SEXUALITY, ETHNICITY, AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT: THE CHALLENGE
FACING GIFTED GAY AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

by

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(Under the Direction of Robert M. Branch)

ABSTRACT

The social and emotional needs of gifted African American males have been well documented. Recent studies have suggested that African American males are a special population among the gifted, dealing with separate issues from their white counterparts, including racial and ethnic identity. Issues of masculinity also seemingly complicate the issue of academic success for African American males as they are faced with the dilemma of achieving academic success and being labeled as “acting white.” This study addresses another issue facing African American males, that of sexuality and its relative importance in the academic success or failure of this population.

INDEX WORDS: Gifted, African American males, Sexuality, Gay African American males, Achievement, Academic success
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, without whom this would not have been possible.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Rev. James Archie and Mrs. Rubye H. K. Calhoun who have been the driving force in supporting and encouraging me to achieve beyond what I felt was possible. Always my support, advocates and protectors – I hope you see in me all that is good in each of you.

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“Vanity of vanities; all is vanity…” Ecclesiastes 1:2b (King James Version)

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“Faggot!”

What? What’s a faggot? I look in my bookbag for my pocket dictionary. D, E, F, Fa - or is it Fe?

“Look at him. Proper ass.”

F-a-g-g-o-t. An inexperienced young man. Inexperienced? I guess that’s me. I replace the dictionary and continue walking down the hall. My first day in public school. All morning I’ve been sitting in a guidance counselor’s office taking tests. As soon as we finish one test I have to take another. She’s an older lady who smells like smoke and wears too much makeup. She smiles at me politely but I can hear her in the hall talking while I’m taking my test.

“Yeah, we have another one. This one has a little money, so I guess it’s ok.”

Is she talking about me? She starts to laugh and then coughs. She sounds like I do during my one of my really bad asthma attacks. No matter, I turn my attention back to my test. These are hard. I don’t understand all of the directions. Does this question mean to find the best answer or the one that best fits? The two are not necessarily the same. So I ask her what should I do.

“Sweetie, you need to finish the test and stop asking so many questions, ok?”

She grabs her cigarettes from the desk and walks out the door.

So I do. And once I’m done she tells me that I did pretty well. She then tells me to grab my things and come with her to go to my new classroom. As we walk up the hall everything looks so strange. St. Christopher’s, my old private school, was so much smaller. I knew everyone in my
class. I had known most of them since pre school. But this place has so many people. There are all kinds, too—black, white, Asian, Hispanic... a rainbow of people. The kids get to wear whatever they want and the teachers are regular people too, not like the nuns at St. Chris. They all look at us as we walk down the hall. I guess compared to them I look a little strange. I look down at my neatly pressed gray slacks, my white Oxford shirt and burgundy cardigan and black loafers. Well, at least I’m clean. My Mommy always says that as long as you’re clean, what you wear doesn’t matter. It’s very cold, so my parents made me wear this stupid sweater. This is what I get for changing schools in midyear, but I had begged so much that my father finally agreed. Plus, St. Chris was going to increase tuition again, which he wasn’t looking forward to paying. My parents had already switched my sister to public school but had hesitated with me, as I had been at St. Chris for so long.

We finally get to the end of a long hall, arriving at my new classroom. The kids are in the room jumping around and laughing. No one is in their seat and the teacher isn’t even in the room. The guidance counselor looks down and says, “Here you are.”

 Throughout the day I try to concentrate on my work, but I can’t. People keep walking by my desk dropping notes. Each one is written in their most polished fourth-grade penmanship. They scribble things like faggot, gayrod, sissy. I quickly glance at them and toss them away, pretending that I am above such childishness. But I am not. I am a child and it hurts. That day is one of the longest of my life. I try during recess to make friends—bad idea. A group of boys surround me and chant, “I pledge allegiance to the flag, I know Kevin is a fag.” Whenever I try to move away they follow me. By this time the entire fourth grade is outside. Soon it seems like the entire playground is chanting and punching me. The bell rings and we are all herded like cattle towards our respective classrooms. As I am walking back inside someone trips me. I fall
hard onto the concrete steps. I look up to see an Asian boy standing over me sneering. I stand up and notice that my pants are torn and my knee is bleeding. From the reflection in the glass door, I can see that I have dirt on my sweater, my shirt and in my hair. I go inside the hall and walk until I find the restroom. I go into the bathroom and grab a paper towel. I wet it under the faucet and put some soap on it. I try to clean my wound, which is now beginning to sting. But it isn’t just my knee; it is my heart. I had never been around people who are so cruel and unforgiving and relentless. And so I cry. I cry and hope that the day will pass without me but it doesn’t. I know that at some point I will have to go back to class and face my fears. So I walk and walk until I find the classroom and I go inside. There I stand at Mrs. Anderson’s desk, bleeding and tattered. Obviously this is not something of my own doing. I tell her how mean everyone has been to me; how they punched me and threatened me; how they tortured me on the playground, and I begin to cry. Again. In front of everyone. And that just makes the situation worse. I can hear the other kids behind me giggling at what I am saying.

And what does she do? Mrs. Anderson stands up and in her most genuine, authoritative debutante voice she announces, “Kevin, I don’t have time for this. Now go to the bathroom and clean up. Don’t be such a sissy.”

I stand motionless. I can’t move. I just stand there and cry. How could she do that to me in front of everyone? Why is she too picking on me? I thought teachers were supposed to help?

And so on that day I learned a valuable lesson, right or wrong—to fit in is the only way to survive. Closed mouths don’t get fed, but they also don’t lose teeth. That was my orientation into the public school system. Quick, fast and hard. And as time passed, things got easier. People no longer beat me up, they simply humiliated me. Day in, day out; relentless, unceasing and without mercy. And so I withdrew, deep into myself where no one could find me. I became expert at being
invisible. I didn’t try to excel or even complete my work because I didn’t want to draw unnecessary attention to myself.

And the years passed. I went from fourth grade to fifth and then sixth. Each year I prayed that the next teacher would be like the previous one and not expect me to perform or even pay attention. The funny part was that no one could understand why I didn’t work up to “my potential.” I was tested repeatedly and each instance gave the same result—gifted. But my grades said otherwise. I was assigned to spend quality time with our guidance counselor on a regular basis, whom I soon discovered was even more unpleasant once you got to know her than she was upon first meeting her. And so each week for thirty minutes she would usher me into her office. She would hand me some books to read on “self-esteem” or “confidence” or some other bullshit, and go take a cigarette break. You know, I actually counted 563,258 holes in her ceiling—that’s how interesting the books were. And once it was over she would send me back to class with her signature scribbled on a sheet that I had to give to my parents telling them of my progress. And each week it was the same report—no change/seek professional help. My question was always, “Well if you’re not professional, why are you wasting my time?” But at least it was a break from the monotony of class. I would sit most days and just daydream about anything, but mostly about going away; traveling to a new place with different people. And then I’d wake up and realize that I was right back where I had started (Calhoun, 2001).

This introduction documents the barriers of developing a healthy sexual identity for a gifted gay African American male in America. While the scenario presented above reflects the experience of a pre-adolescent child, similar patterns of experiences occur throughout our
society. However, gifted gay African American males continue to achieve at high levels despite these barriers.

The underachievement of African American men has been well documented in the literature. Lack of academic success, poverty, economic distress and ethnic identity are all barriers that many African American men face. While academic underachievement, poverty and ethnic identity have been studied consistently in relation to the academic success of African American men, so far issues of sexuality have been overlooked. This issue is further complicated by the fact that the characteristic of giftedness must be addressed to delineate adequately the population for this study. This study proposes to investigate the relationship between ethnicity, sexuality and academic achievement with regard to African American men. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify the relationship of giftedness and achievement to the sexuality development experience of gay African American men in the United States.

Theoretical Framework

Sexuality, intellectual ability, gender and achievement will set the scope of this study. Sexuality is identified and delineated using homosexuality as the key to an examination of the population and its differences from other similarly identified groups. Intellectual ability will be discussed as it relates to giftedness. The members of the population to be studied will be self-identified as gifted and their experiences will be examined using this vantage point. All members of the population are male, as the experiences of men will differ from those of women. The gay African American men who will participate in this study are also high achievers within their chosen fields. Sexuality, however, will remain as the focus of the study because the experiences of high-achieving, gifted gay African American men have not been addressed in the literature.
and therefore it is not known to what extent their sexuality plays a role in their levels of achievement.

Having the proper resources, including books to study, as well as time to study are some of the factors that can influence one’s level of academic achievement. According to Green-Demers, Legault and Pelletier (2006), factors such as one’s belief in one’s ability, effort and the value placed on the task as well as intrinsic motivation can also influence academic achievement.

There have been many studies examining the reasons behind the level of academic achievement of African American men. First, ethnicity has been examined as a factor contributing to the academic achievement of African American men, as noted in Solomon’s (1992) study of African American men. Solomon noted that one of the reasons for the lack of achievement of African American men is the fear of “acting white” and that, as a result, African American male students are less likely to want to be academically successful. Gender has also been noted as another contributing factor to the academic achievement of African American males. Cross and Slater (2000) noted that African American women held 454,000 master’s degrees, which was more than double the number held by African American men.

Furthermore, intellectual ability has been examined as a factor influencing the academic achievement of African American men. Grantham (1998) noted that African American men are placed into gifted classes at lower rates than other populations. Another reason noted by Cross (2001) is bullying, which is now present in many classrooms. Other students with name-calling and even physical violence, target students who attempt to achieve academic success. As a result, some gifted and non-gifted students may not want to separate themselves from their peers in terms of academic success.
Despite these analyses of the academic achievement of African American men, sexuality has not been considered as a factor contributing to levels of academic achievement. More specifically, sexuality has not been adequately addressed in the literature as a factor specific to the achievement of African American men (McCready, 2004). Ethnicity, gender and intellectual ability have all been explored as factors contributing to the level of academic achievement of African American men, while sexuality remains to be explored in the literature. Therefore, it is not known to what extent their sexuality plays a role in their levels of achievement.

Several factors define a healthy sexual identity. A clear understanding of a healthy sexual identity can be gathered first from a discussion of the issues related to sexual identity development, in general. Sexual identity development is a process that takes place throughout the entire life span (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002). The phases of sexual identity development are the same regardless of sexual orientation. There are particular developmental milestones that must be met by individuals as they are developing a healthy sexual life. Individuals go through several stages of biological development during their life span that must be taken into consideration in the development of a healthy sexual identity: Childhood (birth to 7 years), Preadolescence (8-12 years), Adolescence (13-19 years) and finally Adulthood (DeLamater & Friedrich). These stages are also the basis for an individual’s later identification of sexual orientation.

Constructivism and Schema Theory can begin to provide solutions for these problems. Constructivism is the active creation of knowledge and this knowledge creation can be useful in helping gifted African American men. As these individuals are faced with issues of identity in their classes, they are forced to choose between assimilation into the white community and alienation due to their sexual identity by the African American community. A possible outcome
of this study is to suggest ways in which African American male students can be presented with positive role models of African American men who are both gay and academically successful, to help them form their own identity of giftedness and homosexuality. African American male students can then begin to construct their own view of self, as well as whom they aspire to be without being confined by what they may perceive to be conventional notions of sexuality and giftedness.

Schema Theory purports that it is difficult to change schemas once they are formed (Derry, 1996). Changes in schemas can typically only be accomplished if the specific schema structure is targeted. To this end, it is not enough to simply show to the African American community examples of successful gay African American men, but these individuals must also be gifted; in this way, the specific myth surrounding gifted African American men who are gay can be targeted. In the future this same rationale could be used to help dispel other myths concerning particular populations within the gay, African American and gifted communities. The following assumptions have been made in developing this study:

1. Gifted gay African American men have specific needs in relation to their achievement that are not currently being met in K-12 environments.
2. Gifted gay African American men have specific needs in relation to their achievement that differ from those of other populations.
3. The central issue surrounding the achievement of gifted gay African American men is their sexuality in relation to their achievement. This characteristic separates them from other similarly classified populations.
Importance of Academic Achievement of African American Men

Hebert (1998) has suggested that many African American men are victims of underachievement. Information concerning the achievement of African American men reveals that many are not achieving academically. Fifty percent less African American men hold master’s degrees than those held by African American women and 10% less than white men (Cross & Slater, 2000). Furthermore, they are not taking higher-level courses in school and are disproportionally underrepresented in gifted classes (Grantham, 1998).

Many theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon. Sayles (1995) has contended that African American men are experiencing ‘a crisis in the classroom,’ as evidenced by their disproportionately low grade point averages and appallingly high school absence, tardiness, suspension and dropout rates. Fordham and Ogbu (1986), suggested that African American men do not want to be labeled as “acting white” so they purposely fail in their work. While underachievement and acting white have provided viable explanations for certain aspects of the problem, they have not touched on one important aspect of the African American male psyche—sexual identity.

Gifted Identification

First, the issue of giftedness as it concerns African American men and their needs must be addressed. African American men are highly underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented (Grantham, 1998). However, according to the National Association for Gifted Children (2006) and other advocate groups for gifted children, for researchers the problem is much more elusive and begins at the identification stage for gifted programs. There is no nationally utilized method for the identification of gifted students, and the methods that states and school districts utilize for this process can vary depending upon location. The most popular methods for
identification tend to be intelligence tests and teacher recommendations (National Association for Gifted Children).

States, towns and even school districts can decide how they will determine the giftedness of their students. Furthermore, for areas where a teacher recommendation is the key to entry into gifted programs, issues such as reproduction can cause students to miss opportunities to participate in these programs (Margolin & Peterson, 1997). Reproduction is a phenomenon whereby teachers or others in positions of power in education unintentionally reproduce the characteristics of parents and attribute them to the children. The teacher then recommends the child for gifted programs because the child’s parent is a teacher, banker, or minister, rather than basing their recommendations solely on the academic merit of the child. While this could be wonderful for some students, if the teacher is White (and according to statistics, 65% of American teachers are) and does not socialize with all of his or her students’ parents, those students whose parents the teacher does not know will not have the same opportunity to participate as the other students. Thus, reproduction and lack of standardized identification methods for gifted students can decrease the likelihood of qualified students entering gifted programs.

Achievement

Other factors also play a role in the lack of academic achievement of African American men. Sayles (1995) attributed the “crisis in the classroom” that African American men are experiencing to their lack of classroom attendance. In a society in which African American men represent the highest population of individuals in prison and the largest segment of the unemployed, as documented by the United States Census Bureau in 2000, there are viable reasons why many African Americans are not in school. These reasons range from lack of
interest in academics to much more complex issues such as having to care for their families, which does not allow them the luxury of education.

According to one study of college and universities, nearly “three-quarters of all Black freshmen and almost two-thirds of all Hispanic freshmen needed developmental mathematics course, while over 60% of both Black and Hispanic freshmen required developmental English education” as opposed to Whites who enroll at substantially lower rates (Roach, 2000). Moreover, in many universities African American women outnumber African American men and have higher grade point averages overall (Cross & Slater, 2000). This gap in enrollment and subsequent achievement, however, has been widening significantly over the past twenty years. According to Cross and Slater, this gap can be attributed to several factors, including the treatment of African American males in elementary education where “teachers tend to see Black boys as disciplinary problems.” As a result, they are “tracked into care-taker type special education classes in which they are forever classified as incapable of serious academic pursuit” (Cross & Slater). Furthermore, it has been noted that that if the downward trend in African American male enrollment in higher education continues, by the year 2070, African American men “would disappear altogether from the halls of higher education” (Cross & Slater, p. 83). Thus, the already dismal picture worsens.

The issue of African American men and underachievement sadly is not relegated to the United States. In Solomon’s (1992) study of students in a high school setting in Canada, he noted that those who embraced the school curriculum and such attendant activities as speaking standard English, spending a lot of time in the library, working hard to get good grades, and being on time, were perceived as “acting white.” African American students who engaged in academic pursuits were labeled, alienated, ostracized, or even physically assaulted by African
Americans that are more militant. Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, the chancellor of the University of
Capetown, observed, “I find it interesting that we [Blacks] are comfortable with sporting
victories. We have only the best people representing us when it comes to those things. But not to
when it comes to matters intellectual.” This observation further confirms that the crisis in the
classroom does exist for African American students due to lack of comfort with exhibiting
intellectual ability.

The issues dealing with achievement for African American men are not bound just to
education but also stretch farther into social and economic matters. An example of a social and
psychological issue that many African American men must face is the lack of role models in the
community, which may translate to lack of interest in academics. In many communities, there are
no role models to encourage African Americans to continue their education. The image of the
successful African American man has been relegated to that of the average person corner or the
criminal (Majors & Mancini-Billson, 1993). Those individuals who are seen in the places where
many of the African American populations exist are the ones that many African American men
may aspire to become later in life.

African American men who are looking for images of how to be a man often turn to the
most readily available role models; people in their immediate surroundings such as criminals,
who may be involved in prostitution, drugs or other criminal activity. These individuals present a
much more appealing image of success than the local minister or schoolteacher. The criminal has
money, cars, new clothes, respect from peers and the freedom to do as he/she pleases. This is in
sharp contrast to the schoolteacher, who earns very little money. He/She constantly acts as a
disciplinarian and is not highly respected within the community (Majors & Mancini-Billson,
1993). The choice as a model for a young African-American man is therefore the criminal.
Furthermore, the criminal does not have to waste valuable free time in school, where the young African American man may find himself being criticized for individuality and what is seen as culture outside of the mainstream, including manner of dress and speech. Therefore, he may not desire to go to school and to that end, if he is not in school, he cannot achieve. Steele (1991) noted that many African American men aspire to achieving fame in athletic organizations, while allowing their academic performance to go lacking. Steele noted that, in the classroom, African American men and many of their classmates put forth the meagerest effort and show a virtual indifference to the genuine opportunity that is education.

Stages of Sexual Identity Development

Individuals face several stages of development when coming to terms with their sexual identity. These stages, according to Dube and Savin-Williams (1999), include: Awareness of same-sex attractions, same-sex sexual behaviors, identification as gay or lesbian, disclosure to others, and development of same-sex relationships. Most of these stages occur during adolescence, when it is addressed. These stages do not necessarily occur in this order and not all individuals experience each stage.

DeLamater and Friedrich (2002) demonstrated that for individuals with homosexual orientations, this development includes six additional stages: Recognizing a difference, reflective observing, internalizing reflective observations, self-identifying, coming into proximity and networking and connecting with others who are like them. This study focuses on adults because they will have had an opportunity to establish their sexual orientation. This will avoid the confusion that often accompanies the establishment of sexual orientation during the adolescent period.
Gaps in the literature exist concerning the psychosexual development of black men, which can be attributed to several factors. According to Peterson (1991), these include barriers to researchers into the African American community and the African American gay community, as well as lack of willingness of members of these communities to discuss the issue of sexuality with others, especially those perceived to be outsiders. Peterson (1991) observed that African American men, for example, still hold the belief that they are heterosexual, despite their having sex with other men. As a result, many of them may not identify themselves as homosexual and will not respond to queries or surveys concerned with homosexuality, thereby resulting in the loss of data.

The sexual identity and psychosexual development of African American men has been a taboo in much of the literature, especially the literature concerning homosexuality (Wilson, 1988). The African American community holds negative attitudes towards homosexuality, seemingly preventing full exploration of the sexual identity of African American men who are homosexual. As a result, homosexual African American men often do not develop a positive self-concept (Icard, 1987). In addition, the gay community is less accepting of African Americans when they choose to come out (Wilson). This lack of support for gay African American men may result in many choosing to hide their sexual orientation. Although the lack of support may not be worse for gay African American men, it has not been well documented in the literature.

Another issue facing gay African American men is lack of academic achievement. The problem of lack of academic achievement is exacerbated by the fact that gifted students—those with whom they interact on a daily basis face both African American and White—with threats to their academic development. Bullying of students in gifted and non-gifted environments has
become commonplace, resulting in reduced self-esteem and academic performance of its victims. Students are made to feel constantly afraid for their personal safety and as a result are less likely to achieve academically (Cross, 2001). This coupled with issues of racial discrimination and inequity creates a formula for the underachievement of African American men in classroom environments. Furthermore, many of the individuals guilty of this tyranny are the very individuals that students are taught to trust. School administrators, teachers, parents and other gifted students are all perpetrators of the daily struggle of gifted gay African American men as they attempt to find their identity and become academically successful.

Theory

The lack of adequate support for gay African American men in America leads to their underachievement. It is held that this lack of support is different from that for other populations. In an effort to explicate the issues underlying the problem, several theories of conceptualization will be explored.

Constructivism, Queer Theory and the Schema Theory form the theoretical basis for this study. Constructivism as defined by Woolfolk emphasizes the active role of the learner in building comprehension (Woolfolk, 2003). Constructivism was chosen because it provides learners with an opportunity to formulate ideas as information is presented rather than relying on preconceived notions. Schema Theory provides a useful structure for learners to classify information as it is gathered from the outside world, as it enables one to mold information as it is received. These theories can provide a basis both for other populations to better understand gay African American men in gifted academic environments and for this population to better understand it.
Constructivism can be divided into several sub-domains; however, the two pertinent to this study are Psychological Constructivism and Social Constructivism. Psychological Constructivism is concerned with the individual and his/her creation of cognitive and emotional tools, including identity and belief systems (Phillips, 1997). This view of learning contrasts sharply with Social Constructivism, in which the group is emphasized over the individual (Merriam, 1998). The focus is placed more on the culture of the society in which the individual lives rather than on individual mental capacity. Both of these views are incorporated into Constructionism, with the only difference being that this view of learning requires that a public artifact be created as evidence that learning has occurred. These views of learning focus on how knowledge is created and this is helpful in understanding the issues surrounding sexuality and the achievement of gifted gay African American men.

Schema Theory describes how information is organized at a basic level. Schemas reflect one’s understanding of the world and once formed are very difficult to change. Schemas can only be changed over time and with a great deal of contradictory information (Derry, 1993).

Whether one views learning as individual, community influenced or having a public artifact as evidence, that learning has occurred, the basic fact remains that learning influences how individuals see themselves and the world around them. As schemas are constructed via one of these learning theories, the knowledge becomes part of understanding and is very influential in the individual’s life. Learning necessitates that focus be placed in the individual’s environments and therefore if one’s understanding of the world is influenced by those environments, if the messages that are received are not relevant and supportive of their sexuality, they are bound to those ideas until they are challenged with other influences.
Sexuality of Ethnic Sexual Minorities

During the coming-out process for sexual minorities, several stages of maturation occur to solidify their sexual identities. The first milestone that occurs is the decision to disclose to others. According to Dube and Savin-Williams (1999), the larger the number of people to whom an individual discloses sexuality, the more comfortable an individual is with his/her sexual identity. Another milestone faced by sexual minorities is internalized homophobia. Among ethnic sexual minorities, there is a higher propensity for internalized homophobia due to “greater stigma from their community, racism from mainstream society and racism from sexual-minority communities (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999). Furthermore, ethnic sexual minorities also cope with the integration of their ethnic identities with their sexual identities. According to Manalansan (1996), many adolescents feel that accepting their minority, non-heterosexual sexual identity is accepting or acquiescing to white cultural standards.

Sexual Identity and Ethnicity

Relatively few studies have investigated the complex relationship between sexual identity and ethnicity. This, as well as the fact that there is little research connecting these factors to academic achievement of gay African American men, supports the need for more research in this area. Sexual identity as it relates to African-American men must take into consideration the ethnicity of this group. Ethnicity, as defined by Kwan and Shibutani (1965), is a “complex interaction of factors including culture, religion, family, country of origin and social experience.” Many youths experience disconnect from their communities due to their sexuality, especially when these communities espouse strong religious or cultural beliefs that conflict with their new sexual identity (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999).
The sexual identity of gifted gay African American men in America is central to their academic achievement. This population must not only contend with issues related to their ethnicity and giftedness, but must also deal with their sexuality, which provides an additional layer of complexity to their identity. The experiences of this population have not been directly addressed and therefore it has not been possible to determine to what extent the relationship between sexuality, giftedness and ethnicity influences their level of achievement. This study would be a first step toward determining this relationship, and therefore the needs of this population in K-12 environments during this critical period of development.

Research Questions

The main research questions as they relate to the achievement of gifted gay African American males are:

1. What are the perceptions of gifted gay African American men about their K-12 experiences that influenced their level of academic achievement?
2. Do these gifted gay African American men perceive that there was a connection between their ethnicity, sexuality and level of academic achievement?
3. Does there appear to be a connection of which they do not seem aware, but which they indicate in their interviews?
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are several theories that can add clarity and dimension to the discussion of gifted gay African American men. Schema Theory and Constructivism in the context of the discussion of gifted gay African American males provide a bridge to cross the great gap in understanding of these individuals, both in their understanding of their identities and their communities’ perception of them. Through the application of these theories, perhaps a greater understanding of the experiences of gifted gay African American men can be garnered in the hopes of improving the level of academic achievement of this population.

The study of gay African American men and their gifts and talents can include a review of ethnicity and sexuality. Researchers such as Grantham (1998) and Ford (1993) have documented the relationship between giftedness and ethnicity in the study of gifted African American men; however, few have addressed the relationship between these factors and sexuality. Many young gay men have found it easier to be open about their sexuality via the Internet, schools and support groups (Bargh & McKenna, 1998). Due to technology, the lives and experiences of gifted gay African American men have become more open to research and study.

There are several theories most relevant to the study of the gay African American male population: Social Constructivism, Schema Theory and Queer Theory. While each theory plays a separate role in the understanding of the phenomenon surrounding gifted gay African American men, when combined they give a full picture of the problems and successes that may arise.
Constructivism

Constructivism is the actual creation of knowledge. More specifically, Constructivism can be defined as the “process by which teachers and learners work together to create new ideas. . .” (Null, 2004). While this definition centers on classroom learning, other theorists such as Phillips, have delineated more specific types of Constructivism. Psychological Constructivism is concerned with how individuals build up certain elements of their cognitive or emotional apparatus (Phillips, 1997), focusing on how individuals view their own identities, their knowledge and their belief systems. Psychological Constructivism is termed “first wave” Constructivism because of its focus on the individual. The concept of Psychological Constructivism is important as it relates to gifted gay African American men because of the identity issues that they face. The difficulty that gay African American men often face in identifying themselves as African American, gay and gifted makes the concept of Psychological Constructivism key in analyzing reasons behind their lack of or extreme academic achievement.

Social Constructivism

Vygotsky (1962) proposed a different type of Constructivism, with more emphasis on the social nature of learning. Vygotsky’s theory focused on the social and cultural tools that aid the learner in constructing meaning from the environment. Social Constructivism also emphasizes the role of knowledge and other social and cultural tools used by members of the community to help younger group members construct new knowledge (Cobbs & Bowers, 1999). Social Constructivism could be a means to help young gay African American men build their own understanding of who they are.

Social Constructivism focuses on the belief that knowledge is “embedded in a particular cultural setting” (Cobb & Bowers, 1999). One important element of Constructivism is situated
learning, which emphasizes the notion that learning takes place in many environments and not simply in classrooms or in academic situations. Situated learning is not an individual process determined by lecture and memorization, but contextualized to give the learner a full understanding of the concept (Cruess & Cruess, 2006). In addition, as one grows and progresses in the community, this learning allows one to participate more fully in the community itself.

Social Constructivism does not address the learning that takes place in a very specific context and therefore it is more difficult for knowledge to be transferred to other situations (Cruess & Cruess, 2006). The issue then becomes not one of knowledge construction but of how to ensure that knowledge is transferred to other situations within a community. Phillips (1997) stated that Social Constructivists are concerned with how knowledge is constructed and how our understandings of the world are conveyed to new members of the group.

There are some common elements to both psychological constructivism and social constructivism. Most constructivists commonly believe that learners should encounter complex learning environments with associated problems that are not simplistic in nature, since elementary problems will not be useful for learners (Null, 2004). As a result, when more complex problems are encountered learners will not have experience in how to solve them (Resnick, 1987). Social negotiation is the aspect of constructivism that most constructivists believe is important in forming new knowledge. Social negotiation is the key to discussions of gifted gay African American men because it can enable them to understand who they are in different environments and thus help them to better understand their identities by forming the new knowledge of who they are, and who they have the potential to be, outside of society’s preconceived notions and stereotypes. Social negotiation emphasizes the idea that there is a need to respect multiple perspectives of learning and collaboration, such as that implied by the notion
that social situations or contexts determine whether new information is valuable and are important in shifting the thinking of populations (Woolfolk, 2003). Therefore, with regard to gifted gay African American men, once the communities in which they reside determine that their experiences and stories are valuable; these men will be able to develop more fully their identities, which should allow them to be more academically successful.

The application of constructivism is evident in two main forms of learning—inquiry based and problem based. Inquiry-based learning involves an instructor presenting a nebulous situation to learners. According to Lashley, Matczynski and Rowley (2002), inquiry-based learning is composed of the following elements:

1. Formulate hypothesis to explain the event or solve the problem
2. Collect data to test the hypothesis
3. Draw conclusions
4. Reflect on the original problem and the thinking processes needed to solve it

Problem-based learning, in contrast, presents students with real-life problems to which there are no “right” answers. The key to problem-based learning is that the situation that is presented to learners has some relevance or meaning to them. Problem-based learning focuses on explicit attention to authentic problem solving, hands-on learning, and self-directed learning (Gallagher, 2001).

While problem- and inquiry-based learning is appropriate to assist in classroom learning, they can also help develop the academic potential of gifted gay African American men. These types of learning can help gifted gay African American men and their communities develop a sense of understanding of who they are through the understanding that their experiences are unique and that there are no right or wrong solutions to the associated issues.
Constructionism. Constructionism is a form of Constructivism that is social in nature. Constructionism focuses on the public aspect of constructing knowledge that results in some form of public artifact that can be shared with others (e.g., via a Web page or some other media form). Public artifacts, such as Web pages can provide tangible evidence that the knowledge that has been communicated and created has actually been understood.

Schema Theory

Another theory used to frame the study is Schema Theory. Schema Theory is defined as basic structures for organizing information concepts (Derry, 1993). Schemas depict what is typical for that category of information dependent upon that situation, and are individual for each person. One type of schema is story grammar. Story grammar is used to help learners understand and retain stories. Schemas can also be scripts that organize a common sequence of events for a learner. They can be as simple as how to order a pizza or how to drive a car. Schemas are also important in helping learners recognize concepts such as money or traffic. They also facilitate problem solving. As learners encounter problems they can often use the schemas they have for other problems as tools for solving these new problems. Utilizing already learned schemas to solve new problems is a technique termed schema-driven problem solving.

Cognitive Schema Theory can be interpreted as practically any memory structure. The specificity of these memory structures is important in determining how to change preconceived notions and misconceptions about particular phenomena. The most basic type of mental structure used in schemas is the phenomenological primitive, or the p-prim, which is a basic, abstract record of an event. The most advanced schematic structure is the object family that is defined as a loosely organized collection of ideas that tend to work together in certain situations. Students in class use object family structures, for example, when they are confronted with a new problem to
help them determine what methods to use to solve the problem. Schemas, viewed from this
vantage point, are important because as individuals build schemas, they are also examining
misconceptions or naïve ideas about particular phenomena.

Schemas have been explored as a means to help students change their views of science.
Students in science classes, for example, have schemas concerning information about particular
scientific phenomena that are weak or badly informed (Chinn & Brewer, 1993). Chinn and
Brewer noted changing schemas is a process that takes a great deal of time. Part of the issue in
attempting to change misconceptions held by students is that there has to be a specific schema
structure targeted. Derry (1996) suggested that it is difficult to change misconceptions if specific
targets have not been identified. That is, when the specific target structure has not been
identified, one may fail in attempting to change a misperception about the phenomenon. While it
is possible to activate a spontaneous change in schema structure, it is highly unusual unless the
accommodation of new information is extremely different from that which has been learned
previously and falls in line with what is already known (Derry, 1996). Potentially, the idea that it
is difficult to change schemas without drastically different information to discount them could be
used to help gifted gay African American men in that those who work with them can identify
what is already known and then search to find role models that do not fit within that schema for
the population.

Schema Theory and Constructivism provide a learner of new information with structures
to facilitate his or her learning. Constructivism does so by allowing learners to create knowledge
based on what is observed in the environment in a structured manner. Schema Theory facilitates
learning by allowing learners to change misconceptions about subjects to form new or changed
categories of knowledge. For example, a person who believes that all gay men are effeminate
may meet a gay man who is not. The person either will see the non-effeminate gay male as the
exception or will change his or her way of thinking about gay men to include those who are
effeminate and those who are not. The use of Schema Theory can enable gifted gay African
American men to reconcile their own identities internally, as well as give their communities the
opportunity to understand them within their own right—outside of the stereotypes that are
perpetuated by the media and society at large.

The discussion of Schema Theory and Constructivism serves as a juxtaposition of the
sexual identity of gifted gay African American men and their level of achievement. Gay African
American men who are gifted are required to view themselves in terms of their ethnic identity as
well as their sexual identity. Studies by Derry (1993) and others concerning Schema Theory
would suggest that although many members of the gifted gay African American male population
have schemas concerning their identities as gifted African American men, because of the lack of
exemplars of gay African American men who are gifted, this schema may not be formed.
Furthermore, the examples that do exist of African American men who are gay may be limited to
stereotypical images of gay African American men in the media, who are effeminate and
flamboyant. While these images may be accurate for part of the population, they may not include
other aspects of the individual, such as academic giftedness and success. Thus, these schemas
will predominate over all other information that is gathered concerning their identity as gifted
gay African American men. A need therefore exists to change these schemas via Constructivism.
Constructivism will enable images of gifted gay African American men to prevail, providing an
opportunity for new knowledge concerning the identities of gifted gay African American men to
form and thus change the schemas that are held concerning the population.
These theories alone—Constructivism and Schema Theory—cannot fully describe the experiences of gay African American gifted men. In order to represent the experiences of the gifted gay African American male population, Queer Theory must also be examined.

Queer Theory

Queer Theory provides the “tools used to examine what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal,’ primarily through deconstructing issues of sexuality in society,” according to Dilley (1999). Queer Theory can be seen as a means of examining the experiences of marginalized populations through a lens that does not judge these experiences from a homophobic or heterosexist vantage point. Queer Theory can be most closely related to postmodern constructionism in structure and “while it is not the only dimension of human experience that define queers, sexuality does inform all others” (Dilley). Queer Theory therefore points to the use of sexuality as it informs the social and educational experiences of gifted gay African American men.

Queer Theory within the context of the study can be an effective tool in examining the experiences of gay gifted African American men. The experiences of these individuals can be examined using a critical lens of objectivity, while simultaneously not separating their sexual identity from this examination. Queer Theory will form the final component of the theoretical lens through which their experiences can be sensitively examined.

The experiences of gifted gay African American men cannot be fully explored until each of the descriptors that influence the understanding of the gifted gay African American male population is further analyzed. What does it mean to be Gifted? What does it mean to be Gay? What does it mean to be African American? These are questions for further consideration as the study is conducted to determine the experiences of gifted gay African American men.
Giftedness: What Does It Mean to be Gifted?

Throughout the history of education, giftedness has had many definitions. There is still not a single definition encapsulating all the aspects of giftedness on which professionals in the field can agree. Cramond (2004) states:

It is the belief in the transitory nature of knowledge that we hope to convey to our most gifted students so that they can continue to search for better explanations, solutions, and meanings. Would we expect to do less with the concept of giftedness? (p. 15)

Is it necessary to have a single definition of giftedness? Are some gifted students not identified because we still lack an all-encompassing definition of gifted potential? Winebrenner (2001) states that there are four reasons why culturally different students are still not identified as having gifted potential:

. . . many gifted children from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds, minority cultures, and economically disadvantaged families continue to be ignored when children are identified for gifted programs and other learning opportunities. There are four main reasons why this happens:

1. Many standardized tests are culturally biased.
2. The tests use language and idioms with which many of these children might not be familiar.
3. Many of these children attend schools in which gifted education is not a priority.
   Gifted program opportunities may simply be unavailable.
4. Most teachers don’t notice or know how to identify characteristics of giftedness in every student population. (p. 5)
According to the federal definition of giftedness, gifted children are those who “give
evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or
leadership capacity or in specific academic fields and who need services and activities not
ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities” (Marland, 1972).
This definition focuses on the academic potential of high-ability students. However, others
would also include physical or athletic ability as one of the areas of giftedness. States, school
districts and schools are not legally required to adhere to the federal definition of giftedness,
which can also lead to issues of identification for students with high abilities.

Chan (2000) noted and Kaufman and Harrison (1986) cautioned that teachers can be
biased against culturally diverse students, and advocated testing as a solution in the selection
procedure. The dilemma of identification of culturally diverse students with gifts and talents and
the methods by which they should be identified is ongoing. The need for the development of an
instrument that will allow for the identification of culturally diverse students is fueled further by
researchers such as Arthur Jensen (1969), who suggests that biology causes the gap in the
average scores of African Americans and Whites. Glaser (1993) suggests that the difference
between the racial groups may be due largely to genetics. It is still unclear how great a part
environment or genetics play in determining the giftedness of a student; however, both are
factors that must be considered when determining the gifts and talents of students.

The question posed, “What does it mean to be African American and Gifted” has a
variety of answers, and to explore this question fully, one would certainly choose to focus on the
experiences of that population. First is the question of what it means to be gifted; depending on
who is asked, the question may have a myriad of answers. Some students believe that it is their
responsibility to raise the level of consciousness and possibly human potential of society, based
on their gifts. Indeed, in W. E. B. DuBois’s (1903) groundbreaking book, The Talented Tenth, he purports that it is the responsibility of highly intelligent African Americans to uplift the rest of the race. Although slavery and segregation no longer exist in our country, to some degree there is still a feeling that highly intelligent students should nurture and even raise the level of competence of those who are less intelligent. An example of placing students with different ability levels in the same classrooms is heterogeneous grouping. The philosophy behind this placement is for less able students to learn from the more able students, while the gifted students learn how to mentor and be sociable with their “lesser” counterparts. Results have been mixed for both groups in these settings. Some studies suggest that inclusion is wonderful and that students on both sides gain from its use, while others seem to prove the exact opposite. According to Kearney (1996), gifted students have fewer chances to interact with other gifted students because of heterogeneous grouping, which in the end may be to their detriment.

While the federal definition of giftedness may point to capability in specific areas, there are still areas outside of the federal definition of giftedness that need to be addressed. Howard Gardner of Harvard University provides another framework for understanding giftedness and intelligence. Instead of looking at giftedness from one perspective, he proposes that intelligence is understood from multiple perspectives; thus, his theory of Multiple Intelligences is as follows:

In the heyday of the psychometric and behaviorist eras, it was generally believed that intelligence was a single entity that was inherited; and that human beings—initially a blank slate—could be trained to learn anything, provided that it was presented in an appropriate way. Nowadays an increasing number of researchers believe precisely the opposite; that there exists a multitude of intelligences, quite independent of each other; that each intelligence has its own strengths and constraints; that the mind is far from
unencumbered at birth; and that it is unexpectedly difficult to teach things that go against early ‘naïve’ theories that challenge the natural lines of force within an intelligence and its matching domains. (Gardner, 1993, p. xxiii)

Multiple Intelligences, as stated, allow for the possibility of intelligence and therefore giftedness in several areas that are not mentioned in the federal definition, including interpersonal, intrapersonal and visual/spatial intelligence. These types of intelligence, while increasingly recognized by the academic community, have not been included in the official federal definition, which also leaves the possibility that individuals who possess those talents are not included in the identification of gifts and talents.

As it specifically relates to students, who are culturally different and gifted, identification efforts often take into consideration many factors, including interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. Efforts by Baldwin (2002) and others have begun to identify the “g” factor that separates these students from their majority counterparts, but they have not been able to satisfy the need to quantify the presence of ability. Therefore, many school districts and educators still rely on linear methods of determining the giftedness of all students, without considering the gifts that lie within culturally different students and may lie outside of the scope of their instruments.

What Does It Mean to be African American in America?

Negro, African-American, Black—these are all labels used to describe people of African descent living in America. Since the first slave set foot on American soil, the definition of what it means to be African American has been constantly defined and redefined. Initially, African American people in America were considered nothing more than property. Slavery has been documented countless times both by historians and in literature. Authors such as W.E.B. DuBois (1903) have used the plight of African Americans as fodder for their stories. As time has
progressed, images of slavery have become less prevalent in the minds of Americans and literature. The tide has shifted towards images of poverty, degradation and, sadly, incarceration. With specific regard to African American men, the statistics are staggering.

According to the U.S. Census in 2000, the number of African American men and women who are incarcerated exceeds that of white men and women, despite the fact that African Americans only comprise one-fifth of the population. More specifically,

Even more troubling than the absolute number of persons in jail or prison is the extent to which those men and women are African-American. Although blacks account for only 12 percent of the U.S. population, 44 percent of all prisoners in the United States are black. (Human Rights Watch Backgrounder, 2003, p. 1)

Furthermore, when looking at statistics specifically relating to African American men, the numbers become even more depressing. The same organization reports that

Indeed, nearly five percent of all black men, compared to 0.6 percent of white men are incarcerated. In many states, the rate is far worse. According to Human Rights Watch's calculations based on the 2000 U.S. Census, in twelve states more than ten percent of black men ages 18 to 64 are incarcerated. The Justice Department reports that nationwide, a similar percentage of black men in the ages 20-29 are behind bars. (Human Rights Watch Backgrounder, 2003, p. 1)

These statistics help to paint a picture of the life of many African Americans in America and a more dismal portrait of African American men.

Economically, what does it mean to be African American in America? According to the National Urban League, it means to share in significantly less of the nation’s wealth than white counterparts do. The 2005 National Urban League study stated that the status of Blacks was 73%
as compared to Whites—a marginal change from the 2004 index results. The report goes on to state the five measures used to determine the equality of African Americans and Whites in America:

1. **Economics** - Still the largest divide, black economic status measures 57% of White counterparts, an equality gap 20% wider than any other category. Black unemployment remained stagnant at 10.8%, while white unemployment dropped to 4.7%, making black unemployment more than twice that of whites.

2. **Health** - Black health status is 76% that of Whites. Obesity rates for Blacks are increasing faster and the life expectancy rate for Blacks is 72 years vs. 78 years for Whites.

3. **Education** - Black education status is 77% that of whites. Teachers with less than three years’ experience teach in minority schools at twice the rate that they teach in white schools.

4. **Social Justice** - When measuring sentencing, enforcement and victimization, Black vs. White equality under law is 68% that of whites (5% less than in 2004; the worst decline overall). Blacks are three times (3X) more likely to become prisoners once arrested and a Black person’s average jail sentence is six months longer than that of a White for the same crime; 39 months versus 33 months.

5. **Civic Engagement** - Blacks out-measure Whites in the area of civic engagement (voter registration, volunteerism and government service) at 1.08. However, volunteerism is declining for both Blacks and Whites, due to an upsurge with the 2004 elections. (www.NUL.org, p. 1)
While these numbers help to paint a picture of life for many African Americans in America, another factor must be taken into consideration for the purposes of the study—sexuality.

What Does It Mean to be African American and Gay in America?

Of the 9,021 hate crimes committed in America in 2004, 1,479 were motivated by bias regarding sexual orientation (Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigations, 2004). There are countless stories by victims and their families that point to the fact that people with minority sexual orientations are targeted and victimized by greater society. While popular television programs such as Will and Grace and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy have raised the consciousness of society, these shows do not address two important issues—youth who are gay and lesbian and minority, or African Americans who are gay and lesbian.

Researchers have recently begun to look at the lives of African Americans who are gay and lesbian, as evidenced by recent popular books by authors such as J. L. King and E. Lynn Harris. While Harris paints a picture of the African American gay male as being multidimensional—both good and bad—in his fictional works, King gives less glowing descriptions in his work, which discusses gay and bisexual African American males who live out their lives in secret. Both authors, however, do point to a larger issue of African American men who feel that they must live their lives in secret, never allowing anyone to find out that they are attracted to other men.

Although these reasons underpin many of the issues that face African American gay men in America, there are many more that deserve exploration, such as the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among the African American gay male community; religion; and coming out. Both the spread of STDs and religion are issues to which one can relate without being gay; however, understanding coming out requires far more depth. An understanding of coming out
involves being able to relate to having a secret that no one else can know, not just because of fear of shame and rejection, but also quite possibly fear of loss of life. An example of this would be the Matthew Shepard story.

Shortly after midnight on October 7, 1998, 21-year-old Shepard met McKinney and Henderson in a bar. According to McKinney, Shepard asked them for a ride home. Subsequently, Shepard was robbed, severely beaten, tied to a fence and left to die. McKinney and Henderson also found out his address, intending to burglarize his home. A bicyclist discovered Shepard 18 hours later, still alive but unconscious.

Shepard suffered a fracture from the back of his head to the front of his right ear. He also had severe brain stem damage, which affected his body's ability to regulate heart rate, body temperature and other vital signs. There were also about a dozen small lacerations around his head, face and neck. His injuries were deemed too severe for doctors to operate. Shepard never regained consciousness and remained on full life support. He was pronounced dead at 12:53 a.m. on October 12 at Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. Police arrested McKinney and Henderson shortly thereafter, finding the bloody gun as well as the victim's shoes and wallet in their truck. The two murderers had attempted to get their girlfriends to provide alibis.

After the attack, the prosecutor told reporters that Shepard's friends had been vocal about Shepard's sexuality: “They were calling the County Attorney's office, they were calling the media and indicating Matthew Shepard is gay and we don't want the fact that he is gay to go unnoticed.” Matthew Shepard's blood was tested later for HIV. The result was positive although Shepard may have been unaware of his HIV status while alive. (Wikipedia, 2006)
Matthew Shepard’s story, while extreme, clearly illustrates the hatred and animosity that many gay men face. Add to this the issue of culture and it is no wonder that one of the major obstacles facing gay African American men is the coming-out process.

Support for Gifted Students in America

Gifted students are a special population within American schools. They have needs that are not the same as those of other students. The gifted student has been identified as having potential to succeed academically in ways that other students may not. As a result, gifted students need support to help develop their potential. Support from family, friends and teachers can all be determining factors in whether or not the gifted student reaches his potential.

According to Bonner (2003), “family influence and support” may be one of the “most critical elements in the translation of ability and talent into achievement among gifted individuals”. VanTassel-Baska (1992) noted that for educators there could be many limiting factors in their effectiveness in supporting the academic development of gifted students including “responding to diverse populations” including “minority students and low SES gifted students.” These populations provide special challenges for teachers as the teacher attempts to form connections for students in meaningful ways to the curriculum.

Peer support can also be critical to the success of academically gifted students. According to Bonner (2003), peer relationships can offer support to students. Because gifted students are intellectually mature beyond their years, it can be important for them to have peers within their age group with whom they can have social relationships to normalize their existence.

Gifted students may have one or both parents who are gifted, may have a teacher who is skilled in differentiating instruction for gifted students however, this is not guaranteed. Many students still lack the academic and social support necessary to be academically successful.
Support for Gay Students in America

Gay students often lack support in school environments. According to Weiler (2004) in 2001 studies showed that, “83% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students experienced verbal, physical, or sexual harassment and assault at school, a significantly higher rate than for heterosexual students.” Support for these students may come in the form of school and community organizations. However, the Education Digest suggested in a 2003 article that many gay students “have to figure out who they are and where they fit in, and often do this without having the benefit of accurate information, role models, counselors, or support groups.” This further speaks to the lack of support for gay students and appropriate interventions that should occur to help this population.

Support for African American Students in America

It can be assumed that if a student were African American, he would have at least one parent who is African American. In terms of educational support, it has been noted that family relationships play a significant role in the success of students (Bonner, 2003) and African American students are no different in this respect. Studies have shown that minority students in school environments need help as much as other students in pursuing academic success do.

Summary

According to McCready (2004),

The underutilization of gender and sexuality as categories of analysis points to the need for urban educators to develop multidimensional frameworks that take into account how multiple oppressions and categories of difference affect Black male students, at times marginalizing them in the very communities that are thought to be safe (p. 137).
This point summarizes one of the major aspects of research into the study of gifted gay African American men that has been overlooked—the issue of sexuality. The proposed study seeks to explore the experiences of gay African American men who fall into the category of being gifted to determine whether there is a relationship between their ethnicity, giftedness, and sexuality so that future research that is conducted can focus on ways to help them better cope with and thrive in their varied environments.

Furthermore, research has shown that Black students, gay Students and gifted students often lack the educational and emotional support necessary to achieve academic success – therefore it can be concluded that Black, gay male gifted students, at the intersection of these three groups, would also lack this support and perhaps to a greater degree than any one group alone.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was chosen as the means for exploring this topic. The variables of ethnicity, sexuality and giftedness have been explored separately; however, I want to know what happens when these three variables intersect. Qualitative methodology, more specifically a case study approach provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. According to Merriam (1998), “By concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity, the researcher aims to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic to the phenomenon” (p. 29). The case study method allowed me to explore the variables of interest to determine the results of their interactions while maintaining the integrity of their individual qualities. This was done through the contextualized nature of the case study. Merriam notes that, “our experiences are rooted in context, as is knowledge in case studies” (p. 31).

Participants

The primary data sources were the participants. The participants for this study were derived from two groups in an effort to document the experiences of gifted gay African American men. First, two men who have demonstrated significant academic achievement and have been identified as gifted were interviewed. Anecdotal evidence such as test scores and grade summaries were used to document their giftedness.

The second group of people for the study were highly successful gay African American men, as indicated through their biographies and autobiographies. These individuals were Alvin Ailey and James Baldwin. In the initial exploration of the topic, I read both artists’ life stories
and found several similarities. For example, both men grew up with very little contact with their fathers and had very strong mothers. In addition, both of their life stories focus on their impoverished upbringings with little to no financial resources. These emerging similarities aroused my curiosity and led me to further study on the topics of giftedness, sexuality and ethnicity as it concerns gifted gay African American men. Furthermore, these people were chosen due to their accomplishments in their chosen areas of endeavor as well as for their candid description of their lives and the role of homosexuality in their development. The coping strategies of both Ailey and Baldwin also influenced the method of study. Both men were very self destructive in how they coped with their sexuality, giftedness and ethnicity in environments that were not accepting of their differentness. It was hypothesized that just as they experienced difficulties during the Harlem Renaissance that the participants in the study who had similar backgrounds would have difficulties that could lead them to engage in self destructive behaviors.

The participants for the study were part of a purposeful sample. The sample for the study were composed of men over the age of 25, which was done for several reasons. First, men over 25 will not require parental consent to be interviewed or to discuss the topics that were explored. Second, men in this age group have completed their K-12 education and may be able to reflect on their experiences more objectively than individuals who are still involved in the experience. The participants also were identified as gifted during their K-12 experience. As adults, these individuals are high achievers in their given fields of endeavor.

Data Collection

A brief initial interview was conducted to ensure the suitability of participants. Each participant was asked if he would consider himself gay and if he had experienced obstacles that
he would attribute to his sexuality. They were then asked to explain how they felt their sexuality had influenced their success academically and professionally.

Data collection methods for this study were done in two phases. First, interviews were conducted with participants to determine their experiences in academia and to see if they feel their sexuality affected those experiences. A semi-structured interview format was used to facilitate discussion. The questions that posed to the participants were:

1. What was your overall experience in K-12 schools?
2. What factors do you feel most influenced your experience in “school” (elementary, junior high or high school)?
3. Did you feel that your experience in “school” (elementary, junior high or high school) was in any way influenced by your sexuality?
4. Did you feel that your experience in “school” (elementary, junior high or high school) was in any way influenced by your ethnicity?
5. Describe the most important relationships in your life during your “school” years.
6. Describe your family relationships during your “school” years.
7. Describe your relationships with friends during your “school” years.
8. What characteristics do you feel you possess have most affected your level of success?
9. Do you feel that your sexuality has affected your level of success?
10. Do you feel that your ethnicity has affected your level of success?

*Follow-up Questions*

1. Describe your relationship with your mother.
2. Describe your relationship with your father.
Following each meeting with a participant, the interviewer wrote a memo (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to keep an immediate account of impressions of the participant and reflections on the interview. Using the transcribed interviews, a detailed biographical review (Strauss & Corbin) for each participant was written summarizing the interview and key elements. Throughout this study, names and other identifying information about the participants were changed to ensure confidentiality. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The researcher, in a secure location, will hold all interviews and corresponding data including audio cassettes and transcriptions. Six months after the completion of the study, all of the data will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using (a) Grounded Theory, (b) Critical Race Theory, and (3) Queer Theory. Grounded theory is a method of research that allows the data to reveal itself during the course of the study. This method demands that the researcher immerse him or herself in the subject being studied and allow the subject to reveal the findings, as opposed to other theories that require that a certain vantage point be used when conducting research. This theory was chosen because there is very little to no information in reference to gifted gay African American men in America and their levels of achievement. This allowed the data that were uncovered to reveal facts concerning this population instead of beginning the study with preconceived notions of the data that may emerge.

Grounded theory aims to generate theory from data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory offered a systematic approach to explaining the experiences of high-achieving gay African American men where there is currently no grounded concept for description of how it manifests itself. This theory also provided flexibility to identify areas of weakness during the
course of research to ensure that the subject is fully explored. Strauss and Corbin (1990) outlined the stages of analysis that will be used as moving from open coding to axial coding and then to selective coding. Codes were created based on the preliminary interviews and the review of literature. The subsequent interviews were then analyzed and coded according to the initial coding data.

Critical theory is an approach to find deeper meaning and breadth in studying phenomena. However, more than simple critical theory, critical race theory was used to examine the phenomenon. Critical race theory is an approach to law and social rules that sees them as having webs of meaning and interpretation rather than a single definition (Torres, 2000). Critical race theory was used to identify those areas that speak directly to ethnicity and the experiences of African American men in America. By virtue of the population being studied, there were issues dealing with the societal impact on their achievement. Critical race theory allowed for an in-depth discussion of the participants’ perceptions of the effect of race on their level of achievement.

Queer Theory was used to determine issues that underlie the concept of sexuality. Lastly, grounded theory was used to derive new issues and solutions in dealing with the experiences of gifted gay African American men in America. Queer Theory is “concerned with the non-essentializing nature of sexual identities and premised on the notion of resistance to forms of domination, such as heterosexism and homophobia” (Minton, 1997). Queer Theory was essential to give voice to the experiences of African American men who are both gay and high academic achievers.
CHAPTER 4
DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This study explored the experiences of two gay African American men who fall into the category of being gifted. This is an exploratory study designed to determine whether there is a relationship between the participants’ ethnicity, giftedness, and sexuality so that future research that is conducted can focus on ways to help such individuals better cope with and thrive in their varied environments. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the perceptions of gifted gay African American men about their K-12 experiences that influenced their level of academic achievement?
2. Do these gifted gay African American men perceive that there was a connection between their ethnicity, sexuality and level of academic achievement?
3. Does there appear to be a connection of which they do not seem aware, but which they indicate in their interviews?

This chapter presents the findings of the data gathering process in response to these questions and provides information about the research participants. The analysis process is detailed with the development of codes and categories discussed. The categories emerging from the data are presented and illustrated using excerpts from participants’ interview responses.

The sample size for this study was due to the very personal nature of the questions that were asked of the participants involving intimate details of their sexual and emotional histories. Therefore, this is a study of two cases. According to Merriam (1998), the study of a case is particularistic, meaning that it focuses on “a particular event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 29).
This characteristic applies to the study of gifted gay African American men as the study is focused specifically on their level of academic achievement. Furthermore, Merriam also stated that the study of a case is descriptive. The research questions surrounding this study are designed to describe the experiences of gifted gay African American men as this population’s experiences as they relate to their level of academic achievement have only been sparsely chronicled.

Furthermore, the literature that does exist does not address the intersection of the key characteristics of giftedness, homosexuality and ethnicity as it relates to academic achievement, thus pointing to the need for this type of study. Lastly, the study of a case can be characterized as heuristic. Stake (1981) stated that within this type of study,

> Previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge (from case studies) leading to a rethinking of the phenomenon being studied. Insights into how things get to be the way they are can be expected to result from case studies.

This is certainly the case in the study of gifted gay African American men as I am trying to determine if there is a relationship between sexuality, ethnicity and giftedness that indicate an influence on academic achievement. Students who are gifted may lack the educational and emotional support necessary to achieve academic success as do students who are gay and part of an ethnic minority group. Therefore, it can be concluded that Black, gay male gifted students, at the intersection of these three identifiers, would to a greater degree lack this support more so than any one group alone.

**Interview Participants**

Both study participants self identified as gay or bisexual. The men were over 35 and held professional positions. One of the men was a manager for a Fortune 500 corporation and the
other was a professor at a university. Both men indicated that they had divulged their sexuality to individuals within their families; however, neither was open about his sexuality at work.

*Drew*

Drew is a 38-year-old African American man living in the United States. He is a professor at a university where he teaches courses in Psychology. He attended primary and secondary school in a public school system and was identified as gifted in elementary school. He participated in gifted classes until he graduated from high school, and after finishing high school, he attended a university and graduated with a degree in sociology. He went on to earn masters and doctoral degrees. Physically fit and dressed appropriately for his age, Drew likes to participate in activities at his gym including teaching several aerobic classes. He spoke freely about his experiences growing up and his sexuality, recalling his first awareness of his sexuality occurred when he was four years old admiring the physique of his uncle. Other experiences soon followed, confirming his awareness of his sexuality. He eventually identified his sexuality as bisexual, but strongly prefers to be with men.

*Brian*

Brian is a 40-year-old African American man living in the United States. He is a manager for a Fortune 500 corporation. Brian attended public school and was identified as gifted in elementary school, continuing the gifted classes until high school graduation. After military service (honorable discharge), he attended a university earning a degree in business administration. Brian is very physically fit and enjoys playing tennis and running when he is not working. He spoke freely about his experiences growing up and his sexuality. He spoke about his sexual experiences beginning when he was molested as a small child. Someone molested Brian within his community – someone that he trusted. Although he did not feel that his sexuality was
based on this experience, he did feel that it led him to self identify as bisexual and eventually gay.

Data Analysis

Four major categories that emerged from the analysis of the interviews with both study participants, who both self-identified as gifted and gay African American men. The four categories included Relationships, Perceptions, Life Issues and Academic Experiences. The categories reflected the essence of the issues each participant discussed. Each category was developed using the processes of coding, reflection, and reduction of data. Data were collected using voice recordings of participants. The data were then transcribed into several typewritten documents. Before the categories were identified, I read the data several times. I listened to transcribed accounts of the data and then reread the data for clarity. First, the data were coded with each separate code being a small unit of the data: a phrase, a word, a sentence, and in some instances a paragraph. Each code was defined and parameters set for what other data could be placed in this category with the code. For example within the category of Relationships, the relationship had to be a friend or familial relationship. This relationship could not however be with a teacher or sexual as those relationships were categorized in the categories of Academic and Life Issues respectively. Once all of the data had been coded, the codes were inspected and reflected on to see if there were larger categories encompassing a number of smaller codes. In order for a category to be established, it had to encompass several codes as unifying idea. Each category is presented separately with the supporting codes. I typed and printed each code onto individual pieces of paper. The codes were cut onto separate pieces of paper and placed on the floor. I then arranged the codes into categories of related data.
The first category chosen was Relationships with Family and Friends as the codes – overall this category demonstrates how these men came to be who they are. The next category was Perceptions: Others, Self and Understand Others. This category reflected how others understood them, how they understood themselves and how they in turn understood other people. The next category was Life Problems, which included fights, causing fights, sexuality, role models and ethnicity. The final category that was used was Academic, including experiences with teachers, academic motivation, and achievement as well as how they used their intellectual skills.

Code definitions were revised as necessary through a process of continual constant comparison of new codes of data with the old codes. If a new code was needed, it was defined and parameters set. Conversely, a code might fit into an existing code. For example, relationships with friends was initially part of the Academic category but after further analysis of the data, was placed in the Relationships category because it was a better fit for this type of examination. Some codes were very straight forward and fit neatly into a single category. For example, one participant remarked, “My father was not there. I did not grow up knowing my father.” This statement was a direct reflection of his relationship with his father and was therefore placed in the category of Relationships. However, other codes had to be reexamined to determine the best category in which to place them. An example of this recoding was this remark made by a participant: “…so they (other students) treated me different”. Initially this remark was placed in the category of Academics because it referred to a school experience. However, after further evaluation, it was placed in the Perceptions category. Further reading within the interview determined that although this remark referred to a school related experience, the participant was
actually trying to convey the idea that his peers perceived him as different because of his
giftedness.

**Relationships**

Relationship as a category was defined as the important relationships, both family and
friend, contributing to life academic and social experiences, of the participant. Both men
described their family relationships as extremely important in the development of their sexual
identity as well as their pursuit of success. Within this category, two major codes identified were
(a) Family and (b) Friends.

*Family*. The family relationships discussed by both men relied heavily on the relationship
with their mothers. The mother–son relationship for both men was one of the most important
family relationships they had. The importance of the mother-son relationship was echoed in
Alvin Ailey’s biography as well. This relationship also seemed to be the primary motivator for
both men to achieve academic success. Brian remarked, “. . . it had been instilled in me once my
mom realized that I had the potential to go (to college). You can be the first one to go and
graduate.” This was very important to him. He felt anything was better than disappointing his
mother. He stated, “I didn’t cause my mother trouble, and made her proud.”

The same held true for Drew. He stated, “My mom was probably like the biggest
influence on my academic success.” Both men felt their mothers were the driving force in their
level of academic achievement and heavily influenced their decisions about their sexuality-
whether to remain closeted or open about their sexuality. Drew stated his mother felt, “well, it’s
better that he hate me (mother) and he be a man than him loving me and turn out to be gay. And I
remember her saying that, too.” Statements like this emphasize the importance of the relationship
between the participant and his mother and possibly his decision to keep his sexuality a secret
until recently. Other relationships within the family were also important, but did not weigh as heavily as the relationship the participants had with their mothers.

Of secondary importance were the participants’ relationships with their fathers. Both men indicated they had strained relationships with their biological fathers. Neither met their fathers until they were adults. For Brian, this meant he did not have a “father figure” in the household when he was younger. “I think I looked at my grandmother as my father figure. She was very strict.”

Conversely, Drew had a stepfather and felt overall that the relationship was very positive although he did not feel that his stepfather truly understood his intellectual abilities. He said, “I think my dad. . . I don’t think him at times he understood. . . understood my academic life, intellectual abilities. . .” This indicated while his father was a “good father, good provider. . .,” he still felt there was a barrier between them in terms of intellectual ability. His stepfather also served as the family disciplinarian. He noted, “We cut up in school, he would whip us because it was like, okay, he would come home at 2:00 o’clock in the morning. We would still have to get out of bed and get a whipping and a lecture. . .”

This is in sharp contrast the Brian’s home environment. Brian did not have any type of male figure in the home. He did not meet his father until he was an adult and was raised by his mother. Brian stated, “My father was not there. I did not grow up knowing my father.” Discipline in Brian’s household was accomplished primarily by his mother and was followed by the disciplinary actions of his grandmother.

These relationships were instrumental in the lives of both men. Drew felt that while his stepfather was a good provider and cared for him, he did not understand who Drew was. He stated, “he (Father) just didn’t respect me because I was. . . I did like books.” Drew’s academic
success was very important to him so the fact his stepfather did not respect this part of his life was a great disappointment to him.

Friends. Other relationships that were important to both men were their relationships with friends. Friends in this context were people with whom the participants had common interests and with whom they felt a sense of belonging. Brian stated he had very few friends in his primary school because of the school environment. He was one of only a select number of African American or non-Caucasian students in the school, and as a result, he had very few friends. He mentioned one friend who “was an outsider to most of the other kids there. We got along because we were both outsiders.” This was the only friendship Brian mentioned as significant to him during his K-8 school experience. Similarly, Drew had very few friends during his primary school years. He mentioned one young girl in his class; however, the relationship was more of a rivalry. He stated this friendship was based on the fact his mother would often compare him to her in a playful way to encourage him to succeed in school. Alvin Ailey also had few friends in school with his dance partner being a great friend during his youth.

Brian made a distinct contrast between his friendships in elementary school and high school. He did not have many friends in elementary school because he was in a primarily Caucasian school environment where he knew very few of his classmates. However, he had many friends in high school, “I did have a lot of good friends there.” His desire to have more friends led him to exhibit undesirable behaviors in class. “I did my work and got my A’s and B’s and then I cut up with the rest of the kids to fit in with them, as well.” He used humor as a means of fitting in with his peers. He used this strategy because he felt the students in his classes might not accept him. “I was one of the ‘white kids, I acted white, I wasn’t black enough for them. . .
you know, I didn’t hang out with them, I went home and studied and so they were, you know, you got the questions about, well, are you truly black?”

Brian knew his humor would help him to be accepted by his peers. Drew had a different experience. While both he and Brian played sports in high school, Drew used his academic prowess more effectively to get friends. He would tutor other people in his class and even other students to help him gain acceptance at school. He was known as one of the “smart kids” so other students would come to him for academic assistance. This strategy was effective for both men, however there were times when they felt that they needed to use other means to prove their self worth and gain respect from their peers.

**Perceptions**

The category of Perceptions is defined as how other people thought of them, how they thought of themselves as well as how they thought of other people. This category is important to the study of the gifted gay Black male population because models are essential to the success of this population and it is important to determine how they perceive themselves.

**Academic perceptions.** Brian and Drew noted they both had very strong perceptions about who they were academically. Drew noted, “I’m confidant that I’m really smart. . .” In like fashion, Brian was confident in his academic ability. “I’m the smartest in my neighborhood. So, you know, you can catch a ball, but I’ll be the guy who owns your team. . .” This type of attitude exhibited by both men was in part a result of how others perceived them. For example, Brian was often teased because he was smarter than his peers but he knew his academic success would eventually work to his advantage. He “wanted to be a smart kid in high school.” However, he would participate in sports and other after school activities to fit in with his peers, but would always place his academics above everything else. “. . .Then I went out and I played football or
played tennis or soccer or whatever, but my studies came first”. His academic achievements would be his way out of his environment even though he still had to maintain a separate persona to keep his credibility with his friends.

Drew felt similar pressure to combat the perceptions his peers held about him. He wanted to make sure he was perceived on his abilities and not his ethnicity. “I think a lot of my strivings was just to try to make sure that, you know, nobody could say that I got anything, you know, academic wise because it was affirmative action or anything like that.” He also talked about the fact his family and teachers had instilled in him the necessity of being better than Whites so he could succeed in life. His grandmother admonished him, “you weren’t supposed to trust white people.”

One White teacher, Ms. Murphy had been very candid in telling him and his classmates at their predominately-Black school about how White people would see them. She told him and his classmates White people “are going to treat you differently than they treat White people” and they would “make judgments about your race and ethnicity based on your name, even before they see you.” This had a profound effect on Drew because he and his classmates thought, “when a white woman was telling us this, all of a sudden we didn’t cut up in her class anymore because we knew she really cared about us because she didn’t have to say that.”

Brian was given similar advice about how others would perceive him; however, for him the most important perception was that of his mother. No matter what, “didn’t this was listed earlier cause my mother trouble, and made her proud. . . I definitely didn’t want to be a disappointment to her.” Brian felt, while it was important how his friends perceived him, it was more important not to disappoint his mother.
Self-perception. Another aspect of perception addressed by the participants was self-perception. Both men recognized their attraction for men but had different images of what this meant for their life. Drew felt once he accepted his sexuality he was, “like the same person”. Brian addressed his perception of himself very differently. He always knew he was different from his peers because of his sexuality. “No matter how smart you are or how rich you are, you are always going to be known as the gay kid or the fag or, you know, the punk.” Although he was not effeminate, he still realized in terms of intimacy he preferred to be with men rather than women. As a result of coming to the realization he was gay, Brian began to actively work on ways to be, “able to fit in any environment”. He even talked about the famous poet Paul Laurence Dunbar as he described being able to fit into different environments. He stated the poem, “basically says that, you know, we wear the mask to hide the shame. And it’s like no matter what is going on in my life when it come to work and when it comes to anything outside of my life, I’m going to be there. I’m going to do it. I’m going to have it completed. I’m going to move on. . .” He wears this mask to ensure he can complete his work and still maintain his self-image.

Life Issues

Each participant dealt with similar life issues as represented by the questions that were asked by the interviewer. One major life issue addressed in the study was that of sexuality. Sexuality for purposes of this study is defined as the individual’s sexual identity and sexual practices.

Drew’s sexual experiences were limited in comparison to Brian’s sexual experiences. Drew stated his sexual experiences were a combination of experiences with men and women. Even before high school, Drew realized he was attracted to men. He stated that even as early as
four years old he felt a different attraction for men than he did for women. “I knew every since I was four years old. I knew. I knew when I saw my uncle naked. I knew that I thought that men’s bodies. . . I would see then and I was like, wow, they have nice bodies.”

His sexual experiences initially involved sports. He recalled a situation with a classmate in school when they wrestled each other. He felt wrestling was a precursor to more sexual behavior. His classmate who stated when he wrestled, “people don’t touch my dick, that’s what he was saying, confirmed this. You know, he was saying that, what the hell, I think you really want it.” His other sexual experiences involving sports centered on the football team. Drew played football throughout his high school career. He noted some of his teammates exhibited behaviors leading him to believe they too could have been gay or bisexual. For example, he recounted a story about himself and his teammates that took place during one of their football games. In the story, one of his teammates remarked another teammate was very attractive. More specifically, he stated,

“Tory was about two years older than us. And (unintelligible) had like the most beautiful body like that you had ever seen. And he was a quarterback and he was like 16. He was like 220 pounds of solid muscle. . . he had the like the most beautiful body. I look at him and he just kept staring and licking his lips. And I was like, man, he’s serious. I said, you need to stop doing that. Somebody is going to think you are a fag. . . he was like, I don’t even care. His ass looks so good, it don’t make no sense.”

This story illustrated not only his teammate’s attraction for another teammate but his attraction for the teammate as well. The story also shows how despite the fact he knew he was attracted to other men; he was very cautious about allowing this attraction to show in public and even warned his friend this was inappropriate behavior.
Drew accepted his sexuality eventually; however, he had issues with his sexuality he had to face. This issue was similar to that faced by James Baldwin who wrestled with his sexuality until his late teen years in which he began to accept his sexuality and at one point would introduce himself as homosexual to new acquaintances. He stated that he wanted people to know his sexual preference up front so that they could decide if they liked him or not (Campbell, 1991). Drew felt he suffered from homophobia, an “internalized homophobia” causing him to ask himself questions about his sexuality. “. . . am I any less of a man because I’m gay? Am I any less of a man because my students would find out that I’m gay?” He answered these questions and stated, “once I accepted it, you know, I knew I was like the same person,” He realized his sexuality did not determine who he was and felt he was actually a stronger man when he came out to his mother, who had been one his greatest critics in terms of his sexuality. He stated his mother felt, “well, it’s better that he hate me and he be a man than him loving me and turn out to be gay.” Drew’s coming out to his parents was characterized as a good experience. He stated “when I came out to my parents I actually felt. . . this sounds strange. . . I actually felt stronger and more masculine then.” He felt empowered and he was better person for his honesty with his family.

Brian’s sexual experiences mirrored Drew’s experiences in many ways. First, Brian recognized he had an attraction for men going beyond friendship. He stated, “(I) Had a crush on a boy. Had a crush on a girl.” He thought he was going through “a phase” and he would grow out of it. Over time, he realized his attraction for men was not waning and he wanted to have a sexual relationship with a man. A man had sexually abused Brian when he was very young and he thought part of his attraction for men was a result of this, but the abuse did not deter him from pursuing a relationship with a man. He stated, like Drew, his initial contact with men in a sexual
way was for “instant gratification”. He stated, “. . . we didn’t have a ‘true relationship’. It was
more instant gratification” Unlike Drew however, Brian had a clandestine relationship with
another man throughout his high school career. He and his friend would participate in sexual
activities whenever time and opportunity would allow. Since they lived in the same
neighborhood, they would create situations so they could be together. For example, Brian and his
friend, Dan, would go to Dan’s house and invite girls to come with them. When they arrived at
the house, Dan and Brian would coerce Dan’s younger brother into playing games with the girls.
They would leave Dan’s brother with the girls while Brian and Dan hid in a closet. They would
tell Dan’s brother they were doing this to help him get practice in “being with girls.” In actuality,
they were using Dan’s brother as a diversion so they could go into the closet and have sex
without arousing suspicion. This relationship lasted for several years and was very complex. The
complexity of the relationship came as Brian and Dan left the neighborhood. Brian stated when
they were at school together; he would ignore Dan or even make fun of him. This was in part
because Dan was not as smart or as popular as he was. He felt that if he befriended Dan at school
he would cast suspicion on himself about his sexuality. He described Dan as being one of the
“typical project kids,” the ones who “didn’t study” or try to excel in school. Additionally, Dan
was “flamboyant” in his mannerisms and this was not acceptable behavior at their
predominately-Black high school. As a result, Brian would taunt and tease Dan with his
classmates at school. However, when they got to their neighborhood he would defend Dan. He
stated, “I had to defend (Dan). . . in my own way of justifying why I ignored Dan in certain, you
know, instances, I was sticking up for him in others.” Brian felt by defending Dan when they
were in the neighborhood, he could justify teasing him when they were at school. He stated part
of his rationale for this was that at school Dan had teachers and other administrators who could
defend him. However, in the neighborhood, he was Dan’s only defense. He also stated he fostered the symbiotic relationship because he knew as long as Dan needed him for protection; he did not have to worry about Dan leaving him. However, if Dan ever learned to defend himself or found someone else to defend him, Brian could be left alone or even more frightening – Dan might reveal his secret and he could not allow this. Brian felt very torn about his relationship with Dan for many years, but thought that in the end he had done what he needed to do to survive within his environment.

Both men thought in their relationships with their coworkers, their sexuality was not an issue. Brian stated, “In the workplace, I’m not out.” Likewise, Drew was not out at work. While Brian’s rationale for not revealing his sexuality in the workplace was centered, more on being perceived for his ability to do his job by his superiors and coworkers, Drew’s reasoning was very different. He felt that perhaps if he taught at a “predominately White” institution of higher learning, he might be more comfortable in revealing his sexuality. It should also be noted his concern for revealing his sexuality was primarily focused on the men, not the women. Drew stated, “I think about it more so that the males at the school don’t see me as being an effective role model if they knew I was gay.” He recounted a story summarizing his trepidation about revealing his sexuality. He stated the president of his college interviewed him and another colleague for his current position. During the interview, the university president stated although both were great candidates for the position, he chose them specifically because they could “serve as role models” for the Black male students on campus. Drew stated this conversation had a profound effect on him and as a result he did not want to do anything that might sully the students’, especially the Black male students,’ view of him.
Fighting. Fighting was a strategy both men used to maintain their relationships with their peers. Brian felt he had to fight to survive but also to maintain the respect he had earned from his peers. “I fought all the time because of the fact that I went to a private school and they thought I was soft. And so I had to prove myself.” However, he soon discovered the respect he earned was short lived and he would have to fight to maintain respect. “And I would fight and I would prove myself. In addition, they would leave me alone for a couple of months and then there would be somebody new who had to step up to prove himself or herself. And then I would fight.” The fights, however, were rarely with people who knew him. The fights he had were with people new to the neighborhood wanting to use him as a means of proving themselves. “. . .Once I fought one kid, they would leave me alone until a new kid would come in and I would have to fight him to prove myself. And they would leave me alone. . .” The fighting continued through high school and became part of his existence. Fighting was not simply done out of aggression or rage for Brian, it was a survival tactic he cultivated so he could not only survive at school but in his neighborhood as well.

Drew fought as a means of protection in school; however, he did not feel the same pressure to fight as Brian. This was in part because he grew up in the same school system with the same peers throughout his academic career. Conversely, Brian was integrated into a new school in ninth grade and came from a private school making him very different from his academic and social peers. As a result, Brian felt forced to prove himself repeatedly to gain the acceptance Drew already had because Drew had been part of the same peer group since elementary school. Did none of the fights come from other kids seeing them as gay?
Academic Experiences

Another experience both men shared was their academic experience. Both Drew and Brian were identified as gifted by their respective school districts. As a result, both men were placed in classes with White students. Drew’s experience was different from Brian’s experience in one important way: Drew went to a public school during his primary years while Brian attended a private school. The difference in their academic experience was primarily based on this one factor. Drew’s academic experience was in a public school setting so there was a mixture of students in his school, students from different ethnic and socio-economic groups. Brian noted he was only one of four ethnic minority students in his school, including his sister. He and his sister were constantly reminded of their differences simply by going to class every day.

Brian and his sister were part of a lower socio economic group than his classmates and so he felt he had something to prove to them. He stated, “And our economic background was totally different from theirs. We grew up in Section 8 housing so we were treated the same at the school, but once they realized where we lived, it was totally different.” He felt his economic status determined how his classmates treated him. In addition, he felt his academic success could help him not to have to focus on other issues in his life. Brian thought his community would not accept his sexuality and his mother would only be proud of him if she did not know he was gay. He stated, “It was definitely frowned upon in the black community to be gay.” Brian felt revealing his sexuality to his mother was not an option and so to be academically successful was one way to compensate for his sexuality. He stated “. . . if I excelled in one area, be it sports or academics, she would be proud of me and it would overshadow everything else that had happened to me in my life or the way I was feeling my life.” He wanted his mother’s approval no
matter what the cost and felt the only way to do this was to ignore his sexuality and concentrate on his academics. “I felt that if I had let her down in this and it also being that I felt that maybe I was a little different in other ways, that it would be a double disappointment for her. . .”

Both men were also successful academically but neither felt their ethnicity played a part in their success. Both men realized they had excelled in their academic lives but did not feel they had been given any advantages or suffered any disadvantages due to being Black. Brian went to a private, predominately White school until he went to high school. In his primary school, he thought his ethnicity did not help or hurt his academic performance. Furthermore, in high school he felt his performance was not affected because he went to a predominately-Black high school. “High school was totally different because I went to an all Black school. . .” Likewise, Drew felt he was not affected by his ethnicity because he went to schools that were mixed in terms of ethnicity and he never had to deal with issues like racism at school. He thought his determination was his most important characteristic and played a part in his success. “I think that I really am maybe crazily stubborn and disciplined enough to have stuck with a lot of things when a lot of people would have given up.” Both Brian and Drew were adamant their academic success was a result of hard work and not favoritism based on ethnicity.

In terms of their sexuality, Drew and Brian felt it had no part in their academic success. Again, Drew thought his determination was primarily responsible for his success. He stated, “I think it’s persistence, I really do. I think persistence and discipline because I’ve always been really disciplined.” He was very afraid someone at his university would discover his sexuality and as a result has not disclosed his sexuality to his colleagues or superiors, and Drew would never leave any doubt his success was due to his talent and not to favoritism based on his sexuality. Brian, while not attributing any of his success to his sexuality still felt he was
sometimes influenced by it. He stated he had not taken advantage of business opportunities and even promotions because of relationships with men. Brian recounted a story in which he was offered a promotion and because of his relationship with his then partner, he decided not to take the promotion. Brian stated, “I think that I allow myself to fall victim to it sometimes”.

The findings confirmed that ethnicity played a role in the academic development of the study participants, as did being academically gifted. Furthermore, the findings of the study indicate that the sexuality of both men affected their level of academic achievement – whether directly or indirectly. Brian strove to be academically successful to make his mother proud so that she would not be as disappointed in him if he ever revealed his sexuality to her. Drew felt that his academic success was not affected by his sexuality; however, he used his academic prowess to get closer to other men to explore intimate relationships. Finally, the findings of the study indicate an interaction between ethnicity, sexuality and giftedness that can influence the level of achievement of gifted gay African American men.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Scholarly discussion surrounding African American men and intellectualism rarely address issues of sexuality as it relates to their academic success, nor do discussions of that kind typically incorporate matters related to giftedness or ethnicity. Therefore, this study investigated the experiences of gay African American men as related to their giftedness, sexuality and ethnicity. Two African American men, ages 38 and 40, participated in the study. The result was the identification of four major categories: (1) Relationships, (2) Perceptions, (3) Life Issues and (4) Academic Experiences. Each category is presented along with a discussion of the findings and how each finding relates to previous research related to the giftedness, sexuality and ethnicity of African American males. Limitations of the study are also discussed as well as implications for further research. Three research questions guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of gifted gay African American men about their K-12 experiences that influenced their level of academic achievement?
2. Do these gifted gay African American men perceive that there was a connection between their ethnicity, sexuality and level of academic achievement?
3. Does there appear to be a connection of which they do not seem aware, but which they indicate in their interviews?

These questions informed the study of gay African American men who are gifted in terms of their perceptions of their levels of success.
Relationships

The individuals in the study had relationships with people in their lives that either facilitated or hindered their academic development. These relationships included family members, primarily their mothers, as well as friends and classmates. Each participant noted that in terms of their most important family relationships, their relationships with their mothers were the most influential. Bonner (2003) noted “family influence and support” might be one of the “most critical elements in the translation of ability and talent into achievement among gifted individuals.” The findings of the study point to the family relationship as the most important relationship that influenced academic success. Both participants noted that their mothers were the reasons that they tried to be academically successful at school. The participants felt that their relationships with their mothers were important to the point that they based their own ideas of academic success on their mothers’ perceptions of their success. Brian stated that, “if I excelled in one area, be it sports or academics, she would be proud of me and it would overshadow everything else that had happened to me in my life or the way I was feeling ___ my life.” Brian felt that his success was dependent on his mother’s perception of his success. As gifted students, both participants had mothers who were supportive of their academic development; however, neither indicated if their mothers were gifted.

Peer relationships were also important to both participants. The findings of the study pointed to the fact that these relationships supported the academic development of the participants in ways such as mentoring; however the competition that each individual felt with his classmates was what they felt motivated them the most to become academically successful. Brian went to a predominantly White primary school and as a result he stated that he felt that he had to “prove something” to the other students. The other students came from backgrounds that
are more affluent and had opportunities that he did not have, however, Brian knew that if nothing else, he was as smart as they were. “She may have had more money than me, but I was smarter than her, you know.” Drew however did not feel he had to prove anything to his peers in the same way that Brian did. He mentioned one classmate with whom he was competitive, however, he stated that they are now friends and did not mention any type of competition with his other classmates.

Perceptions

They stated that the perceptions of those around them, outside of family members, did not influence their academic development. However, their own self-perceptions seemed to be the most influential in their academic success followed by the perceptions of their family members, for example, both Brian and Drew discussed that they felt smarter than their peers. Brian stated that, “I was smart and I was athletic.” Furthermore, he stated that although he was economically disadvantaged, he was academically gifted. Brian also stated that he did not feel as athletically gifted as his peers but that he knew he was smarter. “I’m the smartest in my neighborhood. So, you know, you can catch a ball, but I’ll be the guy who owns your team, that’s what separated it.”

Perceptions of family members were important to both participants – especially the perceptions of their mothers; however, other family members played a role as well. Brian stated that he knew his sister was aware of his sexuality and at times, she would tease him about it. “she (SISTER) was realizing that something was different about me. So, you know, when we would have arguments she would throw up the punk factor. You know, you faggot, you little punk.” Brian was upset by his sister’s remarks but felt that those types of remarks galvanized him to be
a better person. Drew was teased by his peers as well and felt that teasing was a motivating factor in terms of his success.

Life Issues

Both men discussed their life issues as having influenced their academic success. For example, both men had strained or non-existent relationships with their fathers during their childhoods. While the lack of a father figure could be viewed as a relationship issue, further probing reveals that it was a life issue. Both men felt that the lack of a relationship with their fathers made their lives difficult and served as motivation for them to succeed – almost as if they felt that they would had to prove their self worth to themselves.

Brian stated that he did not want to become like the other men that his mother and grandmother had told him about during his childhood. He also stated that, “My father was not there. I did not grow up knowing my father.” The lack of a father figure in his life and not wanting to be like the other people in his neighborhood galvanized Brian to work harder to become successful. Brian stated, “I definitely didn’t want to be a disappointment to her (his mother).” Brian felt as though he might not have been gay had he had a father figure in his life but was not sure if that would have been the case. “I think though if there was a positive male role model, if I wasn’t exposed to sex with men at an early age, I don’t know if it would be the same type of (gay) relationship that I have now. I probably would have done like many men and gotten married because it is the correct thing to do. It’s what my father had done and what my brother had done. . .this guy accepted me and liked me and it felt good to have somebody like more for change that was like myself. And I felt comfortable around him and so, therefore, now I am going to be gay.”
Drew also did not have a relationship with his father, which he felt influenced his level of success and he resented this lack of parental involvement. He felt that his stepfather was an adequate provider, however he longed for a relationship with his biological father. “I was angry at my biological father because he wasn’t there.” Drew recalled an incident when his stepfather was talking to his half brother and told him that they looked alike because they were related. Drew stated that his father looked at him when he said it and he realized that he was different from both of them. He also felt that his stepfather did not understand his love of learning, however, his biological father, he later learned, was an academic. “And then once I met my biological father I do think some things are in the genes cause I didn’t meet him until I was in my 20s. And he does the same thing (reads volumes of books). So, I think it was partially genetic.”

Academic Experiences

Both participants felt that they had good academic experiences although quite different. Neither participant felt that their academic success was affected by their sexuality or ethnicity. Brian went to a private school while Drew attended a public school.

Brian was cast as the outsider in his school setting – he was typically the chameleon in school. During his primary school experience, he was in a private school setting in which most of his peers had more economic resources, which made him a novelty. During high school, he was a novelty for a different reason – his giftedness. Brian stated that he felt that his success was purely based on his gifts and cunning but not his ethnicity or sexuality; for example, in recounting his high school experience he stated that he became the jokester in most of his classes although he still did his work so that he could succeed academically. He stated that his teachers called his mother to report on his behavior. His teachers would say, “He has great grades, he just won’t
shut up. He talks too much. He talks constantly in class and we can’t get him to behave.” Brian cultivated his skill so that he could fit in with his peers.

Drew’s academic experience was different because he was in a public school with different types of students, however he again did not feel his sexuality or ethnicity influenced his academic success. He stated that his determination in addition to his giftedness helped influence his academic success. “I think it’s persistence, I really do. I think persistence and discipline because I’ve always been really disciplined.”

Did being African American affect Their Level of Success?

Brian and Drew felt that their ethnicity did not have a direct positive or negative effect on their level of academic success in terms of how they were treated by teachers and peers. They did feel that their ethnicity was a motivating factor in their academic success – not in terms of getting preferential treatment, but because they wanted to be better than their White counterparts. For example, Drew noted that he wanted to succeed in part because he went to a primarily White private school. He felt that he had to prove himself to his peers. He would compare himself to the other students in his class. He would think to himself, “how well I was doing compared to the other students in my class, especially the White kids who were coming from affluent backgrounds. . .” and use this as a measurement of his own level of academic success.

Brian also felt that he also had to prove himself to his African American peers in his neighborhood and in high school. He would often get into fights with his African American peers because they felt that he was not “Black enough”. He stated, “I was one of the ‘white kids,’ I acted white, I wasn’t Black enough for them. . .you know, I didn’t hang out with them, I went home and studied.” He felt that he was perceived as being less than African American and as a result, he would often get into fights in his neighborhood to prove himself to his peers.
This type of behavior while gaining Brian respect within his neighborhood, made him feel as though he had to constantly prove himself whether it was necessary or not. Moreover, he found himself leading a double life in which he wanted to be a good student, but had to “wear the mask” in which he would fight or misbehave to be a part of what he felt should be his social group.

Drew did not experience this type of interaction with his peers because he went to a very homogenous school in which most of the students were from similar economic backgrounds. He did feel pressure to be a “real man”, however this was more from his family than his peers. Drew participated in sports and other school activities in which he was respected for his academic prowess; however, he felt that he was a “real” or heterosexual man to his family, especially his mother.

The participants noted that they had been warned by family members, teachers and friends that they would always have to be “twice as good” as White people in order to be successful in their academic lives. Drew stated he had teachers that told him that he should be aware of the perceptions of White people because they would always look at him differently than they would another White person. He recalled a story in which a White teacher became upset at him and his primarily African American classmates for misbehaving in class. His teacher told him, “People will make judgments about your race and ethnicity based on your name, even before they see you. . .you are all born with strikes against you and you all don’t even know it.” He said that this conversation had a profound effect on him and after that; he did not misbehave in her class. His Black teachers who taught him “you have to be ten times better than White people” reinforced this idea. Drew’s grandmother also told him “you weren’t supposed to trust
White people”. All of this combined made him feel as though he needed to compete with White people and be better than them in order to be academically successful.

Did being a Gay Man affect Their Level of Academic Success?

Both men felt that had to disprove any notion that because they were both gifted they could not also be “Black men”. When using the term “Black men”, they referenced their own sexuality. Both Brian and Drew wrestled with the idea of being African American men and being gay while maintaining a high level of academic success. Neither man felt that his sexuality played a role in his level of academic success, however, again this factor served as a peripheral factor in their level of success. They did not strive to be successful because they were gay – they wanted to be successful, but realized that being gay could not be part of the formula to garner them their success. Both men used violence as a strategy to mask their academic success. Brian noted, “When I would go home and I would study and then I would come outside, you know, oh, you think you are better than everybody, you will end up an old punk anyhow. Okay, those were fighting words because I had to prove that I wasn’t a punk, I wasn’t soft. So, I had to fight.” He would constantly fight to show his peers, both boys and girls, that he was not gay. While doing this he would still maintain his grades and romantic relationships with both a male and female peer. He noted, “I started in eighth grade with a male partner on a regular basis and then female partners”. This sexual behavior was part of his strategy to be academically successful as well as maintain his sexual gratification with men while not appearing to be gay. Brian had a long-term relationship with his male partner during all of his high school years. He would justify this hidden liaison by defending Dan to their neighborhood peers when others would mistreat Dan. “I had to defend... in my own way of justifying why I ignored Dan in certain, you know, instances,
I was sticking up for him in others.” Brian felt that having a hidden sexual relationship with Dan was fine as long as it did not affect his social or academic standing.

Drew did not discuss his sexual relationships with other men during his school years in detail, however was very open about his current relationships. He felt that although he had attained academic and professional success, he still could not reveal his sexuality to his colleagues or students. He felt that this would somehow compromise his ability to do his job and mentor African American male students. He stated that the reason for this was “internalized homophobia, maybe that’s it. I thought, maybe it’s a combination of that and fear.” Brian, in like fashion, is not open with his sexuality at work. He felt that he could not be open about his sexuality. He stated, “I know people in the community, in the gay community, but as far as straight folks are concerned, I’m not gay.” Both men felt that their sexuality was private and could not be part of their workplace persona.

Recommendations

The theory that there is a connection between ethnicity and giftedness made by several researchers including Grantham (1998) are asserted by data from the study. It was indicated by the responses from the participants that they felt a strong connection between their ethnicity and giftedness. Seemingly, both Brian and Drew felt that because they are gifted African American men that they had to prove themselves to their peers – especially their African American male counterparts. Both men recounted stories of fights in which they were singled out because they were perceived as different because of their gifts and talents. Brian mentioned that he constantly fought to prove that he was just like everyone else. He stated, “They thought I was soft. And so I had to prove myself.” He thought that fighting was the only way that he could prove he was just as Black and as much as a man as his peers. Drew stated that he fought as well to prove his
manhood. Furthermore, while neither man felt that, their ethnicity was a contributing factor to their success; both indicated that they felt they had to prove that they were smarter than their White peers were – therefore making their ethnicity indirectly a motivating factor towards their academic achievement.

Psychological Constructivism is the way in which people view themselves (Phillips, 1997). Both participants discussed that during their childhood and adolescent years they did not see themselves as gay. They identified themselves as smart but did not want to be identified as gay. Both men felt that it would have been to their detriment to be identified as gay and avoided it at all costs. This led to one of the strategies that Brian stated was effective during his high school years – bullying. Cross (2001) noted that gifted students were often the victims of bullying however, in Brian’s case, he was the bully. He became a bully in an effort to mask his sexuality. He would tease the very classmate that he was sleeping with so that his friends would not discover his sexuality. Brian stated, “I ignored Dan in certain, you know, instances, I was sticking up for him in others.” He continued this behavior because he knew that his sexual behavior with Dan was considered unacceptable in the African American community. Brian stated, “it was definitely frowned upon in the Black community to be gay.” Drew who also felt that his community would not accept being a gay African American man echoed this perception. Furthermore, both James Baldwin and Alvin Ailey both exhibited negative behaviors that helped them cope with the realization of their sexuality and giftedness. James Baldwin chose to escape dealing with his issues by going to an environment more accepting of his differences. He went to Europe to make his life (Campbell, 1991). However, Alvin Ailey chose another route. He began to use illegal drugs which eventually led to his death (Dunning, 1996).
The literature shows that there may be support systems in place for African American men - as an African American male, at least one of your parents would be African American as well. However, no one is guaranteed to have a gifted or gay parent. As a result, the support structure for gifted gay African American men may be small or nonexistent. This leads to the concept of Social Negotiation. I hypothesized that once the communities of these gifted gay African American men saw them as valuable then they could begin to develop their identities without fear to become more academically successful. The first step in determining that their experiences are valuable is that the individuals who have these stories must share them. Brian spoke of trying to hide his sexuality from both family and friends using strategies such as bullying and fighting to appear to be heterosexual. Even now, he is closeted at work and does not openly discuss his sexuality with family and friends. Drew has come out to his family but does not see the value in being open about his sexuality at work. Both participants spoke of shame about their sexuality and as a result, since they did not see their experiences as worthy of sharing with their communities, the community cannot determine their worth.

It is clear from the data that gifted gay African American men face issues concerning their sexuality that influence their level of academic success. However, the results of the study were not what were expected. The expectation was that the participants would reveal that they had been victimized by a system of prejudice and hatred that had caused them to feel that they could not be openly gay, African American and academically successful. In reality, the data indicate that the system of prejudice and hatred was in part self-inflicted and in part a function of the lack of acceptance by their communities for their sexuality. The opportunity to allow others including family members and friends to accept them for who they were was dismissed in favor of “saving face” and maintaining social status and thus family members and friends never had an
opportunity to extend this acceptance to them. This would indicate that as adolescents, gifted gay African American men are not unlike other adolescents who desire acceptance and understanding from peers and family members however are unique in that they feel a need to hide their sexuality, which is not common to their heterosexual peers who can openly engage in dating rituals. The participants likened this to students who have an illness or who are economically disadvantaged as compared to their peers - the difference being however that students who have illnesses or who are economically disadvantaged have role models to show them that it is possible to overcome these circumstances. Individuals such as Dr. Ben Carson who was economically disadvantaged or Lance Armstrong who had a life threatening illness are glorified in our society. However, few openly gay African American men are seen as role models. Gifted gay African American men still lack such role models. I have concluded that one of the ways to help these individuals feel that they can be open and honest about their sexuality is to show them examples of others who have done so and are still considered “strong Black men.” Furthermore, family and peer acceptance is key in helping this self-acceptance to take place. Both participants indicated that part of their lack of self-acceptance was the ridicule and lack of understanding of family members and peers. Therefore, both men developed strategies to compensate for this lack of acceptance – fighting and misbehaving. This is in fact very similar to strategies that gifted underachievers adopt to ensure that their peers are unaware of their giftedness, however, for gifted gay African American men, this also includes family members (Neihart, 2005). The rationale for gifted underachievers is that they can maintain social acceptance and everyone else’s low expectations of them.

The data indicate that there are many ways in which education professionals can work to help this population. The participants both discuss their lack of support at school for their
academic gifts and talents. However, more importantly, both men discussed their feeling that
ey could not be themselves – i.e., disclose their sexuality to their peers. This is important
because although both men were academically successful, they engaged in behaviors that were
destructive, fighting and bullying, to mask their sexuality. It can be inferred that if the men felt
that they could be open about their sexuality, they would not have engaged in these behaviors.
Brian stated that he constantly felt that he needed to prove himself. Furthermore, both men
indicated in their interviews that they did not feel that they had parental support to be open about
their sexuality at home or at school. Drew recounted a story in which his mother felt that she
would prefer that he be straight and pretend to like women than be open about his sexuality.

There are several practices that educational institutions and teacher training programs
could implement to help students – specifically gifted gay African American men feel accepted
in school environments. First, teacher training programs must begin to teach students about
diversity in more than superficial ways. For example, programs must begin to include sexuality
as a part of diversity training. Just as ethnicity has become part of the discourse surrounding
diversity in training programs, there must be inclusion of issues surrounding sexuality. Programs
such as those that emphasize “safe” places for students, can begin to help students with minority
sexual identifications begin to feel that they are safe at school. Also, these programs must
introduce to new teachers ways that they can effectively and seamlessly initiate conversations
with students about topics such as sexuality as most students will not be comfortable discussing
this topic. In terms of gifted gay African American men, this will be especially important. Both
Brian and Drew were uncomfortable with their sexuality and stated that they did not feel that
they could discuss it with anyone.
Next community resources must be put in place to help families and friends of gifted gay African American men support the emotional and social development of this population. Community resources can include support groups and counseling for gay youth. However, the resources should not be limited to those just for the youth – resources should also be in place for those individuals who are charged with supporting them. For example, parents must be educated about the issues facing their children so that they can provide appropriate support. This education should also include ways in which parents and other adults can learn to accept the sexual identification of these populations without internalizing this identification. By this, I mean instead of parents and other adults being concerned about how a teen’s sexual identification as gay will reflect on them, they must learn how to separate themselves from this identification so that they can support the teen. Otherwise, these individuals will not be successful in helping gay youth to deal with the social and emotional issues that they are facing.

Community resources must also include advocacy for gifted gay African American young men. The conversation surrounding this population must include heterosexual men and women. The discussion will be heard differently when the listeners can relate to the person who is delivering the message. The same phenomenon that was discovered during the Civil Rights Movement is true of that to help gifted gay African American men. Individuals such as former Attorney General Robert Kennedy and other prominent Caucasian men and women were instrumental in helping African Americans achieve legal equality. In like fashion, as the discussion to help gifted gay African American youth begins, it will be necessary to have other types of people to provide validity and opportunity for the conversation to be heard by those on the outside of the conversation.
The following are recommendations for academic as well as community professionals.

Academic:

Bibliotherapy – Provide gifted gay African American boys with examples of different types of successful men with similar and dissimilar sexual orientations.

- E. Lynn Harris books – Invisible Life
- Works of James Baldwin – Go Tell It on the Mountain
- James Earl Hardy books – B. Boy Blues
- Gifted Hands – Dr. Ben Carson
- Kaffir Boy – Mark Mathabane

Creativity – Allowing gifted gay African American boys to express their emotions in positive ways.

- Journaling
- Art
- Music

Teacher Training – Train new teachers how to have conversations about sexuality with their students.

- Safe Space Training

Community: Support within the community so that gifted gay African American men will feel secure in expressing their sexuality.

- Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – support meetings
- Human Rights Campaign – resource to help gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals fight for legal rights.
• Starting support groups within the community where gay students can meet and discuss issues that they face.

Gifted gay African American men seemingly want to be academically successful and want others to maintain high expectations for them, but want to have more than anything social acceptance from family and peers. Fighting, misbehaving in class and denial of their sexuality allows them to do so. Therefore, again these men are not unlike other disenfranchised groups that require special interventions to help them gain self and social acceptance. If the goal should be self-actualization for all people to maximize their potential, and as a part of that self-acceptance, it is imperative that this population have role models and strategies to help them attain this level of existence.
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