

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN DOCTORAL STUDENTS AT  
A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION: IMPACT AND INFLUENCE ON  
RETENTION IN DEGREE PROGRAMS

by

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(Under the Direction of Rosemary Phelps)

ABSTRACT

There are many facets that make up a doctoral student's life such as work, social, and family, and it is important to investigate their interactions and dynamics. The purpose of this study is to examine the personal experiences of African American doctoral students pursuing doctoral degrees at predominantly White institutions. Using a Grounded theory methodology as influenced by Critical Race Theory framework, I explored and conceptualized the multiple roles that 15 African American doctoral students must negotiate to successfully complete their programs. The themes that emerged from the data were space/ community, mentorship and advisor relationships, Being Other, Growth and Wellness.

INDEX WORDS: Doctoral Programs, Black, African American, Education,  
Predominantly White Institutions

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To Mr. and Mrs. Robert and Mireille Sainvil

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTIONS**

Doctoral students' roles and expectations have been studied for many years, primarily in terms of focusing on retention rates and characteristics that could assist with the completion of their degrees (e.g., Di Pierro, 2012; Holley & Caldwell, 2012). Despite this attention, few studies focus on the unique self, family, or societal expectations that are placed on African American doctoral students. As historically high numbers of African Americans are pursuing doctoral degrees, (The Solid Progress of African Americans in Degree Attainments, 2006), university faculty administrators must develop a better understanding of factors that affect the progress of African American doctoral students. Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) noted that in 2007 approximately 11.5% of doctoral students were African American. However, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics in 2010, of 106,494 doctoral graduates in America, fewer than 7.4% of the graduates were African American. A discrepancy exists between the number of African American students who enter doctoral programs and those that persist to graduation.

Educational institutions should evaluate factors that influence the retention rates of African American doctoral students. Through further exploration of the factors that influence retention, it is imperative that research is done to understand what types of factors impact this population. The identification of African Americans students' life experiences in their respective programs can provide scholars a better understanding of the factors that might be faced by this population and ways in which to increase retention rates among African American doctoral students. The study of African American doctoral student is important because experiences of

African American graduate students are unquestionably different than those of their White counterparts. Historically, African Americans in general have been neglected, invisible, underrepresented, and even shunned in higher education (Kennebrew, 2002).

### **Statement of the Problem**

African Americans in higher education, specifically those who are in doctoral programs, have a different experience than their white counterparts due to racial inequalities, discrimination, and lack of support within departments (Kennebrew, 2002; Nettles, 1990). Some scholars have noted that not only can higher education be discriminating, but it can be “oppressive and dehumanizing” (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011, p. 93). Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) postulated that although doctoral programs are becoming more diverse as a whole, the ‘system’ remains the same in terms of the overall socialization process to doctoral programs. This is seen in the “lack of diverse epistemological perspectives in the curriculum” (p. 95) and a lack of research that is geared toward students of color. While having to navigate through the terrain of learning new norms, customs, and values of their particular discipline at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), African American students have to learn to cope with additional barriers as noted above (Riley, 2011).

Kennebrew (2002) formulated that although African American doctoral students face these barriers, a host of other barriers and challenges that influence their retention rates, such as the ability to stabilize and maintain financial support, difficulty in identifying social networks during their programs, finding emotional support within as well as outside of their programs, and dealing with academic issues that may arise. Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) found that in order to succeed, African American doctoral students must navigate the culture “outside the institution...within the institution... and within their individual program” (p. 94). The factors

noted above can often cause stress and anxiety that can affect the quality of academic work from students as well as create problems with academic standing (Kennebrew, 2002). Some studies have indicated that African American graduate students feel lonely within their own programs, as they are sometimes treated as outsider or even worse an “unwelcomed guest” (p. 13), which when added to their stressors can account for high attrition rates (Kennebrew, 2002). These stressors can significantly influence doctoral students especially if they feel that they lack the support of their peers or faculty members.

### **Support Factors**

Factors that act as buffers for egregious issues, such as neglect and discrimination in doctoral programs, include healthy relationships within a department, more specifically mentor-protégé relationships. According to several scholars, the mentor-protégé relationship is essential to the success of African American students in completing their doctoral degrees (Felder, 2010; Green, 2008; Kador & Lewis, 2007). An effective mentor guides students through the political, emotional, and practical challenges of a doctoral program. An understanding of the political and practical nuances in a program can determine whether graduate students realize success in their programs. Other buffers include academic support services, family support, and on and off campus support networks. The strength and consistency of these buffers are important to graduate students’ success and progress in their programs. Some examples of on-campus support networks include culturally specific groups on campus; psychological services; career services; and student affairs professionals, faculty and staff. Off-campus support networks include churches, religious groups and community organizations. Religion and spirituality tend to be a strong foundational component for people from the African diaspora. Thus, African American

students often incorporate spirituality to assist them through their journey through graduate school.

Graduate students deal with many barriers during their years as doctoral students, yet, they also have mechanisms in place to provide support. In order to support the needs of African American students at PWIs, institutions of higher education should move toward a multiculturally aware campus environment. From a counseling psychology perspective, educational institutions, more specifically doctoral programs, must not only understand what influences doctoral students' success and perseverance but also recognize the unique experience and added layer of complexities of African American graduate students (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009). Johnson-Bailey et al. (2009) encourages the further implore universities to include support for Black students formally on campus, an implementation and education of professors on the inclusion of Black literature in the classroom as well as set in place a formal system of accountability for the university systems to have evaluations on their progress on such constructs.

As the field of psychology moves into an era of understanding the multicultural implications that influence people's everyday lives, more specifically through research, the voices and experiences of marginalized people of color have recently been recognized and explored in order to better understand how the implementation of traditional policies and curriculum influence the lived experience of marginalized populations in these environments (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009). As this research area increases in breath, the development of this area will provide more information on how to create curricula that both acknowledges, celebrates, and begins to understand the historical implications that have influenced the perspectives and daily experiences of African American doctoral students, which



has often been ignored or even degraded. More scholars need to study success factors of African American doctoral students and identify factors that have helped African American students succeed in their programs. This information could provide more concrete data for universities to improve retention rates for African American doctoral students.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study is an extension of a qualitative pilot study—Self-expectations of African American Doctoral Students at a Predominantly White Institution. In this pilot study, I found that African American students felt a lack of belonging in their academic programs, that the information in their classes were not geared to their experience, and that the theories that they were learning were predominantly Eurocentric. These participants expressed that this lack of epistemology acknowledging the African American experience as well as the lack of awareness of multiculturalism amongst teachers and students often made their doctoral experience lonely. Participants also reported feeling little support from faculty, and notably relied on positive support from their families and their spirituality as coping mechanisms. Finally, they indicated that they often struggled to find a work-life balance in which they could be sociable and connected to family and friends while managing the demands of a doctoral program. This study expands on the pilot study and takes an in-depth look at the impact of various life experiences of African American doctoral students (i.e. stressors or buffers) and how these experiences impact African American student retention in doctoral programs.

Extant literature falls short of addressing African American family expectations, self-expectations and societal expectations and their roles in the lives of doctoral students. However, some literature is focused on African American undergraduate students' stressors, including retention and adjustment to college (Kennebrew, 2002; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith,

2004). Researchers have yet to acknowledge the ongoing stressful lives of African American students post undergraduate programs and the extra stressors that have to be faced in doctoral programs. Although common themes exist across African American undergraduate and graduate students' experiences at PWIs in terms of special challenges and lived experiences, it is necessary to acknowledge and conduct research that looks to understand the increased demand on African American doctoral students (Kennebrew, 2002). Literature maintains that both groups (undergraduates and graduates) face racial discrimination, racial invisibility, and racial insensitivity at PWIs. Given the unique challenges and the rigor of doctoral study, little research has been done on the psychological well-being, social support and retention of African American graduate students. This study addresses the literature gap in this field and identifies how expectations and responsibilities impact African American doctoral students in order to further the knowledge sources of African American doctoral students' common reasons for their attrition.

As previously discussed, differences clearly exist between the lived experiences of undergraduate and graduate students. Some aspects of life roles that tend to differ between undergraduate and graduate students include increase in maturity, responsibilities and expectations due to developmental and social life stages. The life roles of a doctoral student may be more complex than that of an undergraduate due to life experiences and possible relationship/marriage or added responsibilities of caring for children. These differences are not present for each African American doctoral student; however, as people mature and enter graduate school, they tend to have more responsibilities than traditional aged undergraduate students.

In this model of having increased maturity and responsibilities, graduate students also face the increased pressure of greater expectations. These expectations can stem from the self, family, and university faculty. As students enter doctoral programs, there is typically a clearer, more definitive view of their own career paths and goals. Self-expectations in a doctoral program may be hard to manage due to the rigor of the work and the demands of the diverse roles that graduate students play in their family and community. A focus on the lives of African American doctoral students is important because of the collectivistic nature of families and communities. These personal associations, may cause added pressures and expectations for African American students that may not be as salient for their White counterparts. Merriweather Hunn (2008) noted that researchers, such as Tinto (1993) and Guiffrida (2006), who have studied the attrition rates of African American graduate students, expressed that collectivism and connectivity to one's home environment/community are very salient for African American graduate students. The concept of family constitutes an integral part of some graduate students' identity and can play a role in how students operate within and outside the university. An acknowledgement of the background and importance of collectivistic societies is important to an understanding of how these additional factors influence the mindset of African American students. Guiffrida (2006) indicated that for members from collectivistic communities' motivational factors for completing a doctoral degree is less about money and success, and more about cultural motivation orientations and giving back to family and community.

### **Collectivism and Expectations of African American Families**

African American families and communities are bonded by collectivism. The famous African proverb "I am because we are" was used by Carson (2009) to describe the African American family and community. This African proverb speaks of more than just the African

American family but the community including church, social support groups, and social networks. As a community, African Americans typically want to help those in their immediate and extended circles to succeed financially, educationally, and psychologically. Carson defines collectivism as an “individual’s concern with the advancement of the group to which he or she belongs” (p. 327). Carson also posits that “collectivism helps ensure the survival of the tribe [or community]” that one belongs to and is characterized by a responsibility to others and protection of members from alienation or loneliness (p. 328). Collectivism in the African American community incorporates family, extended family, and fictive kin (those who are not related to the larger family yet are considered family members).

Peart-Newkirk (1994) found that for African American doctoral students’ family and (religious) community were important factors that helped them throughout school, which illustrates that family can be a buffer to one’s perseverance in graduate school. Although this concept of family as a buffer may be true, research is lacking on how family expectations or roles within a collectivistic society can influence the lives of African American doctoral students. Within Carson’s (2009) definition of collectivism, an individual can play the role of peacemaker, child, church member, and leader. It is important to develop an understanding of the full scope of the role that each African American students plays within his/her family. Family has been proven to be a buffer and supportive component for African American students; however, there’s the expectation of reciprocation of the same support system while still working through a student’s graduate journey.

### **Self-Expectations of African American Doctoral Students**

Due to many of the factors that doctoral students have to endure during their respective programs, Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero and Bowles (2009) and Peart-Newkirk (1994)

found that African American students often experienced withdrawal, self-doubt, and lowered self-esteem. Doctoral students, in general, experience a great deal of stress in their programs, but African American graduate students operate with greater levels of stress due to racial/cultural barriers as noted earlier (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). This level of stress can often influence how African American students regard themselves. Many students experience imposter syndrome (Pajares, 2001). The imposter syndrome, as defined by Kolligian and Sternberg (1991), is when high-achieving people or students have a sense of perceived fraudulence or phoniness despite their successes. Imposter syndrome can cause distress for doctoral students and cause immeasurable negative consequences on their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996).

This syndrome can be especially applicable to African American doctoral students due to the challenges of facing racial stereotypes and heavy self-expectations. The high levels of self-expectations may lead to the factor of self-doubt that Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero and Bowles (2009) discussed in their article. When students experience the imposter syndrome, they often feel that they have to prove themselves. African American students often feel as though they have a responsibility to prove themselves more than their white counterparts because they feel as if they are an “unwelcomed guest” (p. 13) in their own departments or universities (Kennebrew, 2008). Thus, African American doctoral students face not only internal pressures to be successful, but they also struggle against African American stereotypes that could ultimately lead to stereotype threat.

According to Claude Steele (1998), stereotype threat occurs when “one recognizes that a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs is applicable to oneself in a particular situation” (p. 680). Further, stereotype threat is defined as the “event of a negative stereotype

about a group to which one belongs becoming self-relevant, usually as plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having or for a situation one is in, that has relevance to one's self-definition" (Steele, 1997, p. 616). Kennebrew (2002) stated that stereotype threat causes African American students to "feel [as though] the[y] need to perform exceptionally better than Caucasian American students" (p. 34). Due to stereotype threat and the pressures and expectations that accompany the doctoral studies, a student may experience withdrawal, self-doubt, and reduced self-esteem as stated by Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2009).

### **Utilization of Grounded theory guided by Critical Race Theory Perspective**

Critical race theory (CRT) provides the theoretical framework for this grounded theory study. Using a grounded theory methodology prioritizes the perspective of the participants allowing themes to emerge from the data. Theorists have posed that "humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Thus, grounded theory is fit for this study because the researcher will be building the themes of this study from the voices of the participants.

Grounded theory being a rigorous methodology that is based upon and led by the data, allows the tenets of Critical Race Theory to emerge from the data, if they play a role in the experiences of the participants. CRT is known for its five tenets, which will be thoroughly discussed in Chapter 3, which are counter-storytelling, the stability of racism in America, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Through the CRT tenet of counter storytelling/counter-narratives, the researcher provides the participant with an opportunity to critically reflect on their experiences through a culturally

sensitive lens, which recognizes the voices of marginalized groups and allows the researcher to critically analyze their story to challenge privileged discourses (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). These tenets are expanded through a grounded theory perspective, which ensures that race is embedded in the entire process from interview to analysis and studies the intersectionality of race, gender, and class to explain various paradigms while also challenging traditional research models.

Grounded theory as a methodology has been adopted to further more social justice oriented theoretical orientations like CRT after several iterations and interpretations of the evolution of what grounded theory is (Charmaz, 2014). By using grounded theory through a lens of critical race lens, one can create substantiality for the themes that emerge based on an unbalanced due the nature of grounded theories ability to “broaden and sharpen the scope” of what is being studied (Charmaz, 2014, p. 326). Thus it allows researchers to use their own background knowledge of their theoretical orientation as well as perspective field of study to uncover different phenomena that may not be acknowledged in extant literature due to the lack of examination of various systemically and societally underserved and underrepresented populations, which will be further outlined and defined in the following chapters.

### **Definitions**

*African Americans* will be participants who self-identify accordingly, and identify as part of their racial identity.

*Retention* will be participants who self-identify as a current member of a doctoral program and are actively pursuing the completion of requirements for their standing in their program.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the retention and well-being of 15 African American doctoral students and produce a counter-narrative that illuminate the invisible yet dominant discourses that underpin doctoral education. More specifically, the research questions for this study are:

- 1) What are the protective factors associated with African American doctoral students' matriculation through completion in their degree program;
- 2) What barriers, if any, are experienced by African American doctoral students in their degree attainment processes; and
- 3) How have the lived experiences of African American doctoral students informed their ability to complete doctoral degrees at Predominantly White Institutions?



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While African American graduate students may not experience the same forms of overt racism and discrimination that their predecessors did in the 1970s, the effects of racism currently remain in universities/colleges. Felder and Barker (2013) noted that “within elite institutions... [there are] historical legacies of exclusion that cultivate alienating educational environments” (p. 2). Overt and covert forms of racism can have grave implications for the retention of students within academia and has an impact of minority stress of African American students in doctoral programs. Minority stress can be defined “as a relationship between minority and dominant values and resultant conflict with the social environment experienced by minority group members” (Denato, 2012, p. 13) For African American scholars “minority stress refers to the unique stresses experienced by minority students that interfere with their college adjustment and integration into the university community”, this can have a negative impact on desire to continue, feelings of having to be a representative of one’s race, and it causes undue stress to doctoral students in academia (Wei, Ku, & Liao, 2011, p. 195).

African American doctoral students who attend Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) experience a host of feelings including “isolation, loneliness, discrimination and indifference” (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine & Bowles, 2009, p. 181) from peers, faculty, and administrators (Peart-Newkirk, 1994). These experiences can cause students to be uncomfortable and feel underappreciated within their academic space because their values and cultures may not be celebrated or accepted within many PWI doctoral programs. Peart-Newkirk (1994) stated that Black students are excluded from academic networks by both faculty and peers; these networks,

according to DeFour (1986) (as cited in Peart-Newkirk, 1994), are a major component that can help facilitate educational development. Exclusion from these groups creates a great disadvantage for African American doctoral students, who often must learn how to negotiate academic terrain independently or through the help of an ally or former student. Additionally, Peart-Newkirk (1994) identified that without these networks African American doctoral students must navigate the academic terrain through degree completion with little information or support.

According to Jairam and Khal (2012), doctoral students are “more stressed than the general public due to the rigor of their doctoral programs” and “solidification of their professional identity and learning of the cultural norms of their departments” (p. 312). Doctoral students have also reported increased “relative poverty, anxiety, sleeplessness, academic demands, fear of failure, examinations and time restraints... while having to maneuver through the socialization process within their discipline and university” (p. 312). El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh and Bufka (2012) indicated that African American students have more stress than their White peers due to discrimination, racism, more academic stress, and less social support. Due to the intense stress of the socialization process, doctoral students’ levels of anxiety tend to increase during their programs because of the importance of creating and upholding their professional identity (Jairam & Khal, 2012).

### **Campus Climate**

Negative experiences within the classroom, throughout the campus, and even within the department can cause dissonance for African American students due to their limited understanding of the political movements through their programs and can even cause loss of self in this environment (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). Scholars believe that the loss of self in the environment can stem from dealing with perceived individual and institutional racism,

cultural isolation, tokenism, being the lone person of color, and lack of mentoring (Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011). These social and psychological barriers can be sources of discomfort and distress for a student. According to Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2009), the daily pressures on students as well as racist experiences not only had social implications but also psychological implications, such as “withdrawal, self-doubt, and lowered self-concept” (p. 181-182). These experiences of withdrawal, self-doubt, or lowered self-concept are not specific to one type of doctoral program, as students across disciplines felt these pressures.

Some scholars have indicated that campus climate, classroom climate, and department climate can affect the social and psychological experiences of African American doctoral students. African American doctoral students can be hurt the most by racism in these three climates (King & Chepyator, 1996). Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen (1998) describe campus climate as:

(a) The impact of governmental policy, programs, and initiatives and (b) the impact of sociohistorical forces on campus racial climate. Examples of the first include financial aid policies and programs, state and federal policy on affirmative action, court decisions on the desegregation of higher education, and the manner in which states provide for institutional differentiation within their state system of higher education. Sociohistoric forces influencing the climate for diversity on campus are events or issues in the larger society, nearly always originating outside the campus, that influence how people view racial diversity in society. (p. 282)

Hurtado et al. (1998) analyzed campus climate from a historical and modern point of view; they explained how sociopolitical history as well as current institutional policies continue to promote these students' experiences. They gave examples of how historical perspectives can influence

how a campus functions as well as how students can experience modern day campus climate in terms of diversity on campus, minority representation in the classroom, and diversity within the curriculum. African American doctoral students' perceptions about their safety on campus, the inclusivity/acceptance of the campus, or how they are perceived or welcomed by other students can be extremely important. These factors influence how comfortable students feel about living, working, and traveling around campus. Although these may seem tangential to students' education, imagine if students could not walk freely on campus without fear of persecution or fear of harm, and how these feelings can influence students' desire to remain at a particular institution. Campus climate can cause "students to feel isolated, unwanted, and unwelcomed ...which can lead to feelings of depression, loneliness, and alienation" (King & Chepyator, 1996, p. 170-171).

Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez (2011) further postulated that the socialization process, which has been discussed by various authors, is extremely important to the growth of African American students within their respective departments because this "socialization is the process by which doctoral students learn the customs, traditions, and values of any given discipline or field through mentoring and advising relationships as well as by engaging in research, service, and teaching" (p. 94). Such knowledge about the navigation process could cause students to learn they must integrate their academic program's values and norms with their own values and norms in order to be successful in their respective programs. However, Gildersleeve et al. (2011) found that this socialization process can leave students feeling isolated, frustrated, and even doubtful of their academic worth and abilities. The socialization process is a binary form of development in which students have to develop their identity as a doctoral student and recognize the departmental customs and norms by acquiring knowledge through personal

interactions and immersion into their respective academic program (Felder & Barker, 2013; Jairam & Khal, 2012). African American doctoral students can become accustomed to the culture and norms of their academic department through the creation of relationships with mentors and more advanced students in the program.

Moving from the more systemic forms of racism, African American students can oftentimes experience both overt and covert racism in the classroom (classroom climate). Even though schools have been legally racially integrated for over 60 years, teachers and students of the majority culture need to be more culturally sensitive to African American students and promote inclusion within classrooms and other academic environments. African American students' often feel unwelcomed in the classroom, either through lack of diversity in the epistemological perspectives in the classroom or through having to experience tokenism (Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez, 2011). Johnson-Bailey et al. (2009) indicated that African American students continuously receive biased grading from White professors, are seen as invisible in class conversations, are seen as racial representatives, and experience social discomfort from professors. Kennebrew (2002) stated that feelings of being stereotyped: being regarded as beneficiaries of affirmative action, special scholarships, or tokenism by peers can leave African American students feeling "uncomfortable to the point that they may begin to question their own abilities and competence" (p. 23). This concept is what scholars call stereotype threat. Claude Steele (1997) defined stereotype threat as "a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists. Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-defeating" (p. 614).

Not only can these aforementioned experiences cause feelings of stereotype threat for students, but these experiences can also cause feelings of the “imposter phenomenon.” Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers and Russell (1996) defined the imposter phenomenon as “an inner experience of intellectual phoniness” (p. 54). Further, the authors noted that students who experience the imposter phenomenon, despite all their levels of success and competence, feel as though they have tricked or fooled their professors and peers into believing that they are smarter than they actually are. Imposter syndrome and stereotype threat have psychological implications for students’ performance and self-esteem. Stereotype threat and imposter syndrome can affect the way graduate students perform in academia based on what they have been socialized to believe their entire lives in terms of not being adequate. With both of these forces at work, the graduate experience may be a negative for African American doctoral students. These factors will be further examined in the internal barriers section of this document.

Finally, departmental climate can also influence the experiences of African Americans in graduate school. Departmental climate according to Solem, Lee, and Schlemper (2009) can “affect the attitudes and experiences of individuals in the early stages of academic professionalization. These issues broadly range from mentoring and advising practices to departmental politics and the dynamics of gender and race on campus” (p. 269). Solem, Lee, and Schlemper also indicated “it is important to understand how the conditions, practices, and characteristics of departments are positively or negatively viewed and experienced by diverse groups of graduate students” (p. 269). In recognizing the significance of diversity, factors and practices that create an intellectually and emotionally supportive environment for all members of a graduate program must be identified and incorporated.

### **Tinto's Model of the Characterization of the Doctoral Process**

Tinto's model of the doctoral process (cited in Felder, 2010) explains that the doctoral process contains three major theoretical components: transition and adjustment, attainment of candidacy, and completion of dissertation. The transition and adjustment phase involves the socialization process that includes evaluation of students' investment in a doctoral program, their membership in social and academic communities, and their relationships with faculty. Research has shown that although membership in academic community is one of the most critical steps, "African Americans are faced with challenges in maintaining relationships with faculty in Predominately White Institutions" (Felder, 2010, p. 463). When difficulties of creating connections with faculty are prevalent many struggle to find advocates inside and outside the classroom, which can isolate students further.

The second component, attainment of candidacy, involves the attainment of knowledge that will ultimately aid students in identifying their doctoral research topics. According to Felder (2010), participants, especially African American students, expressed a lack of guidance within departments in terms of degree attainment; this may cause African American students to feel as if they had to choose the best options for degree attainment and ultimately candidacy based on the little knowledge that they had about various degrees, rather than decide with direction from faculty mentors. The final component of this process is completion of the dissertation, which is the stage in which many students drop out (Felder, 2010). During this stage of the process the faculty-mentor (mentor-protégé) relationship aids in shaping the trajectory of the student's journey toward completing the dissertation process. The components that are set forth in Tinto's model highlight the stress and purposeful connections that African American doctoral students have to endure to complete their degrees. Felder (2010) found that doctoral students, more

specifically African American doctoral students, had to navigate the journey independently because they felt as though they did not have support from their faculty and felt as though faculty were more invested in their own interests or goals than that of the students.

### **External Barriers**

The previous sections have examined general factors that may influence the lives of African American doctoral students on campus. In this section, I will discuss five major external factors that have been identified as affecting students' completion of their doctoral degrees. These five external factors are financial support, environment of the home department, mentoring/advising, interaction with peers, and social support networks (Ellis, 2001; Gasman, Hirschfield, & Vultaggio, 2008; Nettles, 1990).

#### **Financial Aid/Support**

Financial support plays a major factor in academic completion for African American students. Some studies described assistantships, scholarships and loans as being in the forefront of the minds of many African American doctoral students as an essential factor of completion and retention (Ellis, 2001; King & Chepaytor-Thomson, 1996; Nettles, 1990). Finding and securing funding for graduate school can be very stressful for African American students. Ellis (2001) found that many of his participants expressed that financial aid was one of the major contributors in deciding whether they remained in school. Financial obligations can be a major source of stress in the life of a graduate student, due to the imminent cost of education as well as their outside obligations (e.g. children, aging parents, and other family responsibilities). Assistantships can be an excellent source of income; however, the typical amount of an assistantship per year may not fully cover total financial costs of students' education, which can



lead to students' having to either supplement their income with loans, scholarships, or outside employment.

According to Nettles (1990), failure to acquire assistantships and fellowships may also deny African Americans students' the ability to interact with faculty mentors. Lack of financial aid can affect African American doctoral students' socialization process due to lack of exposure to local and national conferences, which ultimately could deprive them of the opportunity to make important personal connections within their field of study (Gasman, Hirschfeld & Vultaggio, 2008, p.134). Nettles (1990) proposed that students who held assistantships and fellowships gained more interactions with faculty members, which led to a closer sense of connection to the department as well as a greater sense of satisfaction within their academic programs.

Scholars have noted that African American doctoral students have become progressively more reliant on student loans and personal income to finance their education (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). The increasing dependency on student loans has become a large problem because scholars note that "minority students are less able to obtain and meet payments for large college loans" (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996, p. 41). Gasman, Hirschfeld and Vultaggio (2008) found that financial struggles among African American doctoral students is underemphasized by research and weighs heavily on the minds of students, which can cause academic and personal stress. The financial stress of being in a doctoral program can negatively influence the degree completion, as well as the health and well-being of doctoral students.

### **Environment of the Home Department**

The environment of the home academic unit is an important factor in the academic careers of African American graduate students. The environment of the home academic unit can

include the racial climate of the department, accessibility of the faculty, advocacy for students, acquisition of knowledge and skills surrounding multiculturalism, and sensitivity of future colleagues/students in the program (Gasman, Hirschfeld & Vultaggio, 2008). Additionally, factors such as classroom climate, faculty's ability to address problems, faculty's openness to discussing various topics, and faculty's need to ensure that students feel appreciated in the classroom were extremely important to how African American students experienced their graduate experience (Ellis, 2001).

Classroom climate, as previously defined, is the way in which classmates and faculty address different topics. For example, for the discussion topic of racism in America today, the professor and the students within the class should be aware of various microaggressions that can arise in classroom discussions or interactions. The way in which a professor facilitates classroom discussion can help students feel like the classroom is a comfortable place that each student can express their views as well as accept challenges about uninformed comments. Gasman, Hirschfeld, and Vultaggio (2008) found that African American students frequently "feel academically isolated in the classroom due to the lack of alignment between their viewpoints and those of their White classmates... due to the "risky" nature of addressing racial issues, faculty members may not feel comfortable addressing these issues within the classroom" (p. 129).

A professor's ability to address these concerns in the classroom is important in helping students to feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts and perspectives; therefore, the professor needs to establish and maintain ground rules that delineate the creation of a safe space and ensure that everyone's voice is heard and appreciated. Another variable is the level of respect that is given to each student regardless of race, gender, or social class. A professor's ability to point out racist/sexist comments is a skill that should be learned by all faculty members

who wish to enter the classroom because a threat to student learning can occur when problems are not addressed at the moment of tension in the classroom (Ellis, 2001). If the person in authority does not address and clarify moments of tension, African American students might not want to share their views in the classroom any longer.

Classroom climate was also characterized as the inclusion of culturally-based scholarship. A culturally inclusive curriculum must cover topics from many different cultural groups and divergent viewpoints. Participants in various studies have reported that their curriculums were solely based upon Eurocentric viewpoints and scholarly information; African American students often do not feel represented within the literature, which can advance feelings of isolation and “not belonging” (Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008; Patterson-Stewart, Ritchie, & Sanders, 1997). Gasman, Hirschfeld and Vultaggio (2008) examined the experiences of African American graduate students at Ivy League institutions in terms of how their experiences influence their socialization processes and what factors contributed to success in their graduate programs. In Ellis (2001) one participant voiced her concern of not being heard in the classroom and when she tried to share her perspective, she felt “beaten down there as a minority” (p. 38). African American doctoral students often feel as though they are not considered or included in classroom discussions when discussing relevant pedagogy because a great deal of the information is positioned from a Eurocentric point of view. This situation not only discounts the students’ experiences but forces them to abide by a Eurocentric curriculum in order to successfully attain their doctoral degree.

Additionally, the lack of community within an academic department can be an environmental concern for students. Ellis (2001) noted that female African American students in her study felt more alienated by the “(good) old boys” (p. 38) culture of their departments than

their White female counterparts. African American males and females both noted in this study that they felt isolated from the departments; however, African American males noted that they were able to enter into the academic and social scenes more readily because they could often modify their behavior to avoid negative perceptions/stereotypes from their White counterparts (Ellis, 2001). African American doctoral students often face a myriad of factors that conflict with their happiness; however, the inability to act in a certain manner to be accepted into a doctoral program can be difficult and frustrating for students. The feeling of isolation and creating a sense of phoniness to please others can often become a burden.

### **Mentor-Protégé Relations**

Mentoring and advising are important factors for African American students because these processes foster supportive relationships that aid in navigating the terrain of the doctoral process (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 2000; Williams, Brewely, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005). Mentoring is a process through which a mentor—a senior professional in the field—aids a mentee within the same field in learning the structure of the profession, professional associations/organizations and teaches them the culture, norms, and traditions of the field (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 2000; Kador & Lewis, 2007). Felder (2010) proposed that the “lack of minority faculty leadership coupled with historical legacies of exclusion cultivate alienating educational environments [for African American doctoral students]” (p. 455). Kador and Lewis (2007) noted, “the mentors/advisors of African American doctoral students are the link for students to gain opportunities for presenting research, writing and publishing articles, along with working collaboratively with other scholars” (p. 101). Felder and Barker (2013) reported that it is difficult for African Americans to find the right faculty advisor, who is able to help them with their professional development and socialization processes. The consequences of

African American students not finding an appropriate advisor or mentor can be detrimental to their doctoral process due to the immense role that mentors play in the development of their professional development, social adjustment to the doctoral process, and the building of their disciplinary identity (Felder, 2010). One of the participants in Ellis's (2001) study expressed that African American doctoral students had fewer opportunities to conduct research than their White counterparts did. The participants in this study discussed having to do grunt work (i.e. work that faculty members did not want to do for themselves) that did not contribute to their dissertations. Having faculty and advisors neglect African American students is not only unjust but also detrimental to degree completion rates for African American students. According to Nettles and Millet (2006) (as cited by Felder, 2010), "a low frequency of positive mentorship can jeopardize a scholar's degree completion, career longevity, and overall success" (p. 460). Doctoral degree completion rates and the ability to navigate the journey of a doctoral program are significantly affected by the quality of advisement regardless of race (Felder, 2010). Without mentoring opportunities, African American students must fend for themselves in difficult academic situations and may not be able to have the same access to knowledge that their White counterparts do.

Research shows that when African American graduate students do not receive support from mentors or faculty members, they often withdraw or isolate themselves from their programs and turn to family members and friends (Cornejo, 2007). Cornejo (2007) explained that turning to family and friends can be a source of support; however, they cannot provide the same guidance that faculty members can share with students. The unique support that faculty members are able to provide constitute selective opportunities for graduate students to advance their careers (i.e. internships, research opportunities or connection to research mentors); change the

circumstances within a department; and become competent professionals in their field. Doctoral programs must teach faculty members how to become proficient mentors and reward mentors who have had positive relationships with their mentees (Gasman, Hirschfeld & Vultaggio, 2008). African American doctoral students ideally will work with mentors who welcome race-based research and are not uncomfortable with discussing difficult topics with their mentees.

### **Interactions with Peers**

Gasman, Hirschfeld, and Vultaggio (2008) contend that peer interaction significantly affected students' experiences in their programs as well as their persistence in graduate school. For African American students in particular, peer interactions may influence their graduate school experience, primarily academic achievement and emotional satisfaction (Gasman, Hirschfeld & Vultaggio, 2008). Peer interactions may lead to emotional dissatisfaction as a result of negative stereotypes and peer competition. Academic peer competition can often cause distress for doctoral students because peers often compete academically to receive coveted assistantships, lucrative academic positions, praise and approval from professors, or the highest grades (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

According to Anderson and Swazey (1998) (in the Jairam and Kahl, 2012), doctoral students acknowledged that their "academic friends" (p. 320) often made their experiences unpleasant because of the competitive nature of a doctoral program. Some students in this study expressed that other students who they considered to be in their support network later turned out to be competitors who tried to reach the top of the class by any means necessary (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Gasman et al. (2008) and Ellis (2001) also indicated that African American students gravitated toward peers who were of the same race due to an anticipated shared experience. African American students often struggled with communicating difficult and/or sensitive topics

to their White peers and frequently felt as though they were teaching or challenging their peers' thoughts or worldviews.

This situation can be taxing for graduate students of color who feel as though they have to identify as a representative for their race. Many studies show that African American doctoral students tend to connect with other African American doctoral students on campus because of their shared feelings of alienation, cultural misunderstanding, and isolation that they may experience in the classroom (Ellis, 2001; Nettles, 1990).

Scholars have addressed the phenomenon of peer interaction and provided suggestions as to how departments as well as individual professors can help African American and White students navigate the challenges of being helpful peers despite racial differences (Felder & Barker, 2013). Interaction with peers may be a major source of stress or support for African American doctoral students depending on their life circumstances. Interestingly, Ellis (2001) found that peer interactions were more important for African American students who were working on their doctorate full-time, students who were single, and those who held assistantships than for their African American doctoral students who were working on their doctorate part-time, who were working outside the university in a professional setting, and those who were married or had small children. Both groups of graduate students with children and married are in the same life stage but are experiencing different life circumstances.

### **Social Isolation and Social Support**

Social support can be a mediating factor in the retention of doctoral students because it is linked to reduced stress (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). The stress of a doctoral program can lead to “damaging effects [to] one’s physical [and] psychological health” (p. 312). Jairam and Kahl (2012) indicated that doctoral students who receive support at higher frequencies have stronger

support networks, and have a perceived reduction in stress, as well as physical, and psychological problems than their counterparts who do not have as much support. When students do not receive social support, they often feel social isolation, which Jairam and Kahl (2012) noted as the “absence of meaningful social connections” and further added “social isolation is often exacerbated by being in a new, unfamiliar and stressful environment” (p. 312). King and Chepaytor-Thomson (1996) noted that these factors could affect students’ feelings of loneliness and alienation, which can influence how students’ perceive their ability to remain in doctoral programs. These feelings can be profound especially when a student is the only African American student in a department. Ali and Kohun (2007) found that social isolation contributed to a large number of doctoral students departing from their programs. They further noted that “new forms of socialization and psychological demands that are specific to a doctoral program” (p. 39) exacerbated social isolation. Socially isolated individuals are likely to have a difficult time addressing/expressing the psychological pressures of the doctoral program because they lack an established support network.

In terms of social support, many of the participants in Ellis’s (2001) study expressed concerns that being away from family, being in a new place, and not being able to relate to their White counterparts as well as they did to their African American peers caused a level of stress that can often feel insurmountable. Further, African American peers were seen as a form of social support for each other.

Family support and kinship contributed significantly to the completion rate of African American students’. However, the family system can add stress during the doctoral process. For example, students’ can have trouble balancing home-school life because they may be the primary caregiver in the household or they may be considered the family mediator. In Jairam and Kahl’s



(2012) study, a participant explained some of the difficulties and misunderstandings that can occur among family members about home responsibilities versus school responsibilities that graduate students face. This particular participant noted how difficult it was for her family to be a strong support system at times and also be the weakest link in her support system during other times because their family could not understand why she could not maintain family chores and child-rearing. Although this is a specific example, it is not uncommon for doctoral students to feel pulled in many different directions from their family to participate in family functions, to help with family crises, and to dedicate time to significant others versus their studies.

Jairam and Kahl's (2012) participants also noted that jealousy often existed within the family unit because the student is obtaining a terminal degree. Other students in the study drew attention to the fact that many people in their families did not understand the requirements or demands of completing a doctoral degree: "why it is necessary [to commit to their studies], and what economic or professional opportunities it would provide for the graduates" (p. 321).

According to Sternberg (1981), as cited in Jairam and Kahl (2012), "American society is not aware... of the larger than life trials, fortitude, despair, courage, and even heroics experienced in [doctoral programs]" (p. 321). This can be difficult for some individuals in the family who are outside of the academy to understand the time and dedication it may take for students to complete their degree.

African American families also have a high investment in education even though they may not fully understand the academy. According to Hines and Boyd-Franklin (2005), African American parents have expectations for their children to pursue careers that would be lucrative and successful, so they can surpass the parents' achievements. According to Hines and Boyd-Franklin (2005), "believing that 'to whom much is given, much is expected,' African Americans

often feel that they have the responsibility to ‘give back,’ especially to less economically advantaged family members. [The student in this case often feels a] ‘sense of responsibility that is connected to the belief that the overall well-being of the individual is tied to the welfare of the collective’” (p. 95). Hines and Boyd-Franklin (2005) also pointed out from a collectivist point of view that the personal accomplishments of a student are “often attributed to the sacrifices of others, as well as individual effort” (p. 95). These pressures from family can often cause students to feel that aiding “extended family can leave them feeling depleted emotionally, physically, and/or financially” (p. 95).

### **Internal Barriers**

The importance of academics and ability to negotiate the challenges of the academy are different for African American students in comparison with their White counterparts. Imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and the longing/worrying about completing the program whether due to financial issues, familial obligations, feeling of worth, or the general oppression of society towards African Americans can cause these students to have difficult experiences in their doctoral programs (Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996; Gildersleeve, Croom & Vasquez, 2011; Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008). When attending Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), African American students often feel as though they are invisible, isolated, and undervalued in many doctoral programs (Felder & Barker, 2013). These feelings of invisibility and isolation inevitably have an impact on the internal comfort or well-being of African American doctoral students. The feeling of being an unwanted guest can be pervasive throughout a student’s doctoral experience and may affect a student’s work or participation in their program, department or institution.

Felder and Barker (2013) noted that African American students also felt as though they needed to outperform their White counterparts and felt that their quality of work was less than that of their White peers. In addition to outperforming their White counterparts, Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, and Russell (1996) reported that minority students have to display a greater variety of qualities to be perceived as competent or qualified enough to be in a doctoral program (Ellis, 2001). The qualities that Ewing et al. (1996) identified include having “positive self-image, realistic self-appraisal, understanding of and ability to set long-term goals and delay gratification, access to strong support system, success in leadership, and demonstrated community service” (p. 54). These factors often cause African American students to feel “a sense of academic vulnerability” (Felder & Barker, 2013, p. 3) and may have a great impact on the self-expectations of African American doctoral students.

These internal feelings or concepts of having to work harder than their White peers ultimately stems from the racism and discrimination portrayed about their race in society, which ultimately influences their academic performance (Felder & Barker, 2013). Having to negotiate these internal feelings on a daily basis can affect a student’s commitment to their academic progress (Felder & Barker, 2013). Green (2008) discussed the impact of racism by highlighting the negative stigma and the offensive racial images/stereotypes that African American students have to refute when they enter higher education, which can effect “achievement and accomplishment that the African American professional inspires is overwhelmed and distorted by the social reality it conceals” (p. 339).

Green (2008) pointed out that “the history of African Americans, those representations of their race which they see in the media, all have an effect on their psyche” (p. 339). This pervasive history and negative stereotypes about African Americans can cause African American

doctoral students to fear that they would be reduced to those stereotypes (Steele, 1997). The fear of being reduced to the negative stereotypes for African Americans can lead to stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is “a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists. Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-defeating” (Steele, 1997, p. 614). African Americans who are highly identified with school and are advancing successfully academically are highly susceptible to this threat (Steele, 1997; Taylor & Antony, 2000). Steele (1997) noted the identification with the stereotyped group and fear of being perceived as part of the group makes group members internalize stereotype threat, not the internal doubt about the student’s abilities that makes them susceptible to this threat. Taylor and Antony (2000) revealed that bright, accomplished, and confident students are more susceptible to stereotype threat because of their high self-identification with being African American, and the internal pressure of being regarded as a “positive light and successful” (p.187) make them vulnerable to being criticized. Often when a student feels the impact of stereotype threat, they underperform. Stereotype threat cannot only enter the psyche but is a social and psychological peril that creates an environment of intimidation (Taylor & Antony, 2000).

The African American doctoral student psyche is one that can be affected by stereotype threat, but another internal force has affected many African American doctoral students’—the imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome, as previously mentioned, occurs when “doctoral students experience intense feelings of intellectual inadequacy and subsequently worry that their professors or peers will expose them as academic frauds” (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011, p.430). Although this is imposter phenomenon can be experienced by many

students, unique factors exist for students of color who have various pressures within their doctoral experience. Students of color have a history of being marginalized at PWIs and have experienced overt and covert messages that tell them that they are ‘not good enough’ to be at these institutions (Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez, 2011). These thoughts can cause an internalization of the imposter syndrome at a deeper level. These feelings may leave students to believe that they are ‘not good enough’ to be in higher education and fear that someone may find out their shortcomings or expose them as inadequate. One of the most profound consequences of the imposter syndrome is that despite quantitative data showing competence through the ability to excel in classes, students feel as though they have fooled their professors and feel that they are undeserving of their achieved success (Ewing et al., 1996). According to Ewing et al. (1996), these students fear that once they are exposed for the phony they are, they will experience very painful humiliation and will lose the respect and success for which they have worked. As students suffer through this self-imposed phenomenon, they constantly live in a state of fear and anxiety and will try even harder to prove that they are capable, which still does not ease their fear of not being good enough.

For African American students, the influence of being “Black in America” carries negative influences on their perception of their work, development, and adjustment (Ewing et al., 1996). Gildersleeve et al. (2011) states, “Black and Latina/o students...found themselves questioning whether they belonged in their doctoral program and if they were capable of doing the work associated with program requisites (i.e., writing, research, class work, presentations, etc.)” (p.104). The Black and Latina/o students also dismissed the fact that they actually were admitted to a doctoral program (Gildersleeve et al, 2011). Due to their insecurities these students found themselves internally questioning whether they would be identified by professors as being

unqualified for their doctoral program and questioned as to whether a doctoral degree would be attainable. Ewing et al. (1996) also noted that African American graduate students' general academic self-concept and feeling of the imposter syndrome were connected to their racial identity and worldview. This particular study examined the relationship of culturally relevant works that highlighted African American students encounter with the imposter syndrome. Ewing et al. (1996) followed up on this idea and found that worldview and academic self-concept were most connected to the susceptibility of the imposter syndrome than a student's racial identity. Taken altogether, African American students may struggle with the imposter syndrome based on their worldview, values, and academic self-concept.

Family influence, which is tied to worldview, is rarely discussed in doctoral student literature. It should be noted that internal messages that family members send can often influence African American doctoral students' trajectory in a doctoral program in both a positive and negative manner. McCallum (2012) explained that her African American participants had parents who were highly invested in their schooling and often told them that a bachelor's degree was not good enough and that they should be striving for graduate school. In McCallum's study, these family members were supportive of their students' education; the African American students realized that their families had high expectations for them to succeed beyond college [which can cause some stress and anxiety for the student]. Support or expectations from family could have both a positive and a negative impact on the consciousness of African American doctoral students and their goal of attaining a doctoral degree. Students can thrive on such positivity while others can crumble under the pressure placed upon them by family members. According to Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, and Zeeh (2011), the imposter syndrome for African American students can be exacerbated by experiences in childhood due to familial environment

and values. Familial pressures such as lack of cohesion or expressiveness within the family unit, low levels of support to for the student, the student's individual talents and intellectual abilities are divergent from that of other members of the family, unusually high levels of education in relation to family background, contradictory and negative feedback about achievements of family members, downplay of student's intellectual ability by the family, and the absence of open and accurate praise can all possibly be detrimental to African American doctoral students' ability to counteract feelings of the imposter syndrome (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb & Zeeh, 2011).

### **External Buffers**

#### **Mentor-Protégé Relationship**

Mentorship has been shown to be a critical component of success for doctoral students. Thomas, Willis, and Davis (2007), cited by Ellis (1992), proposed that the success of graduate students depends on a healthy student-faculty relationship that is based upon integrity, trust, and support in which the student can receive quantitative and qualitative feedback as well as advice, counseling, and any helpful information about how to navigate the academy. Brown, Davis and McClendon (2000) clarified that there are important components to proper mentoring of students of color because this process is inherently different from mentoring White students in the field. However, Girves, Zepeda, and Gwathmey (2005) noted that minority doctoral students seem to receive less access to advisors or role models than their White peers. Thomas, Williams, and Davis (2007) explains that the reason African American students have difficulties being mentored in the academy is because many students' [in general] want to do racially-specific research or study racially-specific content; and often not many mentors within their department have those specific interests, so African American students often have to look beyond their

department or home institutions for that mentorship (Thomas, Williams, & Davis, 2007).

Another reason for a difference in the mentor relationships between African Americans and their White counterparts is that “faculty members’ lack of knowledge about the educational and non-academic experiences and realities of under-represented groups, and their lack of experience in diverse contexts, create barriers to their ability and willingness to establish mentoring relationships with minority students” (Thomas, Williams, & Davis, 2007, p. 181).

Brown, Davis, and McClendon (2000) proposed that effective mentoring happens within and outside the classroom and university and it provides students with supplemental information and practical experiences that will help students in the trajectory of their doctoral journey. A mentor is not only a guide, but also a co-discoverer in the doctoral student’s journey. Good mentorship helps minority students find ways to navigate a world that may be brand new and novel for them or their families because they may not have any cognitive map of what the academic world entails and how much it takes for degree completion (Walker, Wright & Hanley, 2001; Felder, 2010). Good mentors can also be an emotional and professional support, a guide who teaches the balancing of academia and personal life, an advocate for their students, someone who offers words of encouragement during times of doubt, a teacher of the unwritten rules of academia, one who has an interest in the student as a person, and one who communicates students’ limitations “objectively without suggesting that the student was incapable” (Patterson-Stewart, Ritchie, & Sanders, 1997, p. 496). A good mentor is also cross-culturally competent and can be a vessel for networking in the student’s new environment (Felder, 2010; Jairam & Kahl, 2012; Patterson, Ritchie & Sanders, 1997). A proficient mentor advocates for their advisee, and has the ability to be warm, supportive, encouraging, and empathetic (Kador & Lewis, 2007).



A good mentor relationship, with minority students in particular, involves a mentor's ability to reinforce students' competencies and help them become comfortable in their legitimacy as an emerging scholar. Thomas, Williams, and Davis (2007) noted that in order to be a good mentor to African American graduate students, an advisor should acknowledge the daily experiences of microaggressions of the students' lived experiences. According to Jairam and Kahl (2012), mentors often become part of African American doctoral students' support systems from the beginning of their doctoral program. The students interviewed in the Jairam and Kahl (2012) article stated that they received social support through motivating words and actions by their mentor, and they also regarded their mentor as "knowledge-based guidance and their content-area expert[s]" (p. 320). Maton et al. (2011) noted that African American graduate students felt that mentoring was linked to their satisfaction and persistence in their programs.

Many articles have discussed the mentor-protégé role and have outlined some attributes of a good mentor; one of the questions that researchers often ask is whether African American students need African American mentors in order to understand their struggles and help them navigate through the terrain of academia (Felder, 2010; Green, 2008; Kador & Lewis, 2007). According to Ellis (2001) and Brown, Davis and McClendon (2000), African American students did not need to be matched by race in order to have a positive relationship. However, Ellis (2001) recommend a diversified faculty population that would increase chances of diverse perspectives and cultural backgrounds so African American students could find professors/advisors with whom they are most similar and comfortable with for both mentorship and advisement.

## **Social Support Network**

Establishing a social support network in a doctoral program can, not only reduce stress as previously mentioned, but also serve as a coping mechanism. Ali and Kohun (2007) suggested that a support network can be a coping mechanism because individuals in their network can provide alternate meanings to different situations; they can help the student change negative situations, and they can help students manage their emotional reactions in various situations. Ali and Kohun (2007) established that by creating a comprehensive support network African American doctoral students can minimize social isolation. Through the creation of this support network, African American students can get social support from many places. Some places that have been discussed include support from faculty and peers, family, church family, and friends. According to Isaac (1998) (as cited in Kador and Lewis, 2007) although there may be some negative stereotyping from peers or peer competition, graduate students need classmates in times of stress, and as a source of reassurance that they are not isolated in the process. Isaac (1998) also noted that African American students often connect with one another for social interactions as well as consultations to aid in conceptualizations of experiences and ideas, reality checks for novel experiences with in academia, and further help one another understand and navigate challenges in academia (Kador & Lewis, 2007). In their study, Jairam and Kahl (2012) found that academic friends were one of the most influential groups for doctoral students. Study participants noted that the emotional and professional support they received from these friends allowed them to have an empathetically bound experience that validated their struggle because their friends were able to understand due to similar struggles. The academic friends were able to vent about similar courses or benchmarks that have to be achieved in a doctoral program.

Academic friends were not only cheerleaders but were able to offer feedback, advice, and assistance.

Jairam and Kahl (2012) found that family was another major group that was helpful to doctoral students. They noted that family members provided emotional and practical support. The main family members that provided support were parents, spouses, children, and siblings. The family provided a different kind of emotional support by providing students with “encouragement, esteem building, and love” (p. 319). The students noted that their families were available for all their triumphs and setbacks; and it was important to them that their family was able to encourage them and help them through their struggles. In terms of practical support, family members were able to provide students with “gifts, financial support, taking care of chores... time and space to do work, and assistance with children” (p. 319). Participants expressed that the practical help of caregiving, chores, and the completion of daily tasks by their family members allowed them to complete a copious amounts of work without distraction. Family aid with finances was a large relief for students because they did not have to worry about working full time and could complete their degree in a timely manner.

Another form of support that was prominent in the literature was African American doctoral students’ connection with their faith, in their local or home churches. Many participants in the Gasman, Hirschfeld, and Vultaggio (2008) study noted that it was their faith and spirituality that helped them remain in their programs instead of giving up on their wishes to complete their doctorate. They noted that faith gave them the determination and drive to continue, as well as the support of local or hometown church members (Gasman, Hirschfeld & Vultaggio, 2008).

Jairam and Kahl (2012) noted that faculty members that students make connections with within or outside of their department provide them with emotional and professional support. Faculty members as mentioned in the previous section provided students with encouragement, mentorship, and helped students balance their work-life interactions. Faculty members provide professional support through the exchange of ideas and impart knowledge in areas of expertise as well as aid in the dissertation process (Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

An additional factor that contributes to school support networks is social groups on campus that are dedicated to African American/Latino students (Gasman, Hirschfeld, & Vultaggio, 2008). These organizations allow students from many disciplines to come together and discuss difficulties in their departments, converse about struggles they may be having with the racial climate on campus and can mentor newer students about various experiences to help navigate the academic system. Often these on-campus groups will have faculty mentors who can provide insight for African American students.

As African American doctoral students move through their journey, social support provides them with a sense of protection by decreasing the stress of a doctoral program and feelings of social isolation. People who are part of a doctoral student's social network provide emotional, professional, and practical support (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Emotional support is defined as trying to help support a student through difficult situations and moments of immense stress and worry (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Professional support is defined as providing mentoring and guidance to students throughout their academic career (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Practical support is helping students with problems such as monetary issues, or helping complete a task due for their program (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Students' family, faculty or friends provided these forms of support at various times.

### **Internal Buffers**

Many factors impact the success of African American doctoral students. All of the external buffers that are in place to help African American students are very important; however, the most important buffer is the doctoral students' sense of self and belief in their abilities to complete their degrees. According to Schlemper (2011), students must have self-motivation and perseverance to complete their degree because ultimately all of the help from advisors, mentors, family, or friends cannot get the necessary work completed for the degree. Students have to become acquainted with the rigor of the work by adjusting to the doctoral workload as well as creating a balancing act of managing academic responsibilities, dissertation work, assistantships and family obligations (Schlemper, 2011).

King and Chepyator-Thomson (1996) indicated that African American doctoral students, in particular, must have motivation to complete their degree, especially academic motivation. Motivational considerations include students' attitudes, beliefs and values that surround their goals of completing their programs (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). Achievement motivation is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as the dispositional propensity to strive for excellence. Intrinsic motivation as defined by Cohen (1985) is the urge to execute "challenging tasks to fulfill an internal need to be competent and self-determining" (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996, p. 3). Whereas, extrinsic motivation helps a student strive for success in order to receive rewards and recognition. An example of extrinsic motivation would be earning a doctoral degree. These intrinsic and extrinsic factors are extremely important to the success of African American doctoral students.

El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, and Bufka (2012) discuss the importance of gaining various coping skills as an internal buffer that will help a student manage the various sources of

stress in a doctoral program. In their study, Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2009) focus on coping skills that have traditionally helped African American graduate students succeed in academia. Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2009) found that African American students utilized their college social experiences and the maturity they have accumulated over their life to help them work through the challenges of the doctoral process. These students stated that although they experienced constant oppression and microaggressions, they would continue to build their self-confidence that helped them through difficult times (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009). African American students must have intrinsic, extrinsic, and academic motivation, as well as the necessary values and beliefs that align with academia. They also need exposure to individuals whom they can learn from and thus use those experiences as additional internal buffers, which will guide them to a higher probability of success. As Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2009) noted successful African American graduate students of the academy had to develop a sense of internal armor as well as an internal confidence in order to function optimally in their academic responsibilities.

Education in America, has continually been a controversial topic across racial, socioeconomic and political lines. Much of the research that has been completed on the educational enrollment and attrition by race has been completed through quantitative measures that do not provide a robust illustration of the complete understanding of the student experience (Davis, 1994). Past researchers have concentrated on the undergraduate population in particular studying the ways to aid with retention and create healthier environments for these students (Johnson- Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009; Kennebrew, 2002; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, & Smith, 2004). Many of these studies have focused on creating healthier environments

to succeed as an emerging adulthood, with little focus on the well-being of students in graduate school. With the sparse information about graduate more specifically doctoral studies, the articles that are available focus on the doctoral student body as a whole, without recognizing the possibility for differential experience for those who are of the non-dominant community. For example, a study that was created to understand the “students and well-being” of doctoral students by Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, and Lonka (2012), identified many complications and stressors that are often faced by 669 doctoral students, but did not identify the demographics of this population nor did it identify cultural differences that influenced problems such as anxiety, depression and insomnia. As noted before it is important to fully understand the qualitative experiences of doctoral students that were not captured within studies such as these but also focus on one particular subpopulation that there is currently sparse information concerning their experiences in doctoral studies. Although there is a gap in the literature, previous research has provided an avenue to continue exploring in greater depth the lived experiences of doctoral students more specifically the subpopulation of African American doctoral students (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011; Golde & Dore, 2001; Jairam & Kahl, 2012).

As Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, and Lonka (2012) highlight, the journey to the doctorate is complicated and complex, with very few people successfully attaining the coveted doctorate due to various physical, psychological, political and lack of funding. Doctoral students in America often have distinctive experiences within their degree programs that is often inexplicable due to the unique pressures and experiences they encounter; students entering doctoral programs cannot fathom the journeys that they will be embarking on because they have a lack of understanding of “what doctoral study entails, how the process works, and how to navigate it effectively” (Golde & Dore, 2001, p. 63); however, there continues to be a trend of not having a diverse group of

students contributing to the dearth of research conducted. In Golde and Dore (2001) study, they offer a broad overview of various shared experiences among doctoral students and attempt to explain the doctoral experience, the doctoral process and ways that are helpful in navigation of this journey; however, the article had a racial breakdown of 83.5% White and 16.5% Other (which was supposed to represent all non-White doctoral students). It is important to recognize the necessity of compiling a more comprehensive understanding of doctoral students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Many of the studies are heavily influenced by the perspective of White doctoral students, as shown in the various demographic sections of previous research. In so much, as there is a lack in data that looks at other marginalized groups that have to navigate said system, and continues to ignore the implications of what it means to be a student of color within a system that pretends the landscape of academia has not been discriminatory and highly selective in its teaching from its inception. This study hopes to provide alternative perspective to the existing literature, while also providing a glimpse into the understanding and context to the meaning of being an African American doctoral student at a Predominantly White Institution in America.



### **CHAPTER III**

#### **RESEACH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

African American students are entering Ph.D. programs at approximately 11.5% a year, yet few studies have focused on the experiences of this subpopulation. This current study sought to add to a growing body of research aimed at understanding the educational experiences of underrepresented students. Specifically, the researcher sought to explore the African American doctoral student experience. It is hoped that through this work light will be shed on both the strengths and challenges faced by African American doctoral students, while also serving as a springboard to make recommendations that can contribute to supporting African American doctoral students in their degree programs.

This study was guided by the following questions: 1) What are the protective factors associated with African American doctoral students' matriculation and completion through their degree program; 2) what barriers, if any, are experienced by African American doctoral students in their degree attainment processes; and 3) how have the life experiences of African American doctoral students informed their ability to complete doctoral degrees at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)?

#### **Rationale for Qualitative Design**

Qualitative research designs allow researchers to present the rich stories of participants in ways that illuminate their experience while maintaining the integrity of their narratives (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Qualitative inquiry supports approaches where social complexities within situations and experiences can be explained and expounded upon through further query

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This study explored common themes throughout the narratives provided by the participants about their experiences as doctoral students at PWIs and utilized an interpretive approach to find common themes that resonate across participants' experiences. As Maxwell (2013) noted, qualitative inquiry is a form of research that grants a researcher a context to understanding the "meaning and perspectives of people you study— seeing the world from their point of view, rather than simply from your own" (p.viii). It also allows a researcher to utilize the participants' worldviews and "physical, social, and cultural contexts" to shape the way in which their narrative is being interpreted (p. viii). Most importantly, Maxwell (2013) emphasized how qualitative inquiry allows for the continuous and meticulous commitment to stay close to the data, which reduces undue bias during the interpretation of the information provided by participants. With this commitment, qualitative inquiry permits participants to guide data generation with the co-creation of meaning between the researcher and participants through intensive interviewing, coding, member-checking and memo-ing, which all provide a way for the researcher to gain further insight into subject being studied as well as strengthen authenticity of the results (Charmaz, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). The flexibility of qualitative research design, more specifically grounded theory with a critical race theory framework, in this study helped the researcher gain robust data to better understand the lived experiences of African American doctoral students (Creswell, 2007).

### **Methodology: Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory was created in response to a lack of organized and widely accepted rigorous methods for building theory from qualitative data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The widely accepted originators of grounded theory Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strauss were interested in creating a methodological research format that was considered rigorous, valid, direct and

involved systematic strategies. As a result, Charmaz (2006) explained that Glaser and Strauss were able to “conduct abstract theoretical explanation of social processes” (p. 5) in a replicable and organized fashion called grounded theory. It should be noted that there has been great resistance to this form of qualitative methodology due to disagreements about the training and qualifications needed to execute this method; however, by reading the extant literature as well as taking educational courses about the purpose and execution of this method, the researcher can effectively avoid potential pitfalls that have been accentuated in extant literature (Charmaz, 2014; Heath & Cowley, 2004).

Although reception to this methodology was positive, conceptual differences between Glaser and Strauss furthered a division in the conceptualization of grounded theory which created two “camps” of grounded theorists: Glaserian and Straussian, (Heath & Crowley, 2004). For this study, the most appropriate form of grounded theory is the Straussian camp that is based on the premise that researchers do not enter their research void of external influence, previous knowledge or experience, or background empirical knowledge. Strauss (1987) contends it is important to understand that both the use of self and past experience are needed to create theoretical sensitivity and help guide the research questions and proposed hypotheses (Heath & Crowley, 2004). These hypotheses are not meant to limit the collection of data but are recognized in the beginning of the research process. They are discussed, noted, and questioned, rather than denying their existence. This prepares the researcher to collect data in a rigorous manner allowing the participant to discuss his or her own experiences sans leading questions and assumptions (Heath & Crowley, 2004).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) noted that when using previously known information, researchers need to be more cognizant and sensitive to the interpretation and meaning making

that they create from narratives of the lived experiences of their participants. Once preconceived notions and reasons as to why the research is being collected are addressed, researchers will use constant comparative method at the beginning of data collection in order to refine their questioning of the future participants. The researcher must maintain reflexivity throughout the process or collection, and analysis by exercising a constant comparative method to ensure that the data remain true to the participants (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2006) defines constant comparative method as “an analysis that generates successively more abstract concepts and theories through inductive processes of comparing data with data, data with category, category with category and category with concept. Comparisons then constitute each stage of analytic development” (p. 187). In grounded theory, the constant comparative method helps researchers stay close to the core concepts of their research (Charmaz, 2006). By checking the responses with the original interview questions to ensure that they are asking questions that will provide robust data regarding the construct, researchers can see whether they are getting information that is needed to understand the phenomena being researched. If the researchers are not able to tap into the construct they are researching, then during this method they can refine their questions or decide whether there is an alternative construct that is emerging.

Constant comparative method is an important routine that is used throughout the process of analysis and interpretation. If the researcher is remaining true to his/ her participants’ words and stories in their analysis, then it creates stronger and more empirically based research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). With emphasis on staying true to participants’ stories and to be able to retain the context of their lived experiences, I will be utilizing critical race theory (CRT) to describe complex, compounded concepts that emerge from the data. Critical race theory provides a framework from which to analyze the complex concepts dealing with historical racial issues and

tensions that may be present in the narratives of the participants. This study is taking a multicultural approach allowing space for the possibility of the non-dominant traditional narratives of African American students and their experiences in higher education. According to Malagon, Huber, and Velez (2009), grounded theory is a methodology that lends itself well to CRT frameworks because it allows participants to create their stories and place their experiences into their own contexts. Malagon, Huber, and Velez (2009) also indicated that using these two ideologies in conjunction with each other allows participants experiences to directly challenge the normative ideas and scholarship that has shaped, “destroyed and erased” (p. 254) the African American experience in academia as well as other often unseen structures of oppression (Huber, 2009).

As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, grounded theory as explained by Charmaz (2014) is a methodology that lends itself to working with various social justice theories because it encompasses the view that participants’ narratives are the foundation for creating meaning through their own worldview, cultural context, and experiences. With this being the foundational perspective toward understanding and building theory, it allows experiences of those who have been marginalized to come to the forefront without undue influence of the master/dominant narrative that exists in the literature. Charmaz (2014) further validated this stance by noting that researchers who are dedicated to social justice can use this methodology to focus on “attentiveness to ideas and actions concerning fairness, equity, equality, democratic process, status and hierarchy, and individual and collective rights and obligations [with their prospective study]” (p. 326).

Consequently, allowing grounded theorists to use an integrative approach with social justice theories such as critical race theory creates a well-defined argument for their studies and

findings, and creates a well-defined way in which these injustices can be changed and reform statutes can be implanted to incorporate marginalized groups within the overall future dialogue and guidelines of the studied institution, which in this case is academia. Moreover, grounded theory “integrate[s] a critical stance [that] offers a corrective to narrow and limited [viewpoints, and] ... can supply analytic tools to move social justice studies beyond description, while keeping them anchored in their respective empirical worlds” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 326-327). With grounded theory’s attentiveness to detail and robust analysis there is concentration and emphasis on equity and equality, which appropriately lends itself to the tenets of CRT.

Charmaz (2014) noted that grounded theorists should not continue to perpetuate the status quo or “import set[s] of concepts such as hegemony and domination and paste them onto the realities in the field” (p. 327), in this case those of African American doctoral students within the context of predominantly White institutions. She proposes that in its place, we can question the basis of these well-defined narratives in academia and see to what extent they are valid, and how they are effect the everyday experiences of the participants (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, it is important to draw attention to the fact that grounded theory utilizes extant literature and the experiences of the participants and researcher to co-create themes that emerge from the data from a perspective that includes relevant information pertinent to this group within this setting, as well as raise awareness to provide or identify potential outcomes of the incorporation of the discovered information within the larger institutions.

### **Theoretical Orientation: Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an orientation that is well-established and “grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color”, it also compos(es) counter-stories...to challenge racism, sexism, and classism and work toward social justice” (Solórzano & Yosso,

2002, p. 23). Critical race theory looks at common themes as these are identified in the narratives of the participants. If participants discuss their experience within a racialized, classist lens, CRT provides a framework that “challenges White privilege, rejects the notion of ‘neutral’ research or ‘objective researchers’, and exposes deficit–informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 133).

The five tenets of critical race theory are counter-storytelling, the stability of racism in America, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). When applied, these tenets ensure that race is embedded in the entire research process from idea conception to analysis. CRT supports the study of the intersectionality of race, class, and gender while also challenging traditional research models such as phenomenology, grounded theory and ethnography. CRT and its methodology places particular emphasis on the interpretation of the role of race, class and gender in the analysis of qualitative methodologies arguing that methodologies created for the purpose of studying European American culture cannot then be adopted for the study of non-European cultures (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, the premise for using grounded theory is that this approach will allow researchers to first gather information from participants to understand their meaning of their personal experiences, allowing their experiences to emerge from the data. Upon rich data gathering, analysis, and member checking, CRT will place findings in dialogue with these assumptions whether or not the findings provide specific critique of the status quo. In this way CRT has the ability to unearth potential counter-narratives from participants’ stories.

In CRT, counter-storytelling is an active process built on the assumption that the stories told by marginalized people have the potential to provide critique of what has been normalized dialogues that enable racial stereotypes of marginalized groups (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

Through counter-storytelling/counter narratives, participants are given an opportunity to critically reflect on their experiences as people of color in White environments. It is also used to critically analyze the story of the participant to challenge privileged discourses, further giving voice to the marginalized group (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Solórzano and Yosso (2009) noted that there is a “master narrative”/“majoritarian story” in most research written by European Americans about people of color which distorts “the complexities and richness of a group’s cultural life ... [creating] a monovocal account [which] engender not only stereotyping but also curricular choices that result in representations in which fellow members of a group represented cannot recognize themselves (p. 134)”. The majoritarian stories, according to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), are stories that are written from the basis of White privilege which is seen as natural. They are stories that are riddled with layers of assumptions about people of color or people of the subordinate group. Many theories or methodologies come from this majoritarian group of privileged White, heterosexual, middle/upper class individuals and their understanding of what the world looks like for those who are not privileged.

The second tenet of CRT is the stability of racism or the permanent component of racism in American life (Bell, 1992 in DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). This tenet is an active move to expand the audience’s understanding of how racism is not only pervasive when identified overtly but can also be implemented in a covert institutional and systematic fashion. Permanence of racism is acknowledging that racism plays a dominant role in American politics, education, and economic and social domains (Hiraldo, 2010). In all these domains, Whites have the hierarchical privilege to benefit from the unconscious or conscious power that is held by the majority power in America. Making it apparent in CRT research that racism is pervasive and needs to be addressed when doing research with people of color, CRT researchers focus on inequality and lack of



acknowledgement of hate speech as well as microaggressions that may be happening in the field of education (Hirald, 2010; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004).

The third tenet, whiteness as property, refers to the right or power of possession that White people hold within the country: the right to use said power, and the right to overlook having the power (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Essentially, this is the lack of awareness that America has towards understanding the power that Whites in America hold in terms of education, power, and privilege. Whiteness as property examines how Whites in America have enjoyed the privileges of owning property whether it be in the physical sense, through education, or socio-politically throughout history. African Americans and other people of color have been seen as property throughout history, which inherently creates an unequal power dynamic. Even though slavery has ended, America has continually tried to keep African Americans from succeeding in different arenas (e.g., through the power of tracking in school systems/AP and Honors classes, creating glass ceilings, and having unfair practices in the workforce). Critical race theorists try to explain these properties of Whiteness by using stories to demonstrate disparities (Hirald, 2010).

The fourth tenet, interest convergence brings awareness to the reality that although there have been great strides within the African American community, in particular, the successes or the overcoming of racism has only been accomplished so far as the majority/White culture will allow (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Interest convergence contends that Whites in America will not allow African Americans or people of color to move forward unless there is a sizeable benefit for Whites. For example, in DeCuir and Dixon's (2004) article a student of color was admitted to a predominately White independent school for his athleticism rather than his academic scholarship. Although the student was in AP classes and on the Honor Roll, he was just seen as a means to an

end in terms of his athletic ability. Although this is on a smaller scale in terms of education, it is a concrete example of how Whites in America will only allow African Americans to benefit from policies or resources insofar as it benefits the majority in this society with some secondary gain. In other words, African Americans are being stifled in what they can accomplish through the use of institutionalized barriers that only allow this marginalized group to move forward as to appear fair but in essence being controlled in their ability to progress.

The fifth and final tenet of CRT is critique of liberalism. In critique of liberalism there are three main themes: “notion of colorblindness, the neutrality of the law and incremental change” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The scholars of CRT have posited that due to the historical nature of this country we would like to believe that we are colorblind, but in actuality it is a mask that people hide behind to promote inequality. Neutrality of law claims to see the laws in America as equal for all people; however, it is clear that not all laws are equal (Hiraldo, 2010). One concrete example is the disparaging incarceration rates and harsh sentences for African Americans as opposed to their White counterparts who commit the same or similar crimes and are given lighter sentences and are incarcerated at lower rates. Another facet to the critique of liberalism is incremental change. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) discuss the differences between what has been interchangeably used within the literature and everyday media such as the definitions of equity and equality. While the “American Dream” has been one of the components of America’s view of success, there is no acknowledgement of the vast amount of disparities that are inherent to America. So although it is projected that people have the same for an education and that hard work will bring success and fortune that is not always the case. This idea does not take into account the disproportionate lack of access to quality living, education and resources, which has been perpetuated through the implementation of slavery, Jim Crow Laws and the

institutionalized oppression of people of color, thus creating unfair footing for reaching the “American Dream.” Hence, the idea of equality is overwrought with implicit nuances. Equity, which according to Merriam Webster Dictionary (2016) is the “fairness or justice in the way people are treated,” should be the ultimate goal for creating a system that provides equal opportunity to everyone. The purpose of utilizing CRT and its five tenets is to take a deeper look behind rhetoric that has been taught and disseminated by the majority and to debunk untruths while allowing an authentic depiction of, in this case, the experiences of African Americans in doctoral programs at predominately White institutions.

With a thorough understanding of the underpinnings of CRT, it is clear that the operating tenets can be eloquently explored through grounded theory. Working from the framework of CRT, it is imperative that as a researcher I am open to understand and explain how my point of views and experiences play into the overall trajectory of this study. These are discussed further and outlined in the researcher positionality statement and Appendix B. Through my participants and the continued use of the proponents of grounded theory, this study sought to provide authentic, empirically based implications that can help universities and faculty better understand the inherent injustices that African American students face as well as use the results to create a better environment for African and African American students.

### **Participant Recruitment and Sampling**

The university chosen for this research is a tier one, large, public flagship Research I university in the southwestern region of the United States. This university was chosen due to its diversity in degree programs, its central location in the southwest region, and the racial demographic mirroring the official U.S. Census data in 2010 (U.S. Census data, 2010).

Upon contact with a professor at this university, the professor agreed to allow me to collaborate with him and his research team on the execution of this project. As a professor at this institution, agreed to be an outside contributor for this research study. Participants were recruited through an advertisement sent out on the university's graduate student listervs. Snowball sampling occurred through the aid of participants who were able to contact colleagues who were interested in participating in the study. Noy (2008) maintains that snowball sampling or snowballing is one of the most employed means of sampling in social science qualitative research. This sampling technique permits the researcher to use initial participants or informants to identify other potential participants that may fit the criteria of the study. With the use of snowball sampling, the researcher interviewed participants until the study reached saturation. Through constant comparative analysis and coding during the collection process, the researcher can maintain veracity and assessed when saturation was reached. According to Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), "saturation is the key to excellent qualitative work" (p. 60). Saturation is defined "as the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook" (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 65) or the stage in a research project where no new material or themes are identified in the data (interviews) (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson also note that it is the "gold standard by which purposive sample sizes are determined" (p. 60). The researcher obtained a total of 15 participants through this method of recruitment and verification of saturation.

In order to maintain the highest integrity of research standards, as advertisement was distributed via graduate student listervs as noted earlier. Two participants from the outside investigator's research lab were also a part of the sampling population. Potential participants needed to meet the following criteria: (1) African-American doctoral student; (2) a social

sciences or humanities major; and (3) be in the 2nd year or beyond in their doctoral program.

Fifteen students who met the aforementioned criteria agreed to participate in the study. Potential participants interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher via email. Meeting times convenient for the potential participants were set up and both parties set up a public meeting place that provided privacy.

### **University Demographics**

The university chosen for this study was a flagship university in the southwestern region of the United States. This particular institution, is spread over 431 acres of land and houses 18 colleges and schools on campus. For the academic year of 2015-2016 when the study was conducted, the university was home to 50,000+ students (undergraduate and graduate students) (Facts & Figures, 2016). There are 79 doctoral degree programs offered at this institution that fall under: Doctorates of Philosophy, Doctorates of Education, Doctorates of Audiology, and Doctorates of Musical Arts (Programs & Contacts, 2016)

Demographically, ninety percent of the students on campus were in-state students with the remaining approximately 10% of being out-of-state and international student who represented over 100 countries. In terms of gender make-up of the university, 51.1% of students were female and 48.9% were male. Racial and ethnic breakdown of the students were: 45.1% White, 19.5% Hispanic, 17.2% Asian, 3.9% Black, .2% American Indian, .1% Pacific Islander and 1.1% of students identified as unknown (Facts & Figures, 2016).

This university in particular is embedded within the fourth largest cities within its state per capita and prides itself on being the most highly educated community in the United States. This city also is known for its art and music festivals and communities, identifying itself as being the city of no majority and also considered the liberal city within its state. Within the context of

the university, it is seen as an added component to a large city that has great pride and heritage. Within the past couple of years however, there have been significant racial incidents both on and off campus including: one White fraternity engaging in bleach bombing African American students, a second White fraternity having pledges pick cotton off of the historical Black fraternity lawn as well as documented racial confrontations with students and community members (McGuinness, 2012).

### **Participant Demographics**

The participants for this study consisted of individuals who self-identified as Black/African American or of African descent. The participants were selected on a first-come first-serve basis. The participants were eleven females (N=11) and four males (N=4), who ranged from 3rd year doctoral students to 6th year doctoral students. Table 3.1 gives a more detailed breakdown of participants' demographic information. Each participant was interviewed either in person or via Skype. A total of eleven (N=11) interviews were conducted in person and four (N=4) interviews were conducted via Skype.

**Table 3.1: Participant Demographic Information.**

<u><b>Gender</b></u>	<u><b>Year in Program</b></u>	<u><b>Major</b></u>	<u><b>Enrollment Status</b></u>	<u><b>Racial/Ethnic Identity</b></u>
Male	5 <sup>th</sup> year	Educational Psychology	Full-Time	African American/Black
Female	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Advertising	Full-Time	Black
Female	4 <sup>th</sup> year	School Psychology	Full- Time	Black
Male	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Cultural Studies in Education	Full Time	Black
Male	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Counseling Psychology	Full-Time	African, Black, African American, African Decent
Female	4 <sup>th</sup> year	Educational Psychology	Full- Time	African American
Female	5 <sup>th</sup> year	Counseling Psychology	Full-Time	Jamaican/Canadian
Female	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	Anthropology	Full-Time	African American
Female	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	African and African Diaspora	Full-Time	Afro-Brazilian
Female	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	History	Full-Time	Black/African
Female	6 <sup>th</sup> year	Counseling Psychology	Full-Time	Multiracial- Black American
Female	5 <sup>th</sup> year	School Psychology	Full-Time	African American
Male	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	Higher Education Leadership	Full-Time	Black/Mexican
Female	5 <sup>th</sup> year	Performance Studies	Full-Time	Black
Female	6 <sup>th</sup> year	Counseling Psychology	Part-Time	Nigerian American

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative interviewing was utilized for this study, more specifically the use of thorough and focused ethnographic observation and interviewing skills were utilized to gather data.

Qualitative interviewing allows qualitative researchers to enter a system and gather information not only through interviews but also with the utilization of observations; thus creating thick, rich

data (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) artfully described data collection as an exciting adventure in which the researcher is not only invested in the stories of the participants but makes a concerted effort to understand the cultural, environmental and educational systems that influence their narrative. As a researcher, it is imperative that you understand and communicate your role as a qualitative inquirer to build rapport with the participants, due to the researcher's identity as an outside individual of the university system. As Charmaz noted each researcher has his/ her own ideas or understanding of the research strategy. For the purposes of this study, I am taking the role of an outside interviewer at this particular institution, and am being transparent that I am also a member of the larger community of African American doctoral students, trying to understand the lived experiences of my peers through in-depth questioning and observation. As an active participant in the research, I am able to understand my own values, biases and background before entering the system as it could affect my participation in the study. In order to minimize my influence on the telling of the participants' narratives, I was able to identify these struggles through deep reflection, journaling, and consultation with committee members. From a Straussian point of view of grounded theory the researcher acknowledges the self as a vessel but also utilizes outside resources (i.e, member-checking and meomo-ing) to maintain the integrity of the research. This approach to grounded theory or qualitative inquiry aids the researcher in gaining "multiple views of each incident for a researcher to ponder... [and thus] generates solid data for systematically comparing and analyzing incidents (Charmaz, 2014, p. 23).

By taking such an approach to gathering data, a researcher is able to provide a robust process by which he/ she has created strong and substantial support for the results of his or her analysis. By providing the audience with "rich, detailed and focused data", the researcher can utilize the voices of participants embedded within their cultural context, background and



experiences to provide a coherent, well-articulated narrative (Charmaz, 2014, p. 23). In this study, I used the transcriptions of interviews, memo-ing, intensive observational notes and understanding of the context in order to collect data.

The interviews were conducted during the months of August and October of 2015. The interviews were conducted at the participants' university and held in a desired space on campus where they felt comfortable, empowered, and unafraid to speak freely about their own stories. This was important to the integrity of the research because I wanted to provide the participants with a space in which they could express themselves freely and have the autonomy to choose their place of comfort.

Each student was to provide informed consent and was notified of their ability to stop the study at any point if they felt uncomfortable. Each participant received the provision of a gift card at the completion of his or her interview. Students were requested to read and sign the consent form, and had the option of accepting or declining their participation in the study. Once the informed consent was signed or verbally acknowledged (during skype interviews), participants were asked to fill out a demographic sheet and begin the interview process. Aside from correspondences for the interviews, the participants were contacted in March to conduct member checks by phone to ensure that the participants agreed with the narrative formed based on their interviews.

The interviews lasted approximately an hour to two hours long in length, and were audiotaped with two voice recorders. The audio recordings were placed in a locked cabinet in a locked office and were not available to any other individual. Before each interview, I sought to build rapport with the participants, then explained the informed consent, and explained the procedures and the subsequent follow-up for member-checking in the future. Through the

utilization of a semi-structured interview guide, I queried the participants about their experiences. In addition, the implementation of an intentional probe for further understanding when participants' accounts opened up new dimensions of their experience allowed me to follow up on key themes that were significant to the participants (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, through the use of intentional probing I gathered more detailed and thick data during the interviews. I also notified the participants of their choice to not answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable or that they wished not to speak of. Once the interviews were completed, participants were provided with a Visa gift card if completed in person or a Visa electronic gift card if the interview was completed via Skype. The information on these audiotapes was transcribed by rev.com, a reliable confidential transcription service that was contracted to transform the audio files into transliterate files. Prior to data analysis, the information gathered during this study was authenticated through an intensive process of validating the transcripts from rev.com. The researcher compared each transcript to the original audio files to ensure that the participants' words were transcribed verbatim and that no meanings during the interview were lost through translation.

### **Analysis**

As a researcher, I chose the Straussian method of grounded theory, which follows an analytical process that focuses on open (initial) coding, axial coding and selective (theoretical) coding (Charmaz, 2006; Cooney, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Heath & Cawley, 2004;). As previously discussed in the chapter, grounded theory stems from two schools of thought where one (Glaser) focuses on creating theory from what has already been established in the literature and allowing that to become influential in the analysis process (Heath & Crawley, 2004). In contrast a Straussian perspective uses the extant literature as part of the research process but

allows themes to emerge from the data. This allows a greater likelihood for the voices of those who have been previously marginalized to be heard without getting lost in previous literature (Heath & Crawley, 2004).

To begin understanding the core ideas behind this school of analysis, it is important to note that it is seen as an art of pulling apart pieces of data into smaller, more manageable pieces. This is done through initial coding, axial coding in which comparative analysis is done and finally, selective coding which is done by trying to understand each portion of the study together thus creating a theory.

Codes within grounded theory are the building blocks of the analysis of data; Charmaz (2006) noted that it is the bones to one's research. Open coding is described as an initial look at the data in which coders must remain close to the words of the participant and curb the inclination to create any meaning or "leaps" to categorize what the participant is saying (Charmaz, 2006). This is the part of the analysis process that keeps researchers accountable and does not allow for application of meaning to data because they have to use the words of the participant to summarize the data in smaller chunks. In this study during the initial coding there was a total of 13 initial codes that were significantly prominent. These codes which were feelings of invisibility, community involvement, advisor relationships and mentoring. These codes were then cataloged into larger chunks of categories that were partnered to create the beginning of a greater narrative (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

When this step of initial coding is complete, the researcher is expected to have hundreds of codes because he or she is not yet trying to create meaning or connection of codes. This allows the researcher to remain open to the experience of the participant, remain close to transcript data, and create short codes (Charmaz, 2006; Heath & Crawley, 2004). The way a

researcher does this is by first trying to compare common codes that arise while coding data and also identifying codes that show up across multiple data sets.

Axial coding, then followed in the analysis process which focuses on categorizing the data into similar groupings and comparing the codes that were developed in the first stage of the grounded theory. Then followed theoretical coding of the data, at this stage, concepts from the CRT framework are attended to and incorporated into the analysis if relevant to the emerging categories (Heath & Cawley, 2004). Heath and Crawley (2004) emphasized that this portion of the analysis is not a linear process; researchers may find themselves having to alter their conceptualizations based on the incorporation and shifting of the impact of differing codes.

The final step in this process is selective coding. This stage is seen as a continual process of axial coding because it is an extension of working with the data and keeping it true to participants' experiences and words, and putting it together in a fashion that is coherent without manipulation. An incorporation of theoretical information is added to either defend or confirm the data at hand. Axial coding, as noted by Charmaz (2014), provides a way for the researcher to synthesize the data into categories and subcategories. This process of synthesis should be linked together in a relevant and authentic manner that provides an accurate narrative embedded in the cultural, environmental and systemic accuracies of the participants' (Charmaz, 2014). Through the creation of the overall themes, researchers utilize the original transcripts and words of the participants to substantiate their findings, which often requires re-examining the data, followed by a quality check with the participants to ensure that their narratives are being portrayed accurately (Charmaz, 2014). Once the member-checking is completed, then the researcher can integrate all of these above components to create themes or narratives that represent the findings of their study.

Through this model, I was able to find many core themes that will be discussed in Chapters IV and V. Grounded theory as viewed through a CRT lens has been shown to be an intensive methodology that is grounded in self-reflection and checking in with the participants. It has allowed for continued exploration and questioning of the themes by fellow colleagues, and integration of information found in Appendix B. Through the researcher subjectivity statement below, I was able to show how the overall process was completed, what thought processes were followed, and how the information was validated.

### **Trustworthiness and Reflexivity**

Concepts such as trustworthiness, and authenticity are concepts within qualitative inquiry. Within qualitative inquiry, researchers conduct their due diligence through “bracketing, member checks, and triangulation” (Maxwell, 2013) in order to uphold these pillars. The researcher does not seek to create a controlled environment that is overly contrived and inauthentic, but seeks instead to put different checkpoints into place to safeguard that the information provided is authentic and accurate.

In order to be a trustworthy researcher, it is essential that a researcher remains close to the transcripts and is consistent with the words of the participants, not misconstruing any of the topics or making intangible connections. It was my intentions to keep the two main threats to my study, researcher bias and reactivity, in the forefront of my analytic process while conducting the study (Maxwell, 2013). This is achieved by implementing reflexivity, which is the careful examination of the biases and values that the researcher may hold and discuss how these may influence the research process (Darawsheh, 2014). Reflexivity in conjunction with member checking and journaling can provide an academically rigorous study because it works to limit the influence of bias on the research process (Darawsheh, 2014; Engward & Davis, 2015).

Darawsheh (2014) noted, “reflexivity refers to the continuous process of self-reflection that researchers engage in to generate awareness about their actions, feelings and perceptions ...

Reflexivity in research improves transparency in the researcher’s subjective role, both in conducting research and analyzing data, and allows the researcher to apply the necessary changes to ensure the credibility of their findings” (p. 561). Reflexivity was conducted through consistent journaling/memo-writing throughout the process of the study from data collection to analysis.

Memo writing for this study will followed Engward and Davis’s (2015) stricter format where the researcher identified his or her perspective, interests and positionality about the research topic, and an outside qualitative expert will provide critique of the memos to ensure that bias is addressed. Memos can also help the researchers identify their misconceptions, or possible over-identification with the material. Through memos and conversations with other researchers the primary author can help control biased perspectives within the study.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a Haitian American female who is a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia, I have a strong personal interest in this research topic. As a member of the demographic population that is being researched, it was important that I remained as objective as possible throughout the whole process by checking in with external sources who were able to provide feedback on the clarity and relevance of my questions. This was one of the most important steps for me because I did not want to ask the participants leading questions that would invalidate the study. Another way in which I tried to keep my biases or experiences appropriately separated from the voices of the participants by journaling or memo-ing throughout the data collection and analysis processes and consulted with my committee to ensure I did not incorporate my own biases into the participants’ narratives. Although I fit into the demographic qualifications of my

study, it is important to identify myself as an ally entering this system, because since I do not attend this particular university, I cannot speak to the participants' contextual experiences.

This was important to notice not only due to my role as a grounded theorist but also it was important to understand the parallel processes that were happening between myself and the participants. During the collection of data, I noticed that participants felt a shared background with me as the interviewer and I would often have to ask them to elaborate when they would make statements such as “you know what I mean”. As a growing researcher this experience was not only a growth process but a way to acknowledge or bring to light the narratives of my colleagues. Through my process as the researcher it became apparent that my identity of not only being African American but Haitian American became prominent a connection between other participants who also considered themselves as not only African American but also being a part of another segment of the African Diaspora. So, it became apparent that it is important to broaden the idea of African Americans in doctoral programs to African American and students within the African Diaspora in order to accurately acknowledge my participants' identity.

### **Limitations**

One limitation for this study is the limited generalizability of the study. Generalizability is the researchers' ability to extend their research results and conclusions to a broader population (Maxwell, 2013). Although qualitative studies are not to be seen as generalizable in the traditional terms, within grounded theory it is important to understand the relationships of how themes can be translated into theory. With this understanding, given the theoretical frameworks of the findings, it should be noted that this is specific to students in the social sciences and humanities and their experiences may not extend to other fields. Through the in-depth stories of the particular participants within this study, their lived experiences, or points of view, a

theoretical model has been built to understand the relational connectivity of the themes, which is highlighted in chapter V.

Another limitation for this study may be that this data was collected from one institution that has unique characteristics. Due to its particular geographic position in the southwest, environment may be a unique factor that plays a role in the experiences of the students. A third limitation may be that the students recruited in the study responded to snowballing and flyers, which may be influenced by a community of interest that want to have an impact on external policies and are comfortable with sharing certain aspects of their experiences (Galea & Tracy, 2007). Again this is important to understand the context of where the researcher has collected that data to understand its ability to be understood in alternate settings.



## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to gain greater knowledge about the lived experiences of African American doctoral students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). More specifically, the study sought to glean an understanding of how the participants experience and create meaning of their doctoral journey. The findings of this study were informed by a critical race grounded theory approach of the experiences of 15 participants at a predominantly White southwestern institution in the United States. The doctoral degree is a highly pursued degree and can often be difficult to complete; therefore, it is important to understand what obstacles, if any, students face as well as what factors aid students in their degree program. In the face of seemingly higher admission rates of African American doctoral students, there appears to be a lack of acknowledgment of the disparaging retention rates of this population in the completion of their degree programs as compared to other subpopulations. By studying the experiences of African American doctoral students, this study contributes to research concerning the understanding of the experience of this particular subgroup of doctoral students who have been underrepresented within doctoral programs and the literature.

Through comparative analysis and the use of the Straussian method of coding, categorizing and thematic creation, five overall themes emerged from the data. These themes represent common experiences and constructs that were salient to the participants' journey to the doctoral degree. The themes emerged through in vivo coding and analysis, and member-checking with the participants to ensure the interpretation of the data remained close to the language of the participants and depicted each participant's data accurately. The five themes are: 1) "Space," 2)

Being Other, 3) Support, 4) Growth and 5) Wellness. The use of expansive memos (see appendix C) describe the construction of each theme and its constituent subcategories. Each theme has prominent subcategories that are essential to understanding the robust meanings of the respective overarching themes. The list of themes and their respective subcategories are presented in Table 4.1.

### Themes

**Table 4.1. Themes and Categories**

Themes	Subcategories
“Space”	“Look like me” Safety/Comfort/Refuge Acknowledgment of current and historical events Place of healing (mentally and emotionally)
Support	Mentorship Relationships with Advisors Expectations Experiences Outside Support: Family Church/Spirituality Community (Fraternity, Volunteer, etc.) Friends/Cohort Significant Other
Being Other	Dominant cultural views and theories Stereotyping, discrimination, microaggressions Invisibility People’s inability to understand Unwanted in university Space Code-Switching Ignorance of current and historical impact
Growth	Journey Navigation through unfamiliar space Patience and perseverance “Politics” Self- Identity Becoming a consummate scholar in field
Wellness	Stress Illness/ “Sanity” Coping skills Support systems

## **“Space”**

### **“Space/ Counter-Space / Community”**

The theme of space is one that strongly emerged from the transcripts. It is a prominent theme that resonated throughout the entire process of data collection and analysis. Participants used space to describe two poignant yet distinct concepts: one of conceptual space or figurative space that incorporates the concepts of temporal, intrapersonal, and interpersonal use of space. Many participants noted that in this conceptual space they had the opportunity to be heard and validated. The second is a physical space that celebrated African and African American culture. Participants indicated that in these spaces they felt they had unspoken shared customs and values as well as a place where they felt protected, celebrated, and validated. The participants also noted they felt their experiences were normalized in these particular spaces regarding the contextual experiences of being African American students in a predominantly White environment.

Within literature, space has been defined by various authors as having differing conceptualizations and definitions. The contexts in which it is used is important to identify in order to sufficiently understand how it is utilized in the narratives of peoples experiences. My study has found similar findings as Brown and Pickerill (2009) in terms of identifying space as a creation of environment where people are able to reflect on their emotional needs and the difficulties of impact activism/microaggressions. However, it is unique in its delivery of how space is interpreted, Brown and Pickerill discuss space in terms of primarily discussing activism however, this study discusses space in term of its utilization by African American doctoral students creating security and community at PWIs. In this space they could learn new practices or coping skills to help them sustain emotional balance and resilience. Furthermore, Brown and Pickerill (2009) noted that it is important that within these spaces individuals practice self-care

and maintain healthy relationships within and outside of their programs. Various authors have indicated that the creation of space is essential for the growth of African American scholars due to the subtle and inherent microaggressions they experience through interactions on campus, within the classroom and in overall institutions (Kennebrew, 2002; Pittman, 2012; Schwartz, 2014; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Schwartz (2014) provided further clarity with a four-pronged definition of space that incorporates the practice of self-care and maintenance: place (physical space), temporal space, intrapersonal space, and interpersonal space. Schwartz noted that place is a physical space; and more specifically, it is a community-oriented place that individuals can convene to help process various stressors and help build relationships and community. Temporal space is most understood as a mental and emotional environment where individuals can convene in order to gain knowledge about past histories and work together to link how it impacts current societal difficulties. Thus, this space is supposed to create a space for advocacy and for scholars to commune and create movements for change. Within temporal space is the concept of social imagination which is defined as the utilization of community ideas to create change. Intrapersonal space is identified as an internal place in which a person can do critical self-reflective healing that is needed when they are in difficult life-altering settings that challenge the boundaries of their knowledge. Finally, interpersonal space is a setting where people can commune for collective and communal solidarity that affirms their experiences (p. 119-122).

Schwartz (2014) noted that it is imperative to discuss space within the context of critical race theory and indicated that within the context of space rather than using space in general terms, counter-space is more appropriate. He states that space can be utilized to describe many different populations and can be applied to various contexts; however, when space is utilized as

an environment to address racialized incidents and provide solace for marginalized groups, counter-space would be a better word to utilize for this arena. Schwartz (2014) noted that counter-space is built to offset or respond to the negative experiences and feelings that are felt by African American scholars in predominantly White spaces. Thus, a counter-space would be an environment that affirms the marginalized groups' experiences and encounters on campus. Therefore, taking the concept of space to a more specific idea of counter-space, which is dedicated to the healing and support of African American scholars, would allow there to be a better understanding that this space had to be created to provide growth and safety.

Brown and Pickerill (2009) initially identified these four dimensions of space, as noted by Schwartz (2014), to mitigate or aid in the understanding of the need for healing spaces for social activists. Participation in academia can be a form of social activism; there are many underlying connections between social activism and the active participation of African American students on predominantly White campuses as noted in Chapter II. In predominantly White settings, African American academics often feel as though they are unwelcomed guests and often feel as though they need to prove that they are competent in their field in order for both peers and professors to respect or hear their contributions (Kennebrew, 2002). The traditional space of academia can often be an uninviting place for African American scholars; due to the physical and psychological impact of experienced these microaggressions (Brown & Pickerill, 2009), one could claim that African Americans at PWIs must become scholar activists for their academic trajectory having to highlight and address possible disparities identified during their own educational journey (Kennebrew, 2002). Thus, with a reflection on the literature and definition of space within the transcripts, below is an in depth look at how the theme emerged.

## Place

Place as a component of space can be described as a physical environment that students identify as “safe space;” it is more than simply a building or room in which students feel safe but an icon or symbol of community, fellowship and the celebration of African and African American culture. Participants indicated that at predominantly White campuses, they often felt as if “*spaces here at the university... doesn't feel as welcoming... I feel like I have to put on a façade for most of the time*” (Participant 8). This participant noted that she had to always be “on” because she felt as though she could not make any mistakes as an African American doctoral student in fear that she would be stereotyped. The quote chosen was part of a dialogue that illustrated a need for a place where she could be comfortable and not have to have the added pressure of fighting typical stereotypes. Other participants agreed with this sentiment and noted that places created on campus where they can commune and be their authentic self allowed them to commune and “*develop [my]self in space in a way that I felt that it was important for me*” (Participant 6).

Place can be created within a room, building or office; more specifically, it is a location on campus that celebrates the cultural aspects of African and African American culture. Many participants noted that there was a new building on campus that the professors and administrators advocated for and that it was a refuge for students and faculty to create a place for growth as an academician. One participant said that “refuge” and “*space [is needed] because of isolation and needing that community... in that sort of sense [that is] really special and needed.*” (Participant 4). Sue and Sue (2010) indicated that these tacit messages within academic buildings and on campus can have adverse psychological and mental impacts on students of color. The discomfort of not feeling like one belongs in a particular setting coupled with the feelings of invisibility on

campus or the feelings of not being understood by others can be an extremely isolating and stifling place for one to thrive (Sue & Sue, 2010).

In the new building on campus, the building directors provided many offices, classrooms and convening places where students are allowed to convene, do work and have a space for community gatherings. Participants noted that oftentimes, the administrators would bring provocative speakers of various disciplines to discuss various topics that aided them with understanding common concerns in maintaining healthy preserving activities on campus. According to participants, the purpose of doing programing within this building/department is to challenge the status quo and inspire professors and students to continue creating space where they can have informed conversations about topics that are relevant to the overall Black community.

*“I put on a panel, shortly after this big racial thing that involved balloons full of bleach that White Greeks were throwing on Black people's heads, claiming that it had nothing to do with race, we put on a panel to deal with various race-related situations that were happening on campus. We had the chief of police, and the president at [the local] NAACP, an attorney, someone from student activities, and somebody else all on the panel, and students could just pose these questions because that situation had been going on for a while, and the police and nobody were doing anything about it because they were saying you couldn't say that it was particularly race related. It was just this whole big ordeal. Then there was just a lot of questions because we know that it's this White fraternity... Not a whole lot came from that, but it was helpful for students who were angry and upset about the situation to confront some of the people that had the authority to do stuff, like the chief of police and other people. It also allowed us to have, with the*

*NAACP president there, and the attorney, was a Black attorney, they also gave us suggestions about how to potentially protect ourselves from these things or how to... Especially the attorney was talking about, they're saying they need evidence, and these are some things you can do when you see these things happening.” -Participant 5*

Many participants indicated that having this department and scholarly works available to them has helped foster the building of the intra and interpersonal aspects of space through the availability of classes that help build their knowledge of African American scholars. Thus, creating curriculums that are providing them with relevant information that helps them not only provide language to their experiences within academia but expose them to varying perspectives of scholarly thought within their fields. The participants were able to further explore their own prior educative experiences and have greater self-reflective thoughts and conversations to help them better expand their belief systems and their own identity as scholars. This self-reflective process allows the participants to have more informed conversations with scholars about issues that are pertinent to their field of study.

Lastly, this place/space serves as a common well-known place where students and professors could call town hall meetings to discuss national as well as campus-wide oppressive incidents. During the height of the racial tensions within the national crisis of police brutality in many American cities and campus wide racial incidents, this was a space where they could convene and discuss the psychological toll it was taking on each participant. It was also a place that they could discuss how to maintain a healthy mindset and have healthy dialogue about forms of activism that can be done in order to help their communities. While utilizing this place to do a great deal of heavy emotional uplifting, they were able to utilize it to have a temporal space to discuss the historical implications that led to present day struggles.



Consequently, as noted in critical race theory (CRT) as described in Chapter II, interest convergence in coordination with the concept of counter-space both discussed the majority culture's hidden agenda of allowing marginalized groups to benefit from certain aspects within this particular institution insofar as to benefit the majority culture. This can be seen through "safe space's" provided on campus that can be seen as being inclusive but conversely be a way of trying to contain and maintain an image of being inclusive but does not celebrate African American culture throughout campus. This concept can provide a conceptual reasoning as to why many participants feel as though they benefited from classes, security on campus, as well as campus resources only as much as it is given to White students; and they were only allowed additional support in specific places. The lack of culturally relevant paintings and artwork hints to the unwelcome feeling that participants felt; and on this particular campus, statues and street names that were built as dedications to past presidents and confederate leaders delivers covert messages that African American culture is unwanted. Therefore, the implication of creating a place is important to opening up an inclusive environmental atmosphere on campus.

### **Academic Space (Temporal Space)**

Academic space is an environment that students and faculty convene and work together in a scholarly fashion to celebrate and understand historical scholarly works within the African and African American culture. Academic space allows students to learn about historical scholarly theories that are not often taught within campuses that tend to only teach from a Eurocentric point of view. Therefore, academic space could be utilized to engage in healthy dialogue to aid in navigation through the system of academia. It is a space where scholars can discuss institutional problems needed to be resolved on campus and intrapersonal struggles. More specifically, it is a space where scholars could create an inclusive not just tolerate climate

on campus as well as brainstorm campus-wide initiatives that help White professors and students understand the impact of invalidation and marginalization on campus. Participants' indicated that they were able to learn from more advanced scholars about tips and tools they could utilize within the classroom setting to be heard and have their point of views taken into consideration in the overall narrative of their classroom environment.

When two highly racialized events happened on campus, participants noted that both the place and temporal space allowed them to work through their feelings and fears about the incidents. They noted that the greater African American community on campus came together, through programming held in the Black Studies building, to discuss the incidents of bleach bombs thrown on Black students and overt intimidation and scare tactics that was used on African American students on campus at night. Attendees of the meetings were able to not only brainstorm about the safety measures and steps that should be taken if the acts should happen to them but they were also able to discuss the implicit and explicit impacts that it had on their feelings of safety. One of the participants noted that there was not much action taken by campus administrators, *"It was just this whole big ordeal talking about, they're saying [we] need evidence..."* Despite this, it was comforting to know that there was a campus community that helped support them physically and mentally.

Several participants explained that this temporal space was a constructive space for them to process nationwide and community problems in a constructive manner whereas they had previously been invalidated on campus. They noted that they were able to engage in painful and tense dialogue about national events of police brutality in America and how it impacted their day to day psyche. Participant # noted that *"reading [about the historical factors of racism and the implementation of oppression was] depressing me or... getting [me] sad... getting all that, I*

*can't just push back the books and walk away and do something else and completely forget about it because this is my life as well.*" This participant in particular was discussing her role as a social justice advocate within her field and having to digest the multiple levels of painful emotional, spiritual and psychological visuals of the very thing she is trying to educate her peers about. She noted that in order to remain what many participants identify as "*sane*" is to engage with other social justice advocates who are trying to create a greater movement in other departments. She ended up gravitating toward other African American advocates in other departments because although her advisor was well-intentioned she did not feel particularly supported. More specifically she felt her struggles were not adequately tended to due to her advisor's inability to alter her perspective to envision that of an African American scholar.

The PWI's surrounding ultimately had an impact on the psyche of each individual student. The participants noted that it took a great deal of self-reflective analysis and self-care to work through their experiences, this is further discussed in the intrapersonal section below.

### **Intrapersonal**

Intrapersonal space is defined as an internal place where a person can do critical self-reflective healing that is needed when in difficult life-altering settings that challenge the boundaries of one's knowledge (Schwartz, 2014). Within this study, participants noted that as they moved through the academic journey they have experienced many internal struggles with self-doubt, growth within their self-identity (sexual orientation, racial identity and gender identity), and struggles with mental health concerns and confidence. As one participant noted, *"It's important because you cannot separate your growth [from] racialized growth and educational growth"* and he further articulates that he was able to incorporate his growth within his *"own personality, understanding myself ... maturity... and intelligence."* Many participants

noted that with intrapersonal introspection they were able to utilize what they learned from their experiences throughout their journey and from mentors to become who they are as scholars. Participants also noted that going through a period of impostor phenomenon or feelings of incompetency and having to fake it through the program, was challenging yet necessary in some ways. As mentioned in Chapter I impostor syndrome is defined as feelings that high-achieving have during times of distress that are centered around beliefs of perceived fraudulence or phoniness despite their successes (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991). This syndrome can cause distress for doctoral students and cause immeasurable negative consequences on their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996).

Participants who felt this indicated that they were either challenged to defend their own understanding of themselves or their own knowledge in order to work through various milestones such as comprehensive exams. Each participant discussed various stages in their own journey with impostor syndrome but noted that it was something that they needed to work through cognitively by themselves. Participant 6 illustrates her struggle with becoming more confident in her work and writing.

*“Because I had history before in the department of linguistics struggling for turning in my thesis, I didn’t turn it in. I decided to drop at the end of the program because I got sick. I doubt[ed] myself saying, “Am I able to write those things? Am I able to do this since I was not able to do this before? Am I imagining something that’s maybe not practical?... This time here I was able to do it with a lot of struggle...Because I still have problems with anxieties to training things. I’m very anxious of having criticism, I have to work around. I’m very, very anxious and I take a lot of time to turn in stuff. That was in the last minute.- Participant 6*

Participants highlight throughout their interviews that before their doctoral journey, they relied on grades for validation from others but this coping mechanism only worked in the beginning of their doctoral programs. Oftentimes this created a sense of security that was fleeting; however, once they were able to work through feeling like they were impostors they felt a greater sense of self and thus appeared to have better relationships with others. Once participants were able to work through their impostor syndrome they noted that they were able to have greater connections and better interpersonal relationships with others.

### **Interpersonal**

Interpersonally, participants found that it was comforting to see others who “*looks like me*” because, as Bell (2008) in Urrieta and Villenas (2013) noted, seeing African American faculty and mentors on campus allows for more diversity and learning. Thus the presence of Black faculty and mentors on campus provides an intrinsic implicit understanding that being an African American scholar in the realm of higher academia is attainable. The presence of African American scholars within this space fosters participants’ overall identity as an academician. African American faculty on campus is source of support in terms of mentorship and advisement that provides a safe space to express concerns, communicate their struggles and get guidance on how to move through academia as an African American student within the environment of a White institution.

This particular space allowed participants to feel, as participant 1 describes, a “*higher feeling of comfortability*” because they felt people within their classes had foundational grounded experiences, understandings and culturally specific knowledge that is unique to African American culture. It was easier for participants to talk to peers who were also African American because they did not have to “*put on a façade*” or be stereotyped for the way in which they

spoke. Participants also noted that it was refreshing to have both students and professors in the department who could validate their experience and help them work through challenges they faced in becoming the consummate professional and crafting their own professional identity.

Space or counter-space, as identified by Schwartz (2014), is an extremely important aspect of a healthy experience and of growth and support for African American doctoral students at PWIs. Through examination of the extant literature and the imperial data collected, one can further understand the thematic categorization and importance of participants' understanding and meanings of holding space and community. Participants' were emphatic about finding a space where they could recuperate and exercise healthy self-care because, as they noted, support from family and friends is invaluable but the support of people who are within an experience with you and can understand the pressure of the academic rigor that accompanies striving for the highest degree within a particular environment is unparalleled. Although there is the theme of support, it is important to differentiate Space/Counter-space as its own theme due to its impact on student success.

### **Support: Mentorship and Outside Support Systems**

According to Kennebrew (2002), African American students in graduate programs often feel abandoned due to a lack of communication with advisors and academic staff. Griffin, Muniz, and Smith (2016) note that although there have been extensive changes in the recruitment of students of color within higher education, there has not been a focus on the retention of students once they enter program. According to Griffin et al. (2016), there is a lack of understanding around the cultural factors that may attract students and retain students of color within these graduate programs. They note that many students leave due to lack of "departmental integration and socialization" (p. 26). Kennebrew (2002) further indicates due to lack of culturally sensitive

or inclusive spaces within the degree programs oftentimes scholars believe that many institutions only included the cultural sensitivity and inclusion efforts during the orientation process, with very little changes within the implementation of learned tools of providing an inviting environment after recruitment (Griffin et al,2016). This often leaves students feeling like unwelcomed guests within a department that will become their home department for years to come.

Support was the second theme that emerged from the data, it was also interwoven in the fabric of the participants' feeling of confidence within their degree programs. Support comes in many forms within the doctoral process, most often scholars have discussed feelings of social integration within the departmental environment, connection to community (on-campus and off-campus), advisory relationship, and emotional/psychological support from support systems such as family, friends, mentors, and spiritual community (Ellis, 2001; Griffin et al., 2016; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Support was a personal and poignant theme in the analysis and had multi-layered components such as: emotional, academic, spiritual and social support. Participants' were deliberate in discussing how these support systems were essential in their "*sanity*" as well as critical in their developmental evolution. They also noted that the different components of their support systems aided them in various aspects of their lives as a doctoral student. Many noted that their support system allowed them to discuss how it aided in them in becoming more confident in their understanding of themselves as academics. They also noted that these relationships helped them navigate novel systems on campus, become well-rounded members of their communities as well as aiding them in balancing multiple life roles.

It should be noted that many participants indicated that each of these support systems whether in conjunction or standalone were critical in the successful management and completion

of essential milestones; however, participants were explicit that it was a combination of many of the support pillars that grounded and sustained them through their endeavors. The doctoral program was an environment that participants could not have prepared themselves for because of the unique role they play as an active participant/leader in their education. Participants noted that the adjustment process and integration process in these spaces is unique and they oftentimes were autonomous in figuring out how their own culture, values and beliefs could fit in with the values and beliefs of their departments. Some participants noted that utilizing the tools that they gained in their bachelor or masters programs had not prepared them for the rigor of or the functionality within the doctoral process. The support of mentors and advisors aided them in attaining different tools and alternative perspectives that allowed them to push them past their typical identity as a student.

The doctorate degree is a highly coveted title and it is imperative academicians garner support and create relationships that help sustain them through the long process of obtaining a doctoral degree. Participants indicated that they draw from multiple sources (individuals, communities, and places) to aid them in maintaining strength and perseverance through their journey. As noted in the literature, protectants identified in the doctoral process includes the mentor-protégé relationship, spiritual communities, family involvement, and a social support network. Within the overall theme of support two subthemes emerged: Mentorship/Relationship with Advisor, Familial/Friend Support.

### **Mentorship/Relationship with Advisor**

#### ***Advisors as Mentors***

Mentoring and advisement is a large theme within this study: each participant discussed the importance of mentorship in their journey within academia. This theme heavily aligns with



the first theme of space and community because for many of the participants, their advisor and/or mentors were key facilitators in creating safe spaces for them to not only grow as an academician but also aided them in navigation through the academic terrain. A mentor-protégé relationship was more effective in guiding participants through the doctoral process rather than a “*standard*” advisement relationship which entailed visiting professors for signatures for class approval and preparation for comprehensive exams. Each participant noted that the more mentoring advisors they had either explicitly or implicitly, the more they became confident about overcoming their own fears of impostor phenomenon or external problems. Some participants noted that in order to get through feeling like an impostor, they would have to step into their own self-identity but also needed some reassurance from their mentors.

Participants discussed how working through the impostor syndrome contributed to bettering mental health problems and stress levels the earlier it was addressed. One example of how mentoring aided a participant in becoming more confident in her abilities was through her mentor/advisor modeling professional activism. Her mentor/advisor gave her emotional support to discuss her fears but also acknowledged the student’s writing in a public forum: “*She (her advisor) travel[led] [to a summer conference, where] she said that she pulled out my work and she read a section of it. People were very, very interested. They’re like, ‘Where is this published? Where can we get it?’ ‘You have to publish this. People were asking [about your piece].*” The participant “*felt also good about people being interested in the work,*” and although it was external validation it provided confirmation that other people within her field were excited about hearing more of her voice within academia. This particular account was just one example of the impact of a mentor believing in their students and exposing the student to outside networks and forums, while also guiding and supporting their progress within their academic endeavors.

For this participant, this particular instance was a propelling moment in her journey as an academician and her growth as a writer. Her sentiments are not uncommon amongst African American students in academia and the internal struggles of wondering if they are good enough, if their work meets criteria that would be considered scholarly and competent. This oftentimes leaves students with internal feelings of uncertainty, being a “fraud,” and unworthiness that they have to overcome in order to successfully be confident in their talents and works (Kolligian & Sternberg 1991). The participant was able to recognize her true potential not only through the encouragement of her advisor but also through an intentional exposure of her work which allowed her to recognize that her work was worthy of praise within her field of study.

Although the classification of mentorship and advisorship have been used interchangeably thus far, many of the participants noted a differentiation between mentor and advisor; but they noted that if an advisor was perceived as “good” they would be considered a mentor. They also added that the mentors who happened to be their advisors helped them learn about the unwritten rules or politics of academia. They described these mentor/advisors as having a vested interest in their development; challenge them yet providing a warm space where they could explore how they could incorporate feedback without feeling a daunting sense of judgment. These participants noted that their mentor/advisors were their “everything;” someone who they can go to talk about how to approach different professors, address incidents that could have bearing on their trajectory in their programs. Some noted that if they were having a personal issue, they knew they could go to their advisor for guidance in helping them navigate or balance being a doctoral student and outside roles and responsibilities. Many participants had similar sentiments to this particular participant who indicated that his mentor/advisor was available for him and he was able to *“lean on him emotionally, even for stuff that I'm dealing*

*with, like if I'm going through relationship issues, something's happening in my family, something happened to me, I can definitely go to him and confide in him,” thus allowing him to feel as though his mentor who happened to be his advisor had “been a really big source of emotional support.”*

### *Unique Experiences of Black Male Participants*

The participant above noted that his relationship with his advisor went above and beyond one of academia and he contributes much of his growth to his relationship with his advisor. Amongst the Black males in particular, having a Black male mentor was imperative to their success because they viewed it as someone who could provide them guidance on how to work through a system that has been predominantly sustained by non-Black individuals. Many noting that with Black male advisors *“there's a lot of things that I can bring to him that I can't bring to a lot of people. Just experiences that I'm having as far as learning how to be a man and existing within the university structure and learning how to be a better researcher.”* Participants' noted that it was important to their growth because they felt that Black male mentors would give them a unique perspective that could not be found in other relationships. During the interactions with these mentors, the participants viewed themselves as active participants in these mentorships. They felt more secure and comfortable with navigating academic conferences after being under the tutelage of their mentors. This was a common resounding sentiment throughout many of the male narratives, many noting that it was coupled with the majority belief that they did not belong in academia, which will be discussed further in the “being other” theme.

### *Advisors but Not Mentors*

On the other hand, those students who did not have a strong bond with their advisor noted that they would only see their advisors for signing papers and preferred to speak to other more

understanding professors or professionals in their field because they felt that their advisor did not have time for them. High turnovers in their departments also contributed to them feeling unsupported. In these instances, the students noted that they had to search for support elsewhere such as other departments, other schools, and even parents. However, once they were able to find the person that fulfilled the role of being a mentor, they now had someone to help them. These individuals were people they could call upon when a question arose, when making a major decision, or to receive feedback on becoming better academicians. Thus, a mentor was seen as a title for someone who is involved in the development of the student and provides them with warmth, openness and has built rapport with them to create a “*space*” where they can feel challenged yet understood. While an advisor could be seen as someone who signs off on papers every semester and has some bearing on their success in their programs but was unable to provide them with the support needed to effectively work within the academy.

For the participants, the difference between a mentor and an advisor was the level of support: they had great working rapport with their advisors but did not get what they needed to sustain and propel them forward within their field. They either did not get the “*same level of critique as some of the other people*” due to culturally specific research or felt as if they “*had a great advisor but she is not what I would classify as a mentor because what I consider someone a mentor who has more personal familiarity. It is just not what fed me.*” As noted, the valuable relationships between mentors-protégé’s (whether or not they are their advisors) are critical to the experience of the students interviewed. Mentorship is a primary buffer that can enhance a student’s experience exponentially and aid them through emotional, mental or academic barriers.

### ***Downward Mentorship***

Another aspect of mentorship that was downward mentorship, more specifically providing mentorship to younger students. Participants noted that in order to maintain their sanity as well as give back to their community, they participated in mentorship programs within the community or university. For the participants giving back to their community in the form of mentoring African American high school students or undergraduates helped them to keep a connection to the reasons they pursued higher education. Many noted that building community, imparting knowledge and wisdom, and providing a space for younger students who have not yet reached higher levels of education was a large portion of their own self-care. Their desire to help younger students allowed them to feel as though they can be faces that younger individuals can look up to and see “*other Black faces*” in higher levels of education so that they can either implicitly or explicitly be encouraged and be exposed to opportunities. Collectivism can be seen throughout this theme as participants wanted to ensure the health of their community as well as creating space for younger students to potentially follow in their footsteps, which is the crux of African American cultural values, as discussed within chapter II.

Mentorship has been an important force that lead many of the participants to growth in many different facets including but not limited to: navigation through the academy, growth in understanding self, in terms of finding voice, racial identity and resiliency, as well as creating boundaries to maintain “sanity.” Many of the participants discussed how they are invested in the mentorship of others because they were given the opportunity to be mentored on how to work with different forces in their respective departments, on a university capacity and how to navigate the best route for their degree program. Participant 1 sums up the pertinent underlying narratives of many of the other participants:

*“Having a mentor shortens one's learning curve, and that's something, once you get to your PhD... Having that learning curve shortened is going to help me through the process. Being able to shorten my learning curve in terms of that is going to shorten the amount of time it takes me to get from A to B in different projects within my PhD, as well as to graduate with it. I think it goes back to my point; you can't separate being a PhD student and being Black.”*

Mentorship and the levels of involvement of an advisor were critical in participants' ability to navigate through their perspective programs. According to Felder (2010), the difficulty African American doctoral students face in their degree programs is connected to the underrepresentation of minority faculty to provide mentoring within many academic departments. Felder claims that the presence of African American scholars within doctoral programs is important for African American students because it can help them with their professional development, their disciplinary identities, and more specifically aid them in navigating through the academic terrain within PWIs. Although Felder primarily discusses African American mentors for African American students, Davidson and Johnson (2001) note that effective mentors can be of other backgrounds but must encompass a multiculturally competent approach towards mentorship. According to Davidson and Johnson (2001), in addition to a multicultural approach, these mentors have to understand the formation of the scholars' identity within academe may have barriers and they have to be active participants in the learning process and open to working through challenging interpersonal and systematic challenges as advocates for their advisees or protégé's.

According to Felder (2010), extant literature on mentorship neglects to acknowledge the experiences of marginalization and the importance of how to be astute in the utilization of

political sensitivity within the realm of academia. It is essential that mentors who are not a part of a marginalized group step outside of their traditional understanding of the process of academia and be open to doing their own exploration and background research on the “assimilation and adjustment processes” of African American doctoral students (Felder, 2010, p. 457). Therefore, this form of mentorship a great responsibility that should be taken with the utmost care due to the impact of how the relationship will potentially affect the student.

Within the context of existing literature pertaining to mentorship, Davidson and Johnson (2001) identify mentorship as activities and interactions with students that aid with various aspects of the academy such as integration in the academic fabric, cultivation of professional and social networks, research and academic competencies, and preparation for the workforce post-graduation. Mentorship includes working with students on skills, acquisition of knowledge and professionalism, as well as social or emotional growth, to ensure that they are a consummate professional upon completion of the degree (Davidson and Johnson, 2001).

### **Familial/Friend Support**

In this study, many participants identified their friends and family as their backbone and confidants through their journey. It should be noted that many participants went on to say that even though their parents and friends did not know everything about the doctoral process the support was much needed to persevere and their consistent presence and openness to learning about various aspects of the process was appreciated and necessary. According to Jairam and Kahl (2012), the family provides the individual with a space of acceptance, a place of healing, and unconditional love. Having these three components are essential to the self-esteem of the individual due to the rigor of the doctorate degree and the internal questioning of one’s abilities and competence. A place of healing and unconditional love allows the individual to remove

themselves from the stressors of academia while in the comfort of loved ones and be reminded that they are more than just a student and there is a greater purpose to their journey. This component of community as a protective factor should not be taken lightly, as many of the participants note it is as central to their growth and development through academia as a mentorship relationship. The two types of relationships provide different but necessary maintenance of self.

Many participants discussed how their cohort members, other African American students on campus, friend circle and “*academic family... provides a yardstick*” for their stressors and anxieties, oftentimes helping them, as one participant noted, “*when I'm having those moments of freak out*” and “*provide me a...really nice safety checks.*”. Each of these entities can help ground students in moments of stress and remind them that their personal identity is greater than their identity of a graduate student. Participants also noted that family and friends provide them with important factors such as “*laughter,*” “*personal feedback,*” “*financial support,*” “*wisdom*” and “*a listening ear...which is so valuable in the graduate experience.*” The ability to utilize the all support that is unique for each student is important for the development of the graduate student because as many researchers note, the doctoral process can often be extremely isolating (Ellis, 2001; Gonzalez, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero & Bowles, 2008; Kennebrew, 2002; Patton, 2009)

The ability to have social support within the doctoral process is one of the buffers that is able to help students work through the difficulties of the doctoral process as well as the interpersonal and systemic issues that may be challenging for a budding academic (Gonzalez, 2006; Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero & Bowles, 2008). In order to navigate the terrain of academia, mentoring has been a common entity within literature and this study as a way in which



doctoral students seek out guidance and academic support; while family, friends and community are outside support systems that students can turn to for emotional, psychological and spiritual distress. Mentorship and support are also buffers for what many participants note as a feeling of being other.

The support of faculty and mentors is critically important but each one of the participants also expressed that they would not have the strength, finances, and support of perseverance to withstand the doctoral process without their friends, spiritual communities and families. Many scholars indicate that a supportive family unit is one of the core factors that help African American doctoral students, in particular, work their way through the doctoral process (Brown, Davis & McClendon 1999; Gonzalez, 2006). Many scholars indicate that within the African American culture, individuals usually turn to family, friends and community to seek emotional support and strong interpersonal support while working through times of difficulty rather than seeking professional help (Gonzalez, 2006; Kennebrew, 2002). Kennebrew (2002) also notes that many African Americans maintain their psychological well-being through fellowship with spiritual community, social organizations, ethnic organizations and other communities in which they embrace.

### **Being Other**

“Being Other” is a thematic category that encompasses components such as feeling like the “*other/foreigner*” in classrooms, feeling like a representation for your race in conversations, and experiencing microaggressions, overt racism and discriminatory acts. As mentioned in previous literature, academia may feel like an environment for the “good old boys” club or give a sense that a student of African or African American decent is an “unwelcomed guest” (Ellis, 2001; Kennebrew, 2002). Ellis (2001) notes that oftentimes African American doctoral students

feel like strangers upon entering new academic departments due to the uniqueness of the doctoral environment as well as their ability to be comfortable in the setting. Ellis notes that this stage of becoming a part of the community of scholarship can be one of the most difficult transitions for African American students if they do not have appropriate mentorship because the mentor/advisor is an advocate and a vessel of knowledge in navigating academia. Ellis also notes that the mentoring relationship helps African American doctoral students navigate through difficult issues regarding things such as classroom environment, departmental environment, interacting with faculty, as well as the overall climate on university campuses.

According to Ellis, African American scholars often define their experience within academe as a feeling of “outsiderness” because they often felt that regardless of their qualifications their ability to succeed in academe was questioned or they were viewed as the token minority. Many African American doctoral scholars felt that there were systematic problems within university and departmental policies: curriculums were euro-centrally dominant in theoretical orientation, and conscious or unconscious attitudes and beliefs of students and faculty affected how they were viewed (Ellis, 2001; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson & Allen, 1998; King & Chepyator, 1996; Sue, Arrendondo, McDavis, 1992).

The theme of “Being Other” is a concept that is delicately embedded in the culture of a predominantly White university systems in terms of race relations on campus and the lack of incorporation or acknowledgement of African Americans scholars in academia. As participants outline their experiences, they discuss very delicate and unnerving times in which they felt that their existence on campus was undesired or even disregarded. Their experiences went further than not being physically acknowledged on campus, as discussed in a previous theme, it also

included feelings of disregard: historical and current events that are relevant to their functioning on campus were dismissed and even incited in verbal and nonverbal manners.

### **Microaggressions**

Participants' felt covert and overt actions against them from faculty members, classmates or others on and off campus that implied that they were unprepared for academia, did not belong in academia, where unwanted in the environment, or seen as an outlier as compared to other African Americans. In one particular instance, participant 12 discussed a welcome dinner for first year students at a professors' house. She attended with three other incoming students, two White students and another African American student, and she recalled: *"we're all going in together...we walk up to the door, and one of the professors' wife opens the door and she greets the White person, the White girl, [she] greets her and says 'Oh welcome to the party.' She looks at me, and my other cohort member and says 'What are you all here for?,"* This participant did not know how to respond in that moment because she realized that this was an overt racial incident and she did not want to become upset and make a bad first impression but it felt infuriating and rejecting and it ruined the evening of what was supposed to be a night of networking.

Another participant, participant 1 recalled an unsettling experience within the campus environment between himself and an older White man at the campus bus stop. The older White man greeted him with, *"Good luck this weekend,"* the participant, confused, asked for clarification and the conversation continued: *"'Yeah, you're playing, right?' I said no [and he said,] 'Oh, you thought I was on the team.'"* This, unfortunately, was a common occurrence for the participant and in the moments of anger he often chose to educate individuals about the ignorance of their statements. Most of the African American men in the study noted they

experienced similar microaggressions on campus and often challenged this stereotypical idea but just as often become tired of having to validate their worth on campus because of the emotional and psychological tax. The stress that is expected when entering a doctoral program compounded with these extra undue experiences can cause a higher level of stress and complication that this subgroup has to deal with.

### **Invisibility, Invalidation and Code Switching**

Participant expressed that in addition to being stereotyped, they also felt invisible; invisibility was a prominent subtheme that discussed a lack of acknowledgement of racist acts or symbols of hate across campus, and a disregard for protests following said incidents. In response to these feelings of invisibility or being stereotyped, many participants become accustomed to code-switching when around their peers. Participants described intense feelings of having to be perfect so others would accept them or would find no reason to invalidate their intelligence. Participants discussed how they have to delicately “*navigate*” maintaining their own authentic self while finding ways to authentically incorporate code-switching in order to help others to acknowledge or try to understand their perspective during controversial topics and in order to appear “*welcoming*” or non-aggressive. According to Greene and Walker (2004), learning to code-switch can be difficult for many African American students because of the fear of giving up whom they are in order to fit a mold that is often foreign to them, but ultimately they have to go through a negotiation process where they can see it as a way to further expand their identity (p.438).

Participants’ also discussed that the lack of Black academics and schools of thought within the curriculum enhanced tendencies of invalidation of current and historical events that impact the Black community. Historical and current events such as confederate flags being hung

on campus and more recent events such as the non-indictment of the officers in the Michael Brown and Eric Garner shootings were discussed as points of contention and infuriation for participants. The participants often felt as though their peers or professors invalidated or mocked their reactions to these concerns. One participant recounted how painful it was for him when his professor invalidated his feelings when he tried to open up to him about his notable distraction within class due to the Mike Brown non-indictment the night before. Rather than try to be sympathetic or utilize the opportunity for a moment of connection, his professor told him, “*My perspective from living in this world is that things happen*” and went on to imply that the participant should get used to happenings like that. The participant noted that in that instance he knew that he could not find support within that environment and had to seek it elsewhere.

Many students on campus discussed prominent incidents on campus that contributed to feeling invisible and unwanted within the university. Two incidents in particular involved White fraternities on campus: “*the [fraternity members] sprinkled cotton on one of the historically Black fraternity’s lawns, and had their White pledges go pick cotton balls up off of the Black fraternity’s lawn...or the fraternity members ‘were throwing bleach bombs... on students of color from their balcony.’*” Participant 12 recalled another incident that involved intimidation: “*white men who were in in core cadets...dressed in uniform...often carry[ing] guns...start[ed] saying things and start trying to get underneath your skin, it becomes very fearful...those moments were very, very stressful.*” Each of the participants that discussed the happenings of the White fraternities and cadets actions were often disappointed at the lack of repercussions or reprimands by the university or lack of action by the university to ensure their safety on campus. Participants indicated that the most helpful “*space*” during this time was the Black Studies building because it was the only campus entity that was taking action to speak out against these acts and validating

the students' feelings of fear and anger. With these compounded invalidating incidences and challenging interactions with professors and classmates who are multiculturally insensitive, participants noted that academe can often be taxing as well as stressful, thus the need for counter-spaces where they can be validated, come together to create change, and experience healing on many levels.

Being other is not only something that may be physically uncomfortable but can have difficult implications on the movement of African Americans through the academic arena. This acknowledges the importance of mentorship and how someone who is more experienced in the field can help younger protégés understand the overall systematic challenges one may face and how to navigate working through these difficult experiences in their personal and professional growth. Thus personal and professional growth was the next prominent theme discussed by participants.

## **Growth**

Growth is a multifaceted theme which encompasses an adjustment and attainment of knowledge, the gaining of experience and knowledge of academic culture, a time of self-identification/exploration, and an understanding of self as an academic professional. Growth was discussed in terms of gaining a greater understanding of the academy, understanding oneself as a racial cultural being, as well as understanding self as a multi-layered being. Growth emerged from the transcripts with an understanding of its use in multiple contexts and constructs. As shown in Table 4.1, participants discussed growth in terms of learning about the doctoral process as a journey, more specifically learning the written and unwritten rules of academia and learning how to navigate unique situations and “political” aspects of graduate school. Growth was regarded as one's evolution in their understanding of their own worldview and a broadening of

their understanding of other schools of thought. Growth was a very personal experience for each of the participants; all of the participants were able to reflect on how they have grown as an individual and as an academic during their doctoral tenure. The participants discussed how they were able to thrive due to eye-opening experiences and a great deal of self-reflection.

One aspect of the growth process was understanding how to communicate effectively with others that may not be advanced in their racial or ethnic identity and their ability to speak about scholarly topics in a manner that is appropriate within an academic setting. Several subthemes emerged including learning how to code-switch, which was discussed in the previous section but is also a prominent subtheme within their growth in higher education. Greene and Walker (2004) note that it is essential for Black academics to understand the roots of code-switching and utilize it in oration to become “astute in bi-dialectical behaviors” and be able to recognize that the way in which Black English is used in the home or community is oftentimes seen as unintelligible in academia (p.435). Greene and Walker (2004) are not condemning or rejecting Black English but instead provide detail as to how Black English is a strength within the Black community that reflects “individual and group identity as well as promoting solidarity” that was built within the African and African American community as a communication style that has double meanings and is a counter language to traditional mainstream English (p. 435). Within the larger purviews of academia, it is important that Black academics be able to utilize language that is “acceptable in different situations and modify their speech to the appropriate style” because unfortunately what the authors note as Black English is often seen as inferior and unintelligible by mainstream audiences (p.435).

### Code-Switching

Participants discuss both their journey to understanding code-switching as well as how they utilize it to navigate authentically through academia. Participant 8 noted that he has come to *“see it as negotiating... there's always this tug because you feel as if... okay, if you're an African American person and you do fairly well in school... you're put up as this exceptional Black person”* and more specifically the *“exceptional Negro.”* With these feelings, many of the participants noted that in the beginning of their growth process as academics they felt that code-switching was inauthentic to their being but learned that it was critical to their movement through academia. Participant 8 also noted that there is often a *“negotiation... [which helps me] maintain my sanity and maintain my identity without selling out and without. “They noted that sometimes code-switching can be often be “emotionally taxing... just being there more self-aware, self-conscious... [and there is a sense of] being on.”* Participants referred to themselves as having to be on their toes and having to perform perfectly while in the academic setting in order not to be categorized or associated with negative stereotypes of African Americans.

With the help of mentors and academic connections, code-switching has become a part of some of the participants “professional” self and they realize that it does not invalidate who they are but provides them the ability to work from different points of view and understandings of how to utilize their knowledge to advance in their perspective fields. According to Greene and Walker (2004), the process of learning the nuances and the utilization of code-switching causes some people to feel anger and resentment that they cannot be their “authentic” self at all times. They often have to go through a process of understanding how to be bicultural and an understanding that they are not giving up their identity but they are expanding how they can share their knowledge effectively amongst individuals with differing upbringings.



## Identity

The intensity of graduate school and/or being in a predominantly White institution helped some participants understand themselves as a racial cultural being. Many of the participants' indicated that they had a strong sense of self in terms of racial identity before their program but having different experiences on campus, whether it be because they had never lived in that region of the United States or had become more aware of themselves as a Black academic due to macroaggressions, made their identity was more pronounced.

Each participant described their own journey to understanding how they can be an African American academic while also maintaining their own genuine authenticity and maintaining their cultural upbringing. Some participants noted that various courses in African and African American studies have "*absolutely informed how I think.*" Some noted that the information delivered in these classes helped them put words to concepts that they had experienced before but did not have language for. As noted by one of the participants: "[the] *fact that I was engaging in these texts that, at one point, I couldn't understand, but I got to reread them and something clicked.*" This shows the importance and intersectionality of space and identity.

Participants noted that classes in the Black Studies department helped them further their development or identity because exposure to Black scholars brought a sense of consciousness that some participants had not been exposed to in other courses. For one participant, the class that was most beneficial was outside of her department: "*I took an African American Women's history course... but that was hands down probably the best class I took in my entire PhD program.*" The exposure to material and curriculum that is pertinent to the African American experiences aids in participants' development and identity within academia. Exposure to Black

Studies curriculum affirms their identity through validation of African American scholars they may not be exposed to elsewhere. According to Sue and Sue (2010), marginalized groups often experience that their classes have a lack of inclusion of material that validates or discusses scholars of color within their field, so this is extremely important to the development and strength of the African American scholars that they received exposure to classes that do.

Growth as an academician is one of the most pivotal experiences and sometimes challenging endeavors as it can often impact the way in which scholars create their identity as an academician (Maher, Ford & Thompson, 2004). Ellis (2001) noted that many African American students entering the doctorate oftentimes are carefully hesitant about their adjustment to their new environment and rigor in an attempt to gain an understanding of their new cultural environment in order to enter the system in an appropriate manner. With the given understanding of this theme, it appears that growth can be seen as one of the foremost fundamental components of the doctoral process.

### **Balance**

The growth process also identifies how participants came to the understanding of how they can comfortably function within their own environments and navigate their multiple roles. Many of the students noted that it is or was a difficult task to figure out how to manage all their different roles within their families, communities and relationships. They noted that in the beginning it is often hard to figure out a balance and they realized they needed to learn to say no to people, or learn that they cannot achieve everything they wanted to commit to in the beginning of their program. A lack of balance or “doing too much” led to either burn out, stress, anxiety, sickness or depression.

Growth, although it has many components, is ultimately becoming comfortable with self as an academician and being able to use all the tools within one's power to create an environment that is optimal for learning. It is also being able to identify barriers that are in place systematically as well as institutionally and utilizing the protectants in place to reach the ultimate goal of attaining the doctorate. In order for these pieces to fit together it is imperative that we discuss the topic of wellness in academia.

### **Wellness**

The fifth and final theme is wellness, a key component to the doctoral process. Wellness is central to one's ability to complete the respective milestones in graduate school. Many students spoke on the topic of wellness by first describing the stressors in graduate school and how they can cause a decline in their physical and mental wellness if not managed appropriately.

Although stress is highlighted by the participants, wellness was used to describe this theme in order to reframe the concept of health in a positive manner. Health is a major factor within the theme of wellness. By focusing on health and not stress as the main component of the wellness theme, we can begin to focus on what could be changed to better health and wellness to retain African American scholars.

Wellness, or self-care as participants noted is something that is often forgotten and has to be added in or taken into consideration as a way to keep oneself "*sane*." Many students discussed sanity in terms of mental health, physical health, balancing of responsibilities, not overstretching self, learning to say no, using "*space and community*" to get support, and feedback. Stress is something that many of the participants expected, however, they did not know how stressful academia could be. It is challenging to find balance between coursework, outside activities, family and relationships. Each participant noted this was something they needed to learn to

manage in order to be their best selves. Some participants identified different on-campus or off-campus groups as groups that kept them well; more specifically, church community, family, Black Studies department, friends, sorority/fraternity organizations, mentorship programs or other students of color groups.

Participant 4 and 15 expressed that she learned “*non-negotiables*” that are a must at least one time a week such as “*going to the gym,*” “*not [being] afraid to tell people no,*” creating “*to-do list,*” engaging in “*spiritual practice[s],*” and engaging in “*space[s] where [her] scholarship and being is validated.*” Participant 15 related non-negotiable to combat the negative effects of stress and its negative impacted her own health or that of her colleagues. These negative effects included mental illness (depression, anxiety, “mental breakdowns”, etc.), relational difficulties, physical illness and even death. One participant noted that she “*mention sanity a lot because...women of color [specifically Black are] dying in academia from... stress [which exacerbates] diabetes, high cholesterol, [and] high blood pressure.*” Stress was not only discussed in physical ailments but also an openness about the mental health toll on each participant.

Participants discussed how they used therapy, physical workouts, or support from their core circle to combat mental health issues. Spiritual wellness was mentioned as a buffer for mental health issues because it was a constant in many of the students’ lives. One participant noted that even speaking to other professors in academia has helped them improved their mental health routines through structures such as to do lists and not spreading themselves too thin. The importance for creating wellness is not only creating balance but also an amalgamation of the themes: space, mentorship, “being other,” growth and wellness.

Each participant had his or her own combination of how these themes played a role in how they function as doctoral students but acknowledge that each component has a part. Although there may be other factors, they did not appear to be prominent within this study. Each participant in the study discussed how they learned to develop appropriate coping skills and learned new ways of interfacing with their environments to help them work through their own process. They describe these factors as the crux of their growth process within graduate school. Participants' were able to discuss how they have implemented coping mechanisms into their daily routines to help avoid or alleviate the stress of school. They discussed coping mechanisms such as "spaces" of safety, physical activity, breaks, receiving advisement, and incorporation of respective activities that are unrelated to graduate school in order to ground themselves in life outside of graduate school. This theme highlights and incorporates many of the other themes as they are all connected in an understanding of how African American doctoral students can maintain a healthy sense of self throughout their programs.

According to Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero and Bowles (2008), the biggest hindrance to the completion of the doctorate by African American graduate students was primarily due to experiencing undue stress. Johnson-Bailey et al. indicate that it has been long researched that Black graduate students, particularly those attending PWIs, tend to feel stress more specifically due to loneliness, isolation, discrimination/ microaggressions, invisibility and multi-culturally insensitive individuals on campus (i.e. faculty, staff and peers). Therefore, it is imperative that there be a shift in the understanding of the needs of historically marginalized students that attend PWIs because there are inherent components as identified in many of the themes above that create a difficult and rejecting environment for African American doctoral students.

## **Conclusion**

The interviews conducted have elicited many common themes that are central to many of the participants' experience; but due to the multi-layered identities and the intersectionality of these identities differ for each participant. Although there are differences between each participant, there are five main themes that resonated with each participant to some degree of salience. Allowing for complexities and textured/varied perspectives, it was imperative that the data guided the creation of a conceptual map of interconnectivity. Understanding the complexity of creating grounded theory, it should be noted that each of the themes have either unidirectional or bidirectional relationships that create a non-linear, non-cyclical map and allows for the themes to intersect and diverge based on the data collected.

Through the voices of the participants, there are unique factors that play into the wellness of these African American doctoral students at predominantly White institutions. It is imperative that we take a deeper look into each of these factors in the future because it impacts the well-being and degree completion of many African American students who are pursuing and will be pursuing the doctorate degree. As the African proverb states, "if you wish to move mountains tomorrow, you must start lifting the stones today."

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of African American doctoral students' at predominantly White institutions. The exploration of the lived experiences of 15 doctoral students and the factors that influence their retention within academia is the beginning of understanding the disparity between the matriculation and graduation rates of African American students. The sizeable discrepancy between the number of African American individuals who begin the doctoral process and those who attain the doctorate is alarming. This study has identified some possible theoretical considerations that provide a greater understanding of this discrepancy. As scholars and researchers it is important that we investigate topics that will help explain and provide clarity to untapped issues that create unequal and unexplained disparities in statistics.

Critical Race Theory was used as a theoretical lens to aid in understanding the narratives of the African American students in this study. The utilization of this theoretical orientation allowed the unfiltered voice of the participants to emerge from the data. Utilizing grounded theory was imperative to the process of conducting the study because it provided a concrete and effective methodology for this type of research. Grounded theory guided the in-depth semi-structured interview process with participants and the multi-layered coding and analysis of the data. As grounded theory is a methodology focused on the data itself, it supports the authenticity of the participants' voices and includes checks and balances so that the researcher's values and beliefs are not driving the results of the analysis but complementing the totality of the co-constructed theory. Grounded theory preserves the accuracy of detailed narratives that allows for

meaning making to occur through the voice of the participants. The accounts of the participants are utilized throughout the process of, ultimately, the co-creation of a theory.

As the researcher, I utilized a convenience sample of 15 self-identified African/African American students who were doctoral level students (in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year or higher) attending a predominantly White institution in the southwestern region of the United States. I utilized a semi-structured interview guide to conduct the interviews for this qualitative study. Additionally, I gathered demographic information to glean as much information from the participants as well as a means to obtain feedback from participants for the authentication of the analysis and themes generated. Upon the completion of the data collection phase, the data were transcribed, authenticated, coded and categorized through the utilization of the grounded theory methods as described in Chapter III. The purpose of the study was to try to gain a deeper understanding of the following research questions:

1. What are the protective factors associated with African American doctoral students' matriculation through completion in their degree program;
2. What barriers, if any, are experienced by African American doctoral students in their degree attainment processes; and
3. How have the lived experiences of African American doctoral students within academia informed their ability to complete the doctoral process at predominantly White institutions?

Through a grounded theory perspective an ongoing working theory has emerged with five prominent interconnected elements: the creation of "space" and community, mentoring/advising and support, "Being Other", the growth process throughout the doctoral journey, and wellness. The detailed narratives of the participants give a robust understanding of how these themes are



interconnected and how they all play a role in the experiences of African American doctoral students within academia. In this chapter, I will be utilizing CRT to further understand the information provided by the participants as well as provide implications and recommendations for further research and practice. Within the realm of understanding the importance of the theoretical model constructed as well as the true elements of the themes, it is imperative to discuss how this work is unique.

As a demographically similar subject to this study, my role as a researcher is better understood through the lens of an outsider of the institution that was selected for data collection. My role as a researcher was not devoid from the implementation or analysis of study; however, my role was that of a story-teller due to my position as a non-student at this particular university. As a story-teller, I found that the greatest testament to my participants was the fact there was an acknowledgement of their unique experience within higher education. Many participants identified that this is a topic that is often discussed among African American doctoral students, however, this was the first instance where they would be able to hear their often marginalized voices validated and heard in a scholarly manner. This was an avenue to provide validated and plausible literature to a venue that has often muffled the voices of African American scholars and schools of thought. By utilizing my power as a story-teller, I am able to work alongside my participants to create a greater dialogue on a larger platform and provide a small glimpse for others to bear witness to the lived experiences of my participants and how it has translated into retention within PWIs.

The five aforementioned themes emerged from the 15 transcribed interviews through the process of coding, categorization, axial analysis and building constructed thematic structures followed by validation through member-checks as discussed in Chapter III. Through the live

interactions between the researcher and the participants, many striking distinctions came up; however, the five identified themes were salient throughout the experiences of all the participants. During the last stage of the analysis process, the analytical themes were verified and authenticated as true to the voices of the participants through member-checks.

### ***Member-Checks***

Participants noted that they felt as though the analysis of their interviews and the overall themes gathered amongst other participants were appropriate and valid. They also provided feedback on how themes could be more robust and integrated concepts they thought about upon their reflection of the data. Participants indicated that the themes of space and mentorship were aptly placed at the beginning of the analysis. The use of member-checks was invaluable due to the intense analysis of each transcript and utilizing the information found to come up with overall theme.

## **Description of Themes**

### ***Space***

Through a critical race theory (CRT) lens it should be noted that participants indicated that this particular space or counter-space “*fed*” them on a mental, physical and emotional level. Fed, as utilized by the participants, to describe a space that “*satisfied or gratified*” an unfulfilled need (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2016). The participants were able to convey that this place allowed them to be their authentic selves with access to more seasoned scholars, who provided them clarity and personal support during times of feeling or being unwelcomed on campus. The visibility of these scholars and the faculty’s ability to invite prominent scholars to visit campus, participants discussed as essential modeling of how to elicit change. Many students were surprised that there were not more accepting spaces for them on campus and often went through

a transition process in which they had to understand the system in which they were entering, attain the knowledge they needed to complete the process, and adjust to how they utilized their new information and made a niche for themselves within that space. This aligns with Tinto's model of navigating the doctorate as discussed in Felder (2010). Tinto's model of academic attainment, discussed in his 1975 and 1993 articles, is comprised of four levels and was created to better understand the reasons for dropout rates of doctoral students. In these articles he outlines four stages that lead to successful attainment of the doctorate which are "transition, adjustment, attainment of candidacy, and completion of the dissertation" (Felder, 2010). More specifically he noted that their individual characteristics, in combination with their personal experiences and various life commitments contribute to the ability of doctoral students to successfully complete their doctoral endeavors. Tinto was a pioneer in the field of studying doctoral attainment and dropout characteristics and it was the aim of this study to add further research data to provide a deeper contextual framework to his model.

As extant literature noted space/community, which included family, mentorship, spiritual organizations and friend groups, is critical in the maintenance of sense of self. Participants noted that they were able to lean upon these groups to ground them during times of stress (Kennebrew, 2002; Nettles, 1990). With the understanding of the common upbringing of collectivism, as noted by each participant, the usage of spaces such as the Black Studies building provided an environment where students felt welcomed, validated, celebrated and challenged to become consummate professionals.

### *Mentorship and Support*

Mentorship and support was one of the most interconnected themes because it was mentioned within relation to each of the other components of this study. Participants stated that

oftentimes their mentors were also advisors and were essential to their growth as academicians. A large percentage of participants indicated that their mentors were everything, including their confidants, their emotional support, their guidance in understanding the culture of academia and how working through various microaggressions and discrimination within their fields as well as on campus interactions. Many scholars have been passionate about the need for and benefits of quality mentorship within academia. This study confirms how the impact of mentorship can lead to doctoral students' movement and understanding of the doctoral journey (Brown, Davis and McClendon, 2000; Ellis, 2001; Felder, 2010; Kennebrew, 2002).

Another factor that was included with mentorship was the experience of advisors not being good mentors to participants. Some participants felt isolated, abandoned or invalidated by their respective advisors. Participants who felt this way noted that although their advisors may have been well-intentioned, their inability to be present and multiculturally competent created a barrier in the advisor's understanding of the intersectionalities and complexities that result in being an African American student on a predominantly White campus. This lack of understanding often caused frustration and an emotional shutting down for the student. In these instances, participants would find other faculty on campus or at other institutions to provide the mentor roles that they yearned for.

Support which was the second component of this theme, included any people or entities outside of the university that were able to play a role in the mental, emotional and physical health of the participants. Participants' indicated that their largest support systems were often times their significant others, family members, friends, and their spiritual communities. Participants also noted that the people who were within their support system played a differing role in their understanding of themselves as doctoral students. They noted that their support systems often

helped them see that even though they were embedded in this academic system, they were more than doctoral students and well-rounded human beings who had other roles. Participants also recognized that they were not alone and had people who would financially, socially, and emotionally support them through their studies. Many participants noted that if they did not have their support systems in conjunction with their mentors, they would have given up on their academic endeavors because of the intense stress that they often endured during their programs. As a researcher, I believe that finding a support system within and outside the university is imperative to foster an environment in which African American doctoral students can thrive in their degree programs.

### *Being Other*

Being other was a theme that came up in each interview. Being other on the participants' campus were manifested in multiple ways: invalidation about experiences within the classroom, microaggressions from peers and faculty, racial incidents on campus and the lack of celebration of the African American culture on the campus. Participants stated that when they entered academia they had great confidence that their peers and faculty members would be advanced in their multicultural sensitivity and inclusion on campus. However, they noted that they oftentimes faced disappointment within many arenas on campus but most notably in social situations. Participants indicated that they were most surprised at being questioned about their belongingness at departmental events, and to statements made about them being athletes rather than academics accompanied by various racial incidents on the university campus.

Many of the participants discussed how these pressures added undue stress to the stress that they had already been exposed to during their programs. The participants were grateful for the specific space on campus that was created to celebrate African American culture to

counteract some of the negative messages as well as provide them an opportunity to speak to other African American scholars on campus. However, they found that while this was a helpful space it was still hurtful that they could only feel safe and be themselves in such few places, and that these spaces in effect served to contain them. These spaces, however did provide a positive setting where their feelings were validated and where they were able to coordinate groups to create change within the university system.

Secondly, the lack of incorporation of Black or African / African American scholarship within their course curriculums was another factor that led students to feel as though they were unwelcomed in class and at the university. Many participants noted that if they did try to bring in information that was from non-White scholars, they were often told that this information was incorrect or was challenged by their peers as to why it was important content for the course. These microaggressions and invalidations on a constant basis oftentimes left the participants tired and angry. Each participant noted that they often looked to mentors for guidance in these situations as well as finding outlets to maintain their sanity, which led to their growth process as an academician.

### *Growth*

Growth within the doctoral process is inevitable. It is defined in more specific terms within this study. Growth within this study is a process in which participants had to work through understanding themselves as an academician, learning how to navigate the culture of academia, and find coping skills that would aid them in becoming consummate professionals in their respective fields. Throughout the study many participants attributed their ability to work through the university culture by following the guidance from their advisors and mentors. They also noted that having a space and a group of individuals to support them on campus that were

able to understand them and validate their experiences aided them in finding their own coping mechanisms in how to create healthy ways to utilize tools to push through the difficulties of academia.

Growth was also defined within this study as working through personal biases, beliefs and knowledge to gain an in-depth understanding of their field of study and the academic culture in which they had now entered. This included understanding the unspoken rules of academia and the helpful ways in which to move through the university system. Growth was associated with some dissonance with what participants had known about life before their doctoral program as well as pressures to incorporate and find a way to be bicultural in certain spaces. Participants indicated that having peers and experienced professionals in this field who modeled these behaviors or pulled them aside to help them gain a better understanding of how to integrate the culture of academia with their own understanding of their own culture was critical to their growth. Participants also indicated that the aid they received within their programs helped shorten a process that would have been more difficult if they had to learn these lessons themselves. Thus many of the students felt they had a drive to create a more inclusive pathway so that future African American doctoral students could thrive in their academic journey.

### *Wellness*

Lastly, wellness is a purposeful conclusion to the understanding of this study. Working from a wellness model is most fitting for this study in order to utilize the information gathered to create a better environment for future African American doctoral students. In Chapter IV wellness referred to the physical, mental and emotional stressors that contribute to both physical and mental illnesses. It is imperative that we take a close look at each component to make academia a more accepting environment for all students. Many participants stated that they had

experienced mental/psychological and physical illnesses that were related to the stressors of the doctoral program in conjunction with various stressors that were discussed earlier in this chapter. Other participants indicated that they noticed throughout their tenure a great deal of burnout among African American faculty members within their departments. More specifically the participants noted that many African American faculty members in their departments had left academia due to various amounts of health issues, oftentimes suffering from high blood pressure, diabetes, anxiety or depression, which was apparent in their work and interactions with others. The participants noted that being able to see the similarity of their stress with some of the professors was alarming yet validating that the process of academia was intense. Many, however, hoped that finding external outlets and ways in which to channel their stress would allow them to further provide guidance for students entering academia. Participants also noted that a better interconnection between early career professionals within their fields and late career professionals may lead to healthier coping mechanisms. Throughout the interviews, there was a great sense of community, in terms of wanting to care for self with community and wanting to take care of community through collaboration. Wellness was the concluding theme because it encapsulated how to help with retention of African American doctoral students within predominantly White institutions, which was the purpose of the study. With a model of wellness at the core, each of these themes illuminated both buffers and barriers that the participants faced and how they were able to work through them to become the consummate academician.

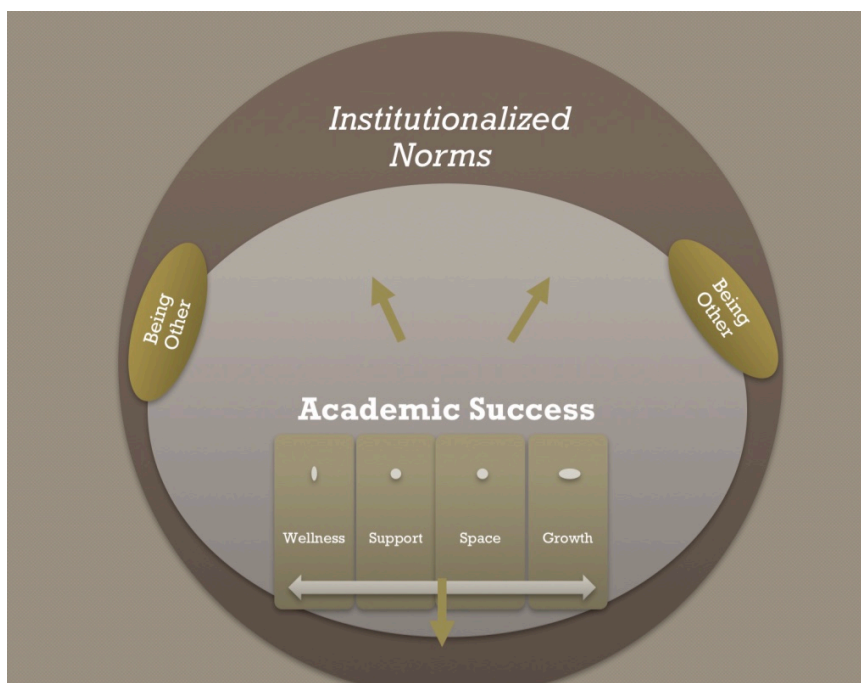
As noted earlier, each of the themes are interconnected and fundamental to the success of the participants to work through their journey in academia. Understanding these results through a cultural lens, community, fellowship, maintenance of identity and openness to becoming a well-rounded professional were at the crux of each analytic result. As identified in previous studies,



the doctoral process is a difficult endeavor. Having people in one's proximity to work, to exchange ideas, and to work through the many obstacles with is reassuring and strengthens one's ability to grow and create coping mechanisms to work through the stress of program completion (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Carver, & Bowles, 2008; Kennebrew, 2002). As Jairaim and Kahl (2012) noted, social support within the doctoral program has an important role in the reduction of stress for doctoral students throughout their tenure. Without these forms of community or support students often feel socially isolated and lack meaningful connection with the university system; they also feel the exacerbated stress of being in a novel environment of a doctoral program is exacerbated, which can influence one's mood, the ability to effectively do work at one's highest level, and the health and wellbeing of the individual (Jairam & Kahl, 2012; King & Chepaytor-Thomson, 1996).

Below is a model that was created to depict both unilateral and bilateral relationships between the themes:

#### **Model 5.1: Relationships Between Themes**



With the result of the analysis as a grounded theory model above, it was apparent that there are relationships among the themes that are interconnected within the lives of many of the participants. As shown above and discussed throughout the last theme, there are many key components that lead to the doctoral success of the participants interviewed. Wellness, Mentorship and Support, Space and Growth were four key components that helped many participants feel as though they could reach the ultimate goal of academic success. Each of those themes are important to the overall academic success and it appears that all of them work in tandem to provide higher levels of matriculation. With the union of those four themes, they appear to work against the barrier of Being Other in a system that was inherently built upon norms that were not institutionally celebratory of African and African American values.

Next, is a word generated figure that was created by a program called wordify, that looks at the frequency of the words that appear in a given document. For this figure I integrated all of the transcripts and put it through this software and this illustration emerged. This shows a powerful image that illustrates the stressors that impact African American doctoral students in this particular study.

**Figure 5.1: Word Generation System**



In regard to the initial research questions, the first question was aimed at exploring the protective factors associated with African American doctoral students' matriculation in their degree programs. Through the analysis process it has been noted that protective factors that were most salient for participants were that of mentorship/advisor, family/support, and space. Participants were able to see their support systems and the four categories of space as providing them growth opportunities in which they were supported through difficult times and also challenged to be able to excel in these environments. The growth process was essential to the

wellness of each individual as he or she was able to learn how to navigate through various systems, learn new skill sets to deal with novel challenges, and acknowledge and incorporate how their own personal experiences molded them into a more refined scholar.

In terms of barriers that were experienced, it was evident that institutionalized norms and being perceived as other were common themes that oftentimes hindered and invalidated the experiences of these doctoral students. Each participant shared personal interactions and invalidating incidents that made it clear that they were not welcomed on campus; they were often isolated, insulted and overtly chastised by peers and faculty. Given the campus, departmental and university climate as well as racial climate of the city the university was located, there were challenging times in which these individuals had to unite, find places and spaces in which they could support one another as well as utilize resources provided by faculty to protect themselves from the negative messages they received.

Lastly, the lived experiences of the doctoral student participants informed their ability to complete doctoral degrees at this PWI. Throughout the process they were able to utilize mechanisms of community, spirituality, and collectivism, which have been essential pillars of the African and African American culture. The culmination of this grounded theory study relies heavily on the pillars of African and African American cultural values due to its interconnectedness to space and community as evidenced by the strong sense of upward and downward mentorship. It appears that overall results of research question one and research question three are closely aligned in their analysis; due to the collectivistic nature of cultural values, one would be remiss to acknowledge how historically African and African American people have been able to thrive within systems. The system of academia, which is built upon tenets that have been functioning with institutionally racist policies, was not built to benefit nor

protect the interests of African Americans. Thus, it is important to identify that there are embedded systemic factors that need to be addressed on a macro- and micro-level.

### **Synthesis of Results Through CRT**

Within the structure of CRT, we can see the five tenets emerging through the analytical results of this grounded theory study. Again as discussed in Chapters I and II, CRT has five critical tenets: counter-storytelling, permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and critique of liberalism. These five tenets have created a lens through which I can provide further understanding of the themes of space, mentorship/ support, being other, growth, and wellness. First, it is important to acknowledge my voice as a participant within this study. Within qualitative inquiry and CRT, acknowledging the voice of the researcher is essential to understanding the roles that the institution, researcher and participants played within the overall results. As a demographic member of the group studied, I entered a system that was not that of my own institution, yet was able to integrate myself and utilize my own knowledge as a counseling psychology student to work with my participants on an interpersonal and academic level. Although many of the concepts that were discussed were similar to my own experiences, I utilized these connections to provide voices to each one of my participants, while also recognizing my voice. Appendix C contains memos written during the trajectory of the study and provides further information. Below, I will go into depth regarding each tenet, how it applied to the lived experiences of my participants, and highlight how CRT was not only an appropriate lens to understand the results but one that was imperative to honor and respect the voices of my participants.

### *Counter-Storytelling*

Counter-storytelling was essential to the delivery of the information that was provided by the participants. As it relates to the current study, the voices of the participants provided an avenue where the traditionally underrepresented and unheard African American doctoral students experience within PWIs can be heard and validated. As discussed in Chapters I and II, there was very little to no literature that was addressed the experiences of African American doctoral students. Articles that did highlight experiences of doctoral students did not focus specifically African Americans. For example, in one study the sample in one study the sample was identified as 60% white and 40% other, lumped all non-European individuals into one voice. In order to provide a well-rounded understanding of the doctoral experience, it is imperative that we as researchers acknowledge and celebrate differences due to the historical and continuing barriers and hindrances that are experienced by non-Europeans, more specifically in this study, students of African and African American descent. In order to honor, acknowledge and listen to the voices of the African/ African American doctoral students, these themes begin to help fill the gap in the literature.

### *Permanence of Racism*

Permanence of racism can be seen through the lack of literature that identifies the voices of African American scholars. It is not happenstance that although African Americans have been a part of the doctoral thread for many decades that literature is void of their experiences. This is completed through the inherent building blocks of what academia was founded upon which only allowed European Americans and affluent individuals to attain a coveted doctoral degree. Although institutions of higher education have been integrated since the 1960s, there have been institutionalized efforts to keep educational institutions a closed space through financial

barricades, rigid and unfair admissions practices, and overt and covert admissions policies. With the use of the invisible veil and ethnocentric monoculturalism as described by Sue and Sue (2008), the majority society oftentimes utilizes paradigms that appear innocuous and standard, to make it difficult for people within marginalized populations to deconstruct the oppressive barriers and requirements that make it difficult to enter systems such as academia. An example of this would be the preservation of Eurocentric theoretical and conceptual knowledge that is disseminated within academic settings, which is inherently connected to Whiteness as Property.

### *Whiteness as Property*

Whiteness as property was embedded within the dialogue that was discussed in this study. Many of the participants indicated that they needed a space that would allow and celebrate the schools of thought of African American scholars. This is due to the possession of solely Eurocentric literature being a part of the curriculum within classrooms as well as academic journals. By the mere fact that there are overwhelmingly White theorists that are studied within many disciplines including psychology, there is an inherent message that African American theorists did not exist, which is contrary to actual historical texts. As an African American scholar it can oftentimes be invalidating and isolating for faculty members and peers to dismiss or invalidate information not in mainstream books and literature or invalidate experiences because they themselves have not faced similar occurrences.

### *Interest Convergence*

Interest convergence, can be seen as a tacit identifying factor that was addressed but not discussed in this study. More specifically through the implementation of the Black Studies department and building, the installation of this building was progress, however, it is a symbolization of trying to temporarily fix but not acknowledge the impact of discrimination on

campus. By obliging to the demands to stop discrimination on campus through building a “safe space”, administration is simply maintaining and containing African and African American schools of thought, into one building, rather than celebrating its existence and contribution campus-wide. As noted earlier, this interest convergence is the implementation or creation of establishments insofar as it benefits the majority culture, and in this case, this building benefits the overall institution because it provides a space for African American culture to be celebrated and appears to be a campus that is inclusive. However, it is inherently stifling of the African American studies because it is solely taught within confinement.

### *Critique of Liberalism*

Lastly, within this study there seems to be a notion that the university is working from an equality standpoint rather than equity. Although these terms are often used interchangeably, they can have extremely different outcomes. As equality is defined by Merriam Webster dictionary (2016), “the quality or state of being equal: the quality or state of having the same rights, social status, etc.”, whereas equity is defined as “fairness or justice in the way people are treated”. Equality does not recognize the past historical and current day wrongs and injustices that have an impact on the lives of students because it does not acknowledge that all students are not starting off with equal footing. Therefore, it is imperative that equity be a better model for understanding this phenomenon because it would be providing appropriate access resources and support to those who have been historically marginalized.

With these concepts put through a CRT lens it is appropriate to understand how the importance of wellness, healthy space, and mentorship are at the core of understanding how to provide positive environments to aid in the retention of African American doctoral students at PWIs.



## **Conclusion**

As a counseling psychologist, the investigation and further understanding of the experiences of African American doctoral students in predominantly White institutions has been eye-opening in understanding some of the barriers that people experience within their journey as academicians. It is important to know the literature behind each concept that one studies both quantitatively as well as qualitatively. This study approached the qualitative aspect of understanding experiences of this subgroup. The struggles faced by these students are unique and opens up a conversation for systematic changes that should be implemented to acknowledge the existence of African American students on campus and enhance their learning experiences as doctoral students. There is a need for changes from a macro-level of management to a micro-level of management in order to complete the tasks of making universities not only tolerate of people from differing backgrounds but accepting of people of varying backgrounds. As many of the participants noted integration of space, community, mentoring, inclusion of Black theory in classroom curriculum as well as multicultural education of professors and departments is imperative to help students truly strive and feel comfortable in the space of academia. With the information gathered in this study and the use with the extant literature about African American doctoral students' experiences, below are some recommendations for departmental and university administration based on the findings of this study:

### **Recommendations:**

1. It is recommended that there be an incorporation of Black or African schools of thought into the curriculums of doctoral programs.
2. It is recommended that faculty members who are inclusive of perspectives from African and African American literature.

3. It is recommended that there is a greater involvement of the academic community during times of heightened racial tensions on campus.
4. It is recommended that there are cultural and inclusion trainings for faculty and students upon entering the institution.
5. It is recommended that there are opportunities for mentorship of African American doctoral students (not mandatory programs but open opportunities).
6. It is recommended that there are forums on campus in which students can discuss difficulties encountered within their academic department.
7. It is recommended that there are spaces within and outside the classroom that provides healthy dialogue about current events that are impacting lives of African American doctoral students.
8. It is recommended that there is an increase in the number of African American professors on campus.

### **Implications for Future Studies**

There has been a great deal of information gathered in this study, however, there should be an in depth study on factors that were not addressed in this study. One particular area for further study is the implications of multiple identities and how these intersectionalities influence the experiences of African American doctoral students. Another recommendation is a study that focuses on generational differences in the experiences within the academy (e.g. people who have worked for many years before graduate school versus students who have completed school with no break in their trajectory). Lastly, it would be valuable to look at how differing groups from the African diaspora experience academia. More specifically individuals from African descent, Caribbean descent and African American descent experience the doctoral process. I propose that

each of these groups would have differing views on how they experience the academy. Thus, creating rich narratives and opening a greater dialogue about academia.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

**Name:**

**Year in Doctoral Program:**

**Major:**

**Current Enrollment Status:**

**Race:** Please choose all that apply:

- ☐ White (Hispanic)
- ☐ White (Non-Hispanic)
- ☐ Black/ African American/ African Decent
- ☐ American Indian / Alaskan Native
- ☐ Asian/ Indian
- ☐ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Bi-racial or Multi-racial \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnic Identity:**

**Short Answer:**

Do you think your race and ethnicity impacts your everyday life? If so, how?

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## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

#### **Initial Questions**

1. Please tell me a little bit about your educational background.
  - a. Where did you do your undergraduate studies?
    - i. What was your major in undergraduate work?
    - ii. What was that experience like for you?
  - b. Did you complete a higher-level degree before your pursuit for a Ph.D.?
    - i. What was your major in undergraduate work?
    - ii. What was that experience like for you?
2. Tell me about your decision to pursue your Ph.D.
  - a. When did that happen for you? How did that decision come about?
    - i. Now that you are in the program, what are some experiences that stand out for you?
3. What expectation did you have when you were entering a Ph.D. program?
  - a. Have any of your expectations changed, if so, how?
4. What challenges have you faced, if any?
5. What successes have you experienced?
6. What has it been like for you as an African American doctoral student at a PWI?

#### **Support Questions**

7. What kind of (financial) support have you received from your program?
  - a. In general, who do you turn to for (financial) support?
  - b. Think of a time when you needed support and did not receive it?
    - i. Tell me about that?
8. What kind of (emotional) support have you received from your program?
  - a. In general, who do you turn to for (emotional) support?
  - b. Think of a time when you needed support and did not receive it?
  - c. Tell me about that?
9. What kind of (professional) support have you received from your program?

- a. In general, who do you turn to for (professional) support?
- b. Think of a time when you needed support and did not receive it?
  - i. Tell me about that?

Roles, Responsibilities and Expectations

- 10. In addition to your PhD what are your other roles?
- 11. How do other people in your life understand your role as a doctoral student?
- 12. How do you balance your other responsibilities with your graduate study?
- 13. Tell me about the expectations you have of yourself.
- 14. Tell me about the expectations others have of you.
- 15. What do you know about graduate school now that you wish you had known in the beginning?

## APPENDIX C

### MEMOS

#### **Memo #1**

Starting this process of collecting data has been rewarding but challenging at the same time. I found myself relating to the participants on a much deeper level than I had initially expected. The participants were open about their experiences and shared some vulnerable information with me that they noted “has to be told” because “this kind of work” needs to be done. The first couple of interviews, I was unsure of how the themes would fit together but since I had the transcriptions completed quickly I was able to read through them and code them and also look at sections where I could have asked clearer follow up questions or sections that I could have elaborated on a bit more.

It was also interesting that as we learn in qualitative courses that we have to probe for deeper meaning when participants feel as though they relate with us and say things like “you know what it’s like or you know what I mean”. I found myself saying many times in the interview, that we all may experience this construct (insert commonality) but everyone’s experience and interpretation of it may be different so would you be able to explain your understanding. The main one that came up was that participants wanted to be around people who “get it” or want “space” to be able to discuss the intricacies of being a person of color on a PWI with the current racial climate of America. Although I had an understanding of what they were eluding to it was important to get a rich and robust meaning from each participant. I thought some participants would get upset and tell me I know you know what I mean but when I asked

them for examples and to elaborate there was a nonverbal understanding of the need to add context.

In these contexts, the participants were noting how it can be emotionally and mentally taxing to have to educate others on what is basic knowledge in the African American community and not being invalidated or second guessed by their peers when they talk about being discrimination or macroaggressions. And with “Space”, participants not only talked about a physical space to meet and be celebrated; celebrated in relations to having Black scholars on the walls of their institution, theories that are relevant to their own experiences in classes that take racial, cultural perspective into considerations, or a place where they do not have to worry as much about being prejudged as (an athlete, or being inferior). However, space was also described as having a forum to discuss issues that impact Black students on campus such as racial incidents, interactions with White peers or professors who may be ignorant to their eurocentrism and space to not have to “code-switch” because of fear of being perceived as uneducated or lesser than. Many participants describe having to feel the pressure to perform in “White spaces”. The first couple of interviews have been interesting but I am excited to have some more conversations with participants.

## **Memo #2**

Today was a difficult day, not because anything went wrong with the interviews, but because I found myself becoming deeply emotional during one of my last interviews. Of course each participant has elicited some type of feeling or comradery within me but when one of my participants ended our session by saying they appreciate that I am doing a dissertation about this because of the fact that they had never really been validated in such a way, commended me for

the balanced questioning so they could explain their story, and indicated this is a project that needs to be published because “our” voices need recognition and need to be heard. When this participant left I felt a heavy sense of obligation and pressure to do this dissertation and its participants justice. I knew that I wanted this dissertation to be impactful and done meticulously, but this added an extra pressure of urgency and responsibility to do justice to each person’s interview. It was an exciting yet daunting, intense responsibility that I felt. In order to ground myself back into researcher mode I had to do some self-care to separate my mind from the interviews.

### **Memo #3**

It is coming to the end of my data collection, I had to do 3 skype interviews because the participants were not in town the week that I was in Austin. There are so many similarities in stories and so many participants really wanted to tell their story and those interviews went for 1.5 hours to 2 hours. I am excited to begin coding but in order to keep myself as unbiased as possible, I went through each transcript for quality checks by listening to the audio and ensuring that the participants words were accurately transcribed. And then I am going to take some time away from the transcripts and come back to them with a fresh new look. It was interesting that the quality checks were so important because the transcribers had a difficult time understanding Black vernacular and would often misquote or put [inaudible] in the sections where they could not understand the language that was being spoken. It was interesting how different words and phrases that are used within the Black community may not make sense to those who are not exposed to it on a regular basis. In one transcript, it had to be retranscribed because the transcriber tried to interchange when participants would say Black or he would put African American or if the participant were talking about trans, cis, and LGBTQ issues, he would use

whatever word he wanted to describe or shorten the transcript. This was angering because this was an instance where the voices of the participant were being altered and diminished. Upon receiving this transcript and quality checking it and finding these egregious mistakes, I emailed the company who profusely apologized for the inauthenticity and blatant disregard for the essence of transcription, thus refunding me money and having an expert transcriptionist re-transcribe the audio for free. This was just another reminder of the importance of my work.

#### **Memo #4**

Coding has been a feat of a task but I have finally gotten through the 545 pages of work and have color coded and categorized the commonalities across the transcripts. Reading through the transcripts with a fresh pair of eyes was helpful because I was able to see some nuances in the voices of the participants that I had not heard the first time of quality checks or during the interviews. It took over 1.5 months to fully work through each transcript and do line by line coding then axial coding. It was a time for me to become intimate with the data and parse out the different codes that came through and try to make sense of how to word and categorize codes across transcripts. In order to make sure I did not miss any key components, I began comparing different codes based on the color coding system I created. It was interesting how many participants had similar concepts to discuss but own had their unique experience to share. With so much data, it often times became overwhelming however, I would have to take a couple of days to relax my mind and then return to the data. One of the ways that I continued to be productive is by adding new information into my methodology section to strengthen my Chapter 3 and make it more robust in explaining the steps in my collection, coding and analysis process. Once finished with all the transcripts, I again stepped away from them for a week to reflect on the process and plan out how I was going to move forward.

**Memo #5**

Upon returning to the analysis, I first began by trying to do the axial coding by spreading out all of my transcripts and trying to cut and paste different sections under categories, but it proved to be overwhelming and daunting with thousands of color coded stickie's'. So I decided to create a guide in excel of my colored codes, then I went through each individual transcript to put which line numbers coordinated with the perspective code. By creating this method, I was able to easily move between transcripts on my computer and do thorough axial coding and collapsing certain categories into larger themes. In this process, I was able to move from 18 categories to 10. Then I proceeded to move toward selective coding and create robust themes that were carefully created to understand 5 overarching thematic classifications that arose from the data. The way in which I came to understanding and creating these classifications is through discussion, talking about the categories out loud to colleagues and the final steps will be to consult with my methodologist and return to the participants for member checks to ensure that their experiences were understood correctly and that the overarching classifications are authentic and accurate.