher recommends teachers in all grades K-12 incorporate this method in their curriculum. Getting parents involved from the onset and keeping them involved stimulates the learning process and encourage positive learning outcomes overall. Results from the current study and prior data suggest parental involvement could be pivotal in achievement success. The results from the Van Voorhis (2011) study remained even when controlling for gender, ethnicity, poverty, and previous report card grades. Again, this suggests applicability across diverse circumstances.

Teacher's promotion of parental involvement in learning is needed to provide historically low-achieving populations with the foundation that will propel them to achieve. The charge here is for teachers to initiate such collaborative learning and also for parents to participate. The role of the parent here is just as important. Parents must take a vested interested in being involved with the process of learning. They must also be involved in addressing matters that impede the learning process of their children, such as racial contentions experienced at school.

Race contentions experienced at school in the early years of education was also common. In many of these cases it was parents again, here as advocates, that played a key role in getting through these experiences. Without this kind of support and advocacy, these women may have felt a sense of powerlessness and isolation which could have significantly affected their learning outcomes. Race-related stress can have a significant impact on mental health (Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook, & Stanard, 2008) and self-esteem (Major & O'Brien, 2005). It was essential for these women to receive support when experiencing these kinds of racial tensions at such a young age, especially since they were not able to advocate for themselves.

Parents must have open discussions with their children regarding differential treatment and their commitment to protecting their children. Once students are able to

identify instances when they are treated unfairly, they have a greater ability to communicate these experiences to their parents and other supportive adults. Parents also must be advocates for their children in challenging implicit or explicit mistreatment in school. Women interviewed in the current study reported feelings of empowerment and support when their parents challenged the racism they experienced in school. Schools must implement culturally relevant programs that empower students to confront racism in a constructive manner. The Tubman Theater Project (Hanley, 2011) is an excellent example of such a program and yields effective outcomes. The Tubman Theater project is a culturally relevant program in which African American middle school and high school students confront racism and classism. Their unexamined internalized oppression was also explored while constructing a positive racial identity as they developed, rehearsed, and performed plays generated from their own lived experiences (Hanley, 2011).

When asked about lived experiences, the women in this study also reported feeling better when they were around African American students (Theme 2). A sense of familiarity and identity confirmation became evident for these women when they were around other African American students. This theme emerged when the women were speaking about their educational experiences from elementary school through graduate school. By the time students matriculate in doctoral programs, this desire is paramount.

They have advanced to another stage in their life development and if attending a PWI, their likelihood of not having other African American students with whom to share their experiences is heightened.

Often, graduate programs at PWIs only accept a small number of ethnic minorities per year. This is further evidenced by the current study. Among the interviewees, most were the only African American student in their cohort. Graduate programs must do a better job in recruiting and retaining a greater number of African American students and faculty. They must diversify cohorts to help establish peer support networks. They must increase African American faculty to allow greater opportunity for faculty mentorship. Schools should place a greater effort in diversifying teachers and staff to further support students of color. Both school and graduate programs should also place a greater emphasis on teacher/faculty mentoring and cultural sensitivity among current teachers and faculty. These recommendations could improve the cultural climate of our learning environments and relieve some the burden students of color face along their academic journeys.

Their ability to persevere through major struggles (Theme 3) was incredibly inspirational. What was even more remarkable was their capacity to draw inspiration from these tragedies to set higher gorals. The women interviewed described several life

altering circumstances that could have easily dissuaded their aspirations. However, each one of them is within one to two years of completing their doctoral degrees. This is a testament to the resilience some African American women have in enduring major struggles. Overwhelmingly, the women in this study credit this resilience to having a very supportive family. This indicates that a strong support system is paramount to the ability to persevere through difficult times. The sheer fact of knowing that those closest to them (family and teachers) truly believe in their ability can make a remarkable difference in their experiences.

Families and teachers of underrepresented students must instill the notion in their children and students that they truly believe in their ability to succeed, against all odds. Students must be empowered to know that they can pursue their educational aspirations despite adversities they have experienced or seen in their communities. This empowerment includes continual motivation throughout their academic journeys from family and academic leaders. Results from the current study and findings in the literature (e.g., Bridwell, 2012) show that encouragement from those who believe in you can have profound effects on students' own motivation to succeed.

The sociocultural framework enhances our understanding of this phenomenon. The role of race and gender in the relationship between various life struggles and

perseverance for African American women highlights their sources of support and resilience. African American women often experience gendered racism, a term originally coined by Essed (1991). This refers to the simultaneous experience of both racism and sexism (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Hutt, 2013). Gendered racism often leads to stereotypes. The stereotype of the "Strong Black Woman," for example, may appear to be a positive stereotype to some because it assumes strength, resilience, and perseverance. However, this stereotype can be harmful if there is a generalization that all African American women are "strong" enough to endure inordinate amounts of stress (Lewis et al., 2013). This kind of belief could impact personal relationships and lead African American women to suppress their emotions and experience negative health effects (Woods-Giscombe & Black, 2010). The other significant implication here is the strong need for supportive resources in schools and graduate programs, especially for African American women.

University student support programs must have outreach programs in place to facilitate the emotional needs of students. For women in particular, university outreach programs should focus upon developing greater awareness of the visions and goals students possess and support them in remaining connected to these goals. Programs should also focus on reasons for perseverance such as relatedness, social connection,

positive coping beliefs and enhanced self-image (Wang, Lightsey, Tran, & Bonaparte, 2013).

A final recommendation is for university student support programs to provide a list of counseling and support resources for students. Hardship transcends race, class, gender, and just about every other demographic. In addition to providing faculty mentorship, it would be beneficial for university student support programs to provide a list of on- and off- campus resources for students at the start of their program.

In answering the research question exploring the lived experiences of African American women in doctoral programs, it was evident that their life experiences led to their academic purpose (Theme 3). This may differ from other students who have known since high school or younger the area they would like to pursue. Students who have aspirations that come earlier in their lifespan have the ability to focus their undergraduate major and even high school concentrations. This lays a foundation for graduate school, helping them to become more competitive applicants. For other students, their purpose may become evident after certain life experiences. This may be especially true for ethnic minorities who may not have had access to higher performing elementary or high schools. When one's vision is realized later, students may not have the undergraduate

background that matches that of their peers. This may place them at a disadvantage when applying for graduate programs.

Graduate programs must place a high value on the work and life experiences of African American women applying to graduate school. Though grades and standardized test scores are important, women who have lived stimulating lives have a great deal to offer to the discussions, research, and collaborations that take place in graduate programs. The only study found on the impact of life experience on graduate admissions is from 1978. Iona College, a private, nondenominational institution in New York awards "life experience credits based on the rationale that college level learning can take place outside classroom walls" (Watsky, 1978, pp. 232). At Iona College, life experience was so valued, that credit could be earned toward a baccalaureate degree.

Doctoral programs are much more comprehensive than undergraduate programs, so I am not suggesting that life experience should take the place of seminal coursework and research. However, there should be a high value placed on life experiences when admission committees are selecting graduate students. Due to inequities in educational experiences, latent doctoral aspirations, and other factors, African American women may not have the linear educational background common among other groups. Disregarding their potential to succeed due to this lack creates a loss for graduate programs that wish to

diversify their student body. Women who have seen or experienced certain phenomena directly may bring a fresh take on what is reported through some research. Likewise, their experiences will lead to examining phenomena in new way to address immediate concerns.

Question 2: What have been the primary challenges and motivations experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their doctoral degrees? This question asked women to discuss the most significant challenges and motivations they experienced in their life overall, while in undergrad, and thus far in their doctoral programs. There were three themes that emerged in relation to this question. The first addresses a common challenge and the last two illustrate common motivations.

The experience of having very poor support in their respective graduate programs (Theme 4) was a common thread among the women interviewed. This result is consistent with other work on the support of underrepresented students in PWIs when compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Allen, 1992; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Fleming, 1981; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Jones, 2001). Listening to the stories of these women on how they endure these environments brings to question how other ethnic minority doctoral students experience unsupportive PWIs. Graduate programs should partner with university support programs, if necessary to commit to providing financial support

beyond the first year or two, providing each student with an individual faculty mentor, and pair each student with a peer mentor. The recruitment and retention of additional African American faculty and graduate students will create opportunities for students to be matched with other African American women. This has been documented to be a successful strategy for increasing mentorship opportunities for ethnic minority students (Patton, 2009).

Many women also described being put into the situation while in their classes of having to be the spokesperson for all African Americans, or serving as a "Native Informant" as coined by hooks (1994). Instructors should emphasize the relevance of their students' culture and experiences (Harper, 2007) but educating others about the perspective of African Americans should not fall to students. This may entail some extra research or prep work. It is important that instructors not rely on the one- or two- students of a particular group to be the experts on cultural topics.

Many of the women interviewed in the current study identified the lack of department support in their graduate programs as their major challenge. When asked about their most significant motivation and source of support while in graduate school, they overwhelmingly identified their families and themselves (Theme 5). Many of them relied on long distance phone calls and periodic visits to their hometowns for support.

Others discussed their own self-reliance. This speaks to the resilience of these women. They have described very difficult situations and circumstances both before and during their graduate programs. Yet, in most cases they have had no local supports or mentors to help. Though these women have been able to carry on, many others could not do so in the absence of a local support network. University student support programs must implement peer support opportunities for students of color.

The literature provides several examples of successful peer mentoring between African American students who come together to support and sustain each other at PWIs (Gaston-Gayles & Kelly, 2004; Marbley, Bonner, & Mckisick, 2004). Having a support system is important for everyone, but is particularly vital for African American women who must overcome the dual-edge burdens of race and gender (Allen, Jacobson, & Lomotey, 1995).

Graduate programs must also implement individualized faculty support for graduate students. Upon the recruitment of a diverse faculty pool, a system should be put into place that pairs students with faculty mentors for added support. Though faculty from all backgrounds can be effective mentors, a great deal of mentoring success with African American students has been attributed to having a mentor who is also African

American (Patton, 2009). Students tend to identify with mentors who are like themselves on salient identity group characteristics (Welch, 1996).

The impact of spirituality (Theme 6) emerged as the second most prevalent motivation among the women interviewed. Most described a relationship with a higher power and a belief that their doctoral degrees are part of a divine plan. When they faced difficult times, they discussed relying on prayer or an alternate spiritual connection to ground them and help them move through the challenges.

University student programs should acknowledge the importance of religion and spirituality for African American students. It would be useful if students were provided resources regarding local religious and spiritual communities. This would not be limited to African American students, but include all students. As such, it is strongly recommended that university student support programs provide a list of campus and community resources to students that identify places of worship, religious and spiritual organizations, and culturally specific religious and spiritual communities for all students. No prior research was found that addressed university student support programs providing these kinds of resources. However, if left broad and unbiased it would be no different from, but just as helpful as, providing a list of of-campus housing, local restaurants, hair salons, and the like. Providing these kinds of resources would be helpful

for students to become involved in their new community and begin to form relationships with like-minded peers.

Question 3: How would African American women who are currently pursuing their doctorate degrees describe the next chapter of their lives? In the last part of the interview, women were asked about their goals and plans for the future. Two issues emerged: relocation and a desire to give back to the community (Theme 7). The goal to relocate reflects upon the tumultuous racial and political climate of their current Southwest region. Though several other goals were discussed (e.g., a future in academia, working in an agency, undecided), nearly everyone expressed a desire to positively impact the lives of African American children. The implication here speaks to the generativity among many African Americans. Broadly defined, generativity is a concern with making a lasting contribution to future generation and is noted as a central psychological preoccupation in midlife (Erikson, 1982). Hart (2001) and her colleagues conducted a study examining the relationship between generativity and social involvement between African Americans and Caucasians. Results indicated that African American adults scored significantly higher than Caucasians on generative concern and generative acts (Hart, McAdams, Hirsch, & Bauer, 2001). Many described their pursuit of earning a doctorate degree as a personal goal. However, when asked how they plan to

use their degree, overwhelmingly they described a desire to contribute the lives of others. If all graduate programs could incorporate ideas of community development into their curriculum, it would greatly support these efforts.

Clinical program such as those in medical school (e.g., Halaas & Brooks, 2011), nursing programs (e.g. Hu, Andreatta, Yu, and Liping, 2010) and clinical psychology (e.g., O'Connor, Lynch, & Owen, 2011) do a great job in integrating community development into their curriculum. Since generativity is a developmental desire for everyone, usually later in life (Erikson, 1982) and even more so for African American women (Hart, 2001), it is recommended that all graduate program implement coursework into their curriculums that helps graduate students conceptualize ideas for community development.

Recommendations for future study

The most salient finding in the current study has to do with participants' continued success despite very poor support from their departments. Several studies have highlighted the vital importance of mentoring and support for the persistence of African American women in graduate programs at PWIs. What has not been explored is the success of these women in the absence of this support. As stated previously, this finding elicits several questions for future research.

Each participant interviewed for this study is in the 3rd year or beyond of their respective doctoral program. This brings up the question of attrition. How many students began graduate programs, but did not make it to their third year? How many discontinued their graduate studies in these programs due to their lack of department support? How many first and second year doctoral students will end up leaving for similar reasons? We learned from Theme 4: Academic Perseverance Through Major Struggles/Experiences led to purpose, that the women in this study are very resilient. They have endured very difficult experiences, but had the ability to construct resilient identities that enabled them to persevere through it. What about women who do not possess the ability to construct resilience in response to difficult environments? How will they fare, how have they fared in graduate programs that overtly or covertly provide little support for them? As importantly, what can be done to help doctoral programs support underrepresented students more effectively?

A greater number of life story analyses should be done on African American women in of the United States with low concentrations of African Americans. There is a body of work on the African American experience at HBCUs and PWIs in the Midwest, Southern, and Eastern parts of the country (e.g., Feagin et al., 1996; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003; Smith, 1980). Very little work has been done on the African

American experience in the Southwest, a region where the historically low African American populations continues to expand. Regions in the Southwest, such as in the states of Arizona and New Mexico historically have a small African American population. As such, local ideologies, resources, and networks for African Americans can be problematic. Very unique experiences can arise out of this kind of environment that are worthy of study.

The exploration of African American men in graduate programs should be studied as well. Despite the rise in degree attainment by African Americans, there exists a very large gender gap between African American men and African American women (More than 4.5 Million African Americans Hold a College Degree, 2009). Exploring the lived experiences of African American men, their challenges, motivations and future plans, will help to fill an empirical gap regarding their higher learning outcomes. Quantitatively, we have an idea of how many men are achieving graduate degrees and how many are not. A qualitative study will provide insight into what has worked for African American men who have been academically successful.

In addition, results of the current study showed unique conditions for students in STEM fields. Both students in these fields reported strong overall department support. They were also the only students in the study who do not report experiencing racism

while in their graduate program. This may suggest that African American women students in STEM programs have a unique graduate experience compared to those in non-STEM areas. Perhaps the difference has to do with the fact that minority STEM students are being heavily recruited and funded by government programs such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH). There is a mutual benefit in recruiting and retaining minority STEM students for faculty and students. Faculty are allotted government program funding to recruit top STEM students who will help them produce research and remain successful, while minority STEM students have the opportunity to pursue graduate school at no cost (Hurtado, Cabrera, Lin, Arellano, & Espinosa, 2009). By contrast, many other programs are losing funding making the cost of graduate school a greater burden for students and reducing the incentive to recruit top minority students for faculty. This is another area that I am interested in exploring in the near future.

Conclusion

This study was an exploration of the lived experiences of African American women in pursuit of doctoral degrees in the Southwest. Specific experiences in their life stories, challenges and motivations, and future plans were explored and analyzed for common themes. Emergent themes included early childhood support and advocacy, impact of other African American students, perseverance through struggles, lack of

department support, importance of family support, impact of spirituality, and desire to give back.

Sociocultural theory provides insight into these themes as they help to conceptualize the intersectionality of participants negotiating their spaces as African American, female, and in a predominately White learning environment. Critical race theory illuminates the experiences of racial contentions and their desire to contribute their efforts to help other African Americans once their doctoral journeys are complete.

This study has addressed the need of better recruitment and retention of African American students in non-STEM graduate programs at PWIs. It has offered supportive literature, current findings, and implications for stakeholders. Finally, it is the hope that underrepresented youth will find the stories of the women interviewed inspiring. Results from this study show that improvement in the collaborative efforts of parents and teachers in creating a supportive learning environment for African American women throughout their academic journey has the potential to greatly impact the rate of doctoral achievement among this group.

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APPENDIX A

STUDY FLYER

Would you like to take part in a study about African American Women Pursuing Doctoral Degrees?

If you are an African American woman who's in the third year or beyond of a Ph.D. program, you are invited to share your life story.

Sharing your life story and personal experiences about pathways that have helped you in your educational pursuits will offer a voice for African American doctoral students and provide a framework for faculty, administrators, and students to shape policy and program development.

Your participation will include a confidential 90-minute digitally recorded interview and brief follow-up phone interview. Participation is voluntary. A graduate student researcher from Arizona State University is looking for 10 women to participate in this study. If you are interested and want to discuss this study, please contact:

Linda Manning, M.A.

Linda.Manning@asu.edu

APPENDIX B

INFORMATION LETTER-INTERVIEWS

While on My Journey: A Life Story Analysis African American Women in Pursuit of their Doctoral Degrees in the Southwest

Date:

Dear Research Participant:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Kathryn Nakagawa in the Lifespan Development Psychology / Educational Psychology Division of the Mary Lou Fulton Teacher's College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to explore the life stories of African American women who are in pursuit of their doctoral degrees.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve two interviews. The first will be a face-to- face interview where I will ask about your life experiences and will last 2-3 hours. As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your story, including parts of the past as you remember them and the future as you imagine it. The story is selective; it does not include everything that has ever happened to you. Instead, I will ask you to focus on a few key things in your life – a few key scenes, characters, and ideas. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. Instead, your task is simply to tell me about some of the most important things that have happened in your life and how you imagine your life developing in the future. I will guide you through the interview so that we finish it all in about three hours or less. The second interview will be conducted over the phone and will last 30-60 minutes. This interview will be follow-up to the first and will simply ask clarifying questions regarding the responses given in the initial interview.
You have the right not to answer any question, and to stop the interview at any time.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

Although there is no benefit to you possible benefits of your participation are advancing the literature on the lived experiences, challenges, triumphs, and coping strategies of highly achieved African American women.

Your responses will be anonymous. You will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your anonymity. The single document containing identifying information will be kept e a locked file cabinet at a secure location on campus. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

I would like to audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be taped; you also can change your mind after the interview starts, just let me know. The tapes of our interview sessions will be kept in a locked file cabinet at a secure office on campus. All data collected including audiotapes will be kept for a total of (7) years. All tapes will then be destroyed via disassembly and cutting of the actual ribbons. Small ribbon clippings will be discarded at a secure facility. All notes will be shredded at a secure facility.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at: Linda.Manning@asu.edu or nakagawa@asu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Date:	Time / Location:	Interviewee Code:

Interview Question	Research Question
A. Life Chapters: Please begin thinking about your life as if it were a book or novel. Imagine that the book has a table of contents containing the titles of the main chapters in a story. To begin here, please describe very briefly what the main chapters of the book might be. Please give each chapter a title, tell me just a little bit about what each chapter is about, and say a word or two about how we get from one chapter to the next. As a storyteller here, what you want to do is give me an overall plot summary of your story, going chapter by chapter. You may have as many chapters as you want, but I would suggest having between about 2 and 7 of them. We will want to spend no more than about 20 minutes on this first section of the interview, so please keep your descriptions of the chapters relatively brief.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
B. Key Scenes in the Life Story: Now that you have described the overall plot outline for your life, I would like you to focus on a few key scenes that stand out in the story. A key scene would be an event or specific incident that took place at a particular time and place. Consider a key scene to be a moment in your life story that stands out for a particular reason - perhaps because it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important, or memorable. For each of the eight key events we will consider, I ask that you describe in detail what happened, when and where it happened, who was involved, and what you thinking and feeling in the event. In addition, I ask that you tell me why	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?

you think this particular scene is *important* or significant in your life. What does the scene say about you as a person? Please be specific.	
B1) High Point. Please describe a scene, episode, or moment in your life that stands out as an especially positive experience. This might be *the* high point scene of your entire life, or else an especially happy, joyous, exciting, or wonderful moment in the story. Please describe this high point scene in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so good and what the scene may say about who you are as a person.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
B2) Low Point. The second scene is the opposite of the first. Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not *the* low point in your life story. Even though this event is unpleasant, I would appreciate your providing as much detail as you can about it. What happened in your event, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling? Also, please say a word or two about why you think this particular moment was so bad and what the scene may say about you or your life.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?

B3) Turning Point. In looking back over your life, it may be possible to identify certain key moments that stand out as turning points -- episodes that marked an important change in you or your life story. Please identify a particular episode in your life story that you now see as a turning point in your life. If you cannot identify a key turning point that stands out clearly, please describe some event in your life wherein you went through an important change of some kind. Again, for this event please describe what happened, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling. Also, please say a word or two about what you think this event says about you as a person or about your life.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
B4) Positive Childhood Memory. The fourth scene is an early memory - from childhood or your teen-aged years - that stands out as especially *positive* in some way. This would be a very positive, very happy memory from your early years. Please describe this good memory in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or about your life?	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
B5) Negative Childhood Memory. The fifth scene is an early memory - from childhood or your teen-aged years - that stands out as especially *negative* in some way. This would be a very negative, unhappy memory from your early years, perhaps entailing sadness, fear, or some other very negative emotional experience. Please describe this bad memory in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or your life?	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?

B6) Vivid Adult Memory. Moving ahead to your adult years, please identify one scene that you have not already described in this section (in other words, do not repeat your high point, low point, or turning point scene) that stands out as especially vivid or meaningful. This would be an especially memorable, vivid, or important scene, positive or negative, from your adult years. Please describe this scene in detail, tell what happened, when and where, who was involved, and what you were thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you and your life?	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
B7) Wisdom Event. Please describe an event in your life in which you displayed *wisdom*. The episode might be one in which you acted or interacted in an especially wise way or provided wise counsel or advice, made a wise decision, or otherwise behaved in a particularly wise manner. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you and your life?	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
B8) Religious, Spiritual, or Mystical Experience. Whether they are religious or not, many people report that they have had experiences in their lives where they felt a sense of the transcendent or sacred, a sense of God or some almighty or ultimate force, or a feeling of oneness with nature, the world, or the universe. Thinking back on your entire life, please identify an episode or moment in which you felt something like this. This might be an experience that occurred within the context of your own religious tradition, if you have one, or it may be a spiritual or mystical experience of any kind. Please describe this transcendent experience in detail. What happened, when and where, who was involved, and what were	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?

you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about your life?	
C. Challenges	
C1) Life challenge. Looking back over your life thus far, please identify and describe what you now consider to be the greatest single challenge you have faced in your life. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own life story?	**Question 2.** What have been the primary challenges and motivation experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their graduate degrees?
C2) Undergraduate challenge. Looking back over your academic experience in undergraduate and graduate school thus far, please identify what you consider the greatest single challenge you've faced. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own life story?	**Question 2.** What have been the primary challenges and motivation experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their graduate degrees?

C3) Graduate school challenge. Looking back over your academic experience in undergraduate and graduate school thus far, please identify what you consider the greatest single challenge you've faced. What is or was the challenge or problem? How did the challenge or problem develop? How did you address or deal with this challenge or problem? What is the significance of this challenge or problem in your own life story?	**Question 2.** What have been the primary challenges and motivation experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their graduate degrees?
D. Motivations: The following section asks about your (3) greatest motivations. It contains question regarding who or what has been your greatest life motivation, greatest motivation while in your undergraduate program, and greatest motivation while in your graduate program thus far. These can be people, such as a family member or mentor, or a situation that was particularly motivational.	**Question 2.** What have been the primary challenges and motivation experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their graduate degrees?
D1) Life motivation. Looking back on your life thus far, please identify what you consider the greatest single motivation you've experienced. This can be a person and /or event that has influenced your life the most thus far.	**Question 2.** What have been the primary challenges and motivation experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their graduate degrees?
D2) Undergraduate program motivation. Thinking about your undergraduate experience, what was your greatest single motivation you experienced? This can be a person and/or even that influenced your undergraduate experience most.	**Question 2.** What have been the primary challenges and motivation experienced by African American women while in pursuit of their graduate degrees?
D3) Graduate program motivation. Thinking about your undergraduate experience, what was your greatest single motivation you experienced? This can be a person and/or even that influenced your	**Question 2.** What have been the primary challenges and motivation experienced by African

undergraduate experience most.	American women while in pursuit of their graduate degrees?
E. Life Theme: Looking back over your entire life story thus far, with all its chapters, scenes, challenges and motivations, and extending back into the past and ahead into the future, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story at this point?	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
F. Personal Ideology: Now, I would like to ask a few questions about your fundamental beliefs and values and about questions of meaning and morality in your life. Please give some thought to each of these questions.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
F1) Religious/ethical values: Consider for a moment that religious or spiritual aspects of your life. Please describe in a nutshell your religious beliefs and values, if indeed these are important to you. Whether you are religious or not, please describe your overall ethical or moral approach to life.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
F2) Political/social values: How do you approach political or social issues? Do you have a particular point of view? Are the particular social issues or causes about which you feel strongly? Please explain.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
F3) Change, development of religious and political views: Please tell a story of how your religious, moral, and/or political views and values have developed over time. Have they changed in any important ways? Please explain.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
F4) Single value: What is the most important value in human living? Please explain.	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral

	degrees?
F5) Other: What else can you tell me that would help me understand your most fundamental beliefs and values about life and world? What else can you tell me that would help me understand your overall philosophy of life?	**Question 1**. What have been the lived experiences of African American Women who are pursuing doctoral degrees?
G. Future Script	**Question 3.** How do these African American women pursuing doctoral degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?
G1) The next chapter. Your life story includes key chapters and scenes from your past, as you have described them, and it also includes how you see or imagine your future. Please describe what you see to be the next chapter in your life. What is going to come next in your life story?	**Question 3.** How do these African American women pursuing doctoral degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?
G2) Dreams, hopes, and plans for the future. Please describe your plans, dreams, or hopes for the future. What do you hope to accomplish in the future in your life story?	**Question 3.** How do these African American women pursuing doctoral degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?
G3) Life project. Do you have a project in life? A life project is something that you have been working on and plan to work on in the future chapters or your life story. The project might involve your family or your work life, or it might be a hobby, a vocation, or pastime. Please describe any project that you are currently working on or plan to work on in the future. Tell me what the project is, how you got involved in the project or will get involved in the project, how the project might develop, and why you think this project is important for you and/or for other people.	**Question 3.** How do these African American women pursuing doctoral degrees describe the next chapter of their lives?

H. Reflection: Thank you for this interview. I have just one more question. Many of the stories you have told me are about experiences that stand out from the day-to-day. For example, we talked about a high point, a turning point, challenges, etc. Given that most people don't share their life stories in this way on a regular basis, I'm wondering if you might reflect for one last moment about what this interview, here today, has been like for you. What were your thoughts and feelings during this interview? How do you think this interview has affected you? Do you have any other comments about the interview process?	**Reflection**

Source: Derived from "The Life Story Interview", by Dan P. McAdams (February 2008)

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL

ASU Knowledge Enterprise Development

Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

To:	Kathryn Nakagawa WILSN
From:	Mark Roosa, Chair Soc Beh IRB
Date:	08/29/2012
Committee Action:	**Exemption Granted**
IRB Action Date:	08/29/2012
IRB Protocol #:	1208008117
Study Title:	While on My Journey

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) .

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.