SUCCESS, TRANSFORMATION, AND SERVICE: A CRITICAL RACE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESSFUL POST-COLLEGIATE BLACK MEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Edward Delgado-Romero)

ABSTRACT

Psychological research has often used a deficit model to understand the mental health of Black Americans. Specifically, in social science research Black men have often been portrayed as unmotivated, underachieving and violent (Harper, 2012). This study used a strengths-based approach to explore the lives of successful Black men. The purpose of this study was to investigate successful, post-collegiate Black men's conceptualization of success through an exploration of transformative moments in their lives. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to understand how participants articulate communalism, or being of service, which is a core, strengths-based value for many in the Black community (Moemeka, 1998). Participants of this study were eleven Black male alumni members of a leadership academy that highly values service and achievement. Narrative inquiry and critical race theory informed the qualitatively constructed dialogues and thematic analysis presented. This study described a variety of people (including mentors, parents/caregivers, peers and public figures) and opportunities (such as attending rigorous schools and extracurricular engagement) that shaped participants' success. Additionally, participants discussed the importance of communalism in their lives described as being motivated by ancestral history and a sense of responsibility to Black male youth.

Implications for Black male mental health and the field of counseling psychology are explored.

INDEX WORDS: Black, African American, male, Critical Race Theory, success, narrative inquiry, transformation theory

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DEDICATION

To my dad Robert Bruce Unkefer for telling me to take risks.

To my Aunt Ida Hamilton for teaching me how to love.

"I am because we are; and because we are, therefore I am."

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> Blackness to me is faith. Having faith in what you don't see. Because we as a people often don't see validation, we don't see uplifting in the context of mainstream America or even situations like Harvard. So for me it's having faith that I am significant. I am valid. I am valuable even though everything else is telling me that I'm not. (I Too Am Harvard, 2014)

The above quote was taken from a Black male undergraduate student at Harvard University sharing his experiences on campus. This student's perspective echoes sentiments of invalidation that have been expressed by many Black male college students in the United States (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Harper, 2005; Smith, Hung & Franklin, 2011). Black males at all levels of education often are met with low expectations and assumptions regarding their intellectual capacity by their peers and teachers (Comeaux, 2013; Harper & Davis, 2012). Specifically, academic achievement research often focuses on the high drop out and low graduation rates of Black male high school and college students (Harper, 2012). Taken in isolation the statistics can be staggering: Only 59% of Black males graduate from high school, whereas the overall national graduation rate is approximately 81% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Black males are overrepresented in both elementary and secondary school special education classrooms and vastly underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015; Whiting, 2009). Of the 41% of Americans who attend college, only 16% are Black men (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2015; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). Of the Black men who attend college, only 34% graduate within 6 years, whereas 43% of Black women graduate within the same period (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). The negative and punitive focus on Black men extends beyond the classroom. For example, Black males are six times more likely to be imprisoned than White males (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013). Low life expectancy, high HIV/AIDS rates, and high unemployment rates all lead to the view of the Black man as "in crisis" (Laubscher, 2005; Wade & Rochlen, 2013).

The negative portrayal of Black men in academic research and mainstream media limits the scope of their experiences. As described in the Schott Foundation for Public Education's (2015) report on Black male youth and men:

> Black males in America have been cast in a light far too negative for their actual contributions to family, community, democracy, economy, thought leadership and country. There are over two million Black male college graduates and over one million enrolled in college today….Yet, in the face of these positive attributes, the systemic treatment, outcomes and portrayal of Black males in key systems like education, labor and justice have been largely negative. (p. 6)

The Schott report argued for a more holistic understanding of Black men and youth and detailed how systemic and institutional oppression led to this negative perception and the achievement gap between Black males and their White counterparts.

Moreover, when President Barack Obama gave an address regarding the My Brother's Keeper Initiative, a program that supports the achievement of men of color both

academically and socially, he mentioned many of the negative statistics described above and noted:

> We've become numb to these statistics. We're not surprised by them, we take them as the norm. We just assume that it is an inevitable part of American life. Instead of the outrage it really is….These statistics should break our hearts and compel us to act. (The White House, 2014)

President Obama argued for a shift in focus from reveling in the destructive depictions of Black men in this country to a more strengths-based perspective and action. However, it is clear this action will not come swiftly or easily given this country's extensive history of discrimination and oppression of Black people.

This nation's history of discrimination, oppression and negative portrayals of Black people has impacted the field of psychology as well. For instance, Parham, Ajamu and White (2011) gave a detailed description of the harmful perceptions of Blacks in United States history through a psychological lens. These scholars explained that from slavery until the 1950s, Blacks were viewed within psychology using an inferiority model that argued Blacks are intellectually, mentally and physically inferior to Whites. Scientists during this time period contended that Blacks' inferiority was due to genetic and heredity differences that made them "just above the ape in hierarchy of animal/human development" (Parham, Ajamu & White, p. 18).

In late 1950s and early 1960s, psychological conceptualizations of racial differences changed and a deficit model of Black populations was lauded arguing that Blacks are intellectually, cognitively and socially deficient due to their environment and not their genetics (Gunthrie, 1998; Parham, Ajamu & White, 2011). This view was

established by many liberal-minded researchers who posited society was to blame for Black's cultural deficits as a result of decades of racism and discrimination. It was believed that segregation and other discriminatory acts left Blacks with insufficient interaction with White norms, behaviors and beliefs leaving them culturally bereft. Although psychological research shifted from genetic attributions of Black inferiority to external attributions, implicit in this deficit model was the notion that White, middle-class norms were the ideal and should be embraced by all populations and opposing norms are unacceptable and intolerable (Parham, 2009). Many current researchers contend that this deficit model towards Blacks continues in contemporary research and use of a deficit model does not acknowledge nor do justice to the cultural norms, accomplishments or abilities of Black people (Harper, 2009; Harper, 2012; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Zion & Blanchett, 2011).

Specifically, Black men are often subjects of scholarship and media portrayals based on the deficit model (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). In social science research Black men were frequently found to be academically low achieving, unmotivated, intellectually limited, aggressive and violent (Harper, 2012; Laubscher, 2005). In academic settings, these assumptions can lead to complications with stereotype threat resulting in lower academic achievement (Steele, 1997). Moreover, the deficit-model of Black men may prompt mental health concerns such as race-related stress and depression (Watkins, Walker & Griffith, 2010).

Several researchers have begun to combat this deficit model of Black populations. For example, Yosso (2005) described the wealth of cultural capital that Black students bring to college including resiliency, strong community and familial ties and institutional

navigation skills. Yosso also noted the robust linguistic capital many Black students bring with them, as oral tradition and storytelling is incredibly important to this population, which requires several advanced cognitive skills. The author explained, "storytelling skills may include memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme," (Yosso, 2005 p. 79). Focusing on the strengths and richness of Black culture moves away from the deficit model to a more multicultural approach, which posits that all cultures have positive aspects and no culture is superior to another (Parham, Ajamu, White, 2011). Related to Black men specifically, Harper (2012) conducted the largest qualitative study of Black male college students with the purpose of understanding what factors contributed to their success in higher education. Harper found that Black men possessed a plethora of internal and external resources that contributed to their academic success including strong racial and gender development, resiliency and the ability to make beneficial administration and faculty connections on campus.

Problem Statement

Extant psychological literature has often used a deficit model when researching Black populations. This model has been particularly detrimental to the perceptions of Black men, who are often portrayed as "at risk," violent and uninterested in academic achievement, while little is understood about the 34% of Black men who have become collegiately successful (Harper, 2012).

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate how successful, post-collegiate Black men conceptualized success through an exploration of their transformative moments and

the articulation of communalism in their lives. Transformative moments allow people to understand important experiences in their lives through a process of critical reflection and modification of their interpretation of events (Mezirow, 1991). These moments can lead to self re-examination and a new understanding of oneself in relation to the world (Mezirow, 1996). Exploring these moments with successful Black men can provide new insight into how they perceive success and the elements they attributed to becoming successful.

Additionally, the concept of communalism, or being of service, was explored. Communalism is a foundational, positive and strengths-based value within the Black community; however, little is understood about the significance of this value within people's lives, especially within the dominant value of individualism prevalent in the United States (Mattis, Jagers, & Hatcher, 2000). This study explored how participants directly and/or indirectly articulated communalism. Among communal cultures, and the Black community specifically, oral tradition is highly valued, consequently the narratives in this study stand as a testament to young Black men who are striving towards their own success (Boykin, Jagers, Ellison & Albury, 1997). Within the Black community, oral tradition and sharing of histories is incredibly important in the intergenerational exchange of knowledge on how to combat challenges and overcome adversity, and this study added to this rich history (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Parham, Ajamu, White, 2011).

This study was also informed by narrative inquiry and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Narrative inquiry is a type of qualitative research that focuses on people's stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It allowed a space for participants to reflect on their experiences with consideration for the time, place and social context of their narrative.

Narrative inquiry uses techniques similar to oral storytelling, which may be particularly culturally congruent with the participants within this study (Clandinin, 2013; Lyons, Bike, Johnson & Bethea, 2011).

Critical Race Theory aims to shed light on the damaging effects of racism and oppression and gives marginalized populations a voice to incite societal change (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). In Harper's (2012) study described above, most participants mentioned they had never been asked about their educational or life experiences. The author argued this is problematic as the participants of his study hold the keys to academic success and need to share their stories to inform other students who may need support and guidance. CRT is in alignment with this belief, as it posits that social justice can be articulated through the telling of narratives that disrupt the status quo, challenge dominant discourses around race and achievement and value the voices of marginalized populations (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Definitions

Black will be self-identified allowing research participants to label their racial identity according to their racial affiliation and conceptualization of Blackness.

Communalism is a cultural orientation that privileges interdependence and relationships over individual well-being.

Success will be self-defined by participants in this study.

Transformation has been defined as the:

> Process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference…to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change,

and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

Research Questions

This research will explore the following questions:

1. How do participants conceptualize success?
2. What transformative moments do participants identify on their journey to success?
3. For these participants, what is the significance of being of service (that is, how do they articulate communalism)?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELEVANT RESEARCH

Success and Service

Currently, there is no consensus among psychologists on the definition of success and its encompassing factors. A study by the Harvard Business Review (Groysberg & Abrahams, 2014) compiled qualitative data taken from over 4,000 interviews with executives from diverse professions and cultural backgrounds across the world. Participants discussed how they conceptualized success and their various responses indicated how individualized the definition of success might be. Groysberg and Abrahams found differences between participants according to their gender: women typically noted a sense of fulfillment related to reaching individual goals (such as having passion for their accomplishments), whereas men reported success being achieved by accomplishing organizational goals. However, both genders noted that building strong relationships with others, personally and professionally, as the key element in their conceptualization of success. Other factors contributing to participants' understanding of their own success included financial security, enjoyment of their work environment and feeling that they lived a purposeful life.

McClure's (2006) study of African American fraternity members found some evidence of how men within a national Black Greek organization conceptualized success. The author described how Black fraternities typically have a strong focus in community service and act as a social outlet for minority undergraduate students on college campuses. For many participants in McClure's study, success was most concretely

realized through the acquisition of a good job after college that could support them and their families. Additionally, participants in this qualitative study highlighted the opportunity for career advancement, having a strong commitment to the Black community and the ability to give back in a meaningful way to the community as clear indicators of success. While these findings are significant, McClure noted they may be limited to Black men who are Greek-affiliated and may not be generalizable to other Black male college students. The unique experiences of National Pan-Hellenic Counsel (NPHC) Greek-affiliated Black men will be explored in further detail in the *Student Organizations and Outside Engagement* section of this chapter.

The concept of success has had some cursory theoretical analysis within the field of positive psychology as well, although it has not been this field's primary focus. For example, in Wong's (2011) re-examination of positive psychology and its conceptualization of "the good life," success is a positive outcome of self-confidence (p. 70). Wong argued that there isn't a cohesive definition of the good life in positive psychology research; however, it should include values, resiliency, meaning-orientation and well-being (including happiness and health). While the author does not explore success at length, Wong does argue that success is a positive outcome of well-being and pursuing the good life.

Even though the overall concept of success has not been explored in depth in psychology, the idea of high achievement among Black students has been studied in the field of education. This is a specific form of success that the participants in the current study have been exposed to. Consequently, the stories the participants told were often influenced by the factors that supported their success in a school context. Harper's

(2012) study on Black male achievement provided much needed insight on the academic success of this population. This author interviewed over 200 high-achieving Black male college students for The National Black Male College Achievement Study. The participants had an average GPA of 3.39, held numerous leadership positions in organizations on campus, had meaningful relationships with administrators and/or faculty members and were involved in enriching academic experiences such as study abroad programs and internships. In this largest qualitative study on Black male achievement to date, Harper found that several factors were relevant to the success of these students. Some of these factors were psychological in nature, including social identities development, faculty and peer support, outside engagement, and communal values (Harper, 2012).

Because the participants in this study are from the same demographic population but situated in a different temporal space as the participants in Harper's (2012) study, many of the previously mentioned factors were explored within their narratives. Consequently, these factors are investigated at length below.

Social Identities

Racial identity. Harper (2012) noted that racial, gender and social class identities were significant factors for success among Black male college students. He argued that the development of strong Black identities increased participants' academic engagement and abilities to garner higher academic achievement. Research has indicated that the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement is tenuous. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that Black students who disassociate themselves from Black culture are more likely to be higher achievers. This concept, known as oppositional culture

theory or "acting White," posited that Black students attempt to embrace racelessness and try to disengage from their racial identity to become academically successful. Moreover, Awad (2007) and Lockett and Harrell (2003) both found no relationship between racial identity and academic achievement among Black college students and questioned if racial identity should be considered as a factor related to academic performance. However, it should be noted that both studies utilized samples from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Consequently, results may not be generalizable to Black students at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). Additionally, Lockett and Harrell conducted their study using the Racial Identity Attitude Scale (RIAS) to measure racial identity attitudes, although this scale has been found to have poor psychometric properties (Cokley, 2007).

While the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement continues to be unclear, some studies have found positive associations between a strong Black identity and academic achievement. Phinney (1990) and Ward (1990) both found that high-achieving students might gain strength and validation from their racial group affiliation. These theorists argued that a strong racial group connection could lead to academic motivation and achievement. At the high school level, Chavous et al. (2003) did not find a correlation between GPA and racial identity, although an association between racial group affiliation and positive academic beliefs and motivations was noted. Rowley (2000) conducted a cluster analysis of Black college students and contrary to Fordham and Ogbu's findings (1986), the cluster with the highest GPA was more likely to support views indicating the importance of race to their sense of self.

The literature does not present a clear conclusion on the relationship between racial identity and academic achievement and there is currently no reported research on the effects of a sense of Black pride or belonging as it relates to the success of post-collegiate Black men. Cross' revised nigrescence model of racial identity includes four stages that emphasize racial salience throughout one's lifespan (Vandiver, 2001). Vandiver asserted that racial salience is determined by the importance of race in a person's life and his/her valence for engaging with his/her racial identity. Each stage in Cross's revised nigrescence model may present opportunities that are ripe for transformative moments, especially during transitions. As people gain more awareness of who they are as racial beings, their thoughts and attitudes about the world must change, which can lead to significant cognitive and epistemological shifts (Vandiver, 2001; Mezirow, 2000). Consequently, how participants view their racial identity and connection to the Black community influenced how they conceptualized their own success and accomplishments.

Gender and masculinity. While most previous studies on gender development and masculinity have been conducted on adolescent White males, a few studies have focused on the importance of gender development among Black college men (Ford, 2011). Broadly, a clear masculine identity has been linked to a positive self-concept and to positive psychological and academic outcomes (Price, 2000). For Black male college students, masculinity has often been enacted in accordance with a "cool pose" image that is frequently depicted in the media and popular culture (Ford, 2011; Harper, 2004; Majors & Billson, 2002). Elements of this persona include athletic ability, romantic prowess, emotional restrictiveness, material possessions and a competitive nature (Ford,

2011; Sanchez et al., 2011; Wilkins, 2012). Extant literature suggests that Black men who do not enact these features of masculinity are likely to be subjected to victimization and isolation from their Black peers (Davis, 2001).

While Ford's (2011) study indicated that Black men found the need to uphold a cool pose of Black masculinity in public spaces, Harper (2004) asserted that this image was not required for all high-achieving Black college men. The participants in Harper's qualitative study described a different conceptualization of Black masculinity, including being a responsible member of the Black community, caring for one's family and holding respected leadership positions. For example, one participant in the study noted:

> Being 'the man' isn't about the money, the clothes, and the cars that you have right now. You're 'the man' when you're at a company and you're in a position to hire other African Americans; when you're in a position to give dollars back to the Black community; when you have time to go be a mentor to young African American boys in your city, that's masculine…to me, being an executive someday who's able to reach back and help other African Americans is the measure of a man. (Harper, 2004, p. 100-101)

Several of the Harper's participants rejected the prescribed notions of Black masculinity given to them by the media and society at large and defined Black masculinity to be more congruent with their lived experiences and beliefs. Additionally, while participants noted that many of the Black men at their universities held different beliefs regarding Black masculinity (including many elements in alignment with the "cool pose" persona), they felt a keen sense of camaraderie, respect and support from other Black men on campus. Contrary to participants in Davis' (2001) study, these participants reported that their

manliness was never questioned by other Black men and that they were often supported and praised by Black male students who weren't as involved in campus activities. While there is a paucity of research on Black masculinity and gender development, the few studies available do indicate that the articulation of Black masculinity can unfold in a variety of ways.

Social class. While socio-economic status has not been directly linked to academic performance, it has been noted as a significant factor in the college application and decision-making process for students in general (Bowen, Kurzweil & Tobin, 2005; Harper & Griffin, 2011). For some Black men, education is seen as a factor in possible upward mobility and success (Sanchez et al., 2011; Cole & Jacob Arriola, 2007). However, obtaining placement at rigorous colleges and universities can be difficult for economically disadvantaged Black male students without support from outside resources. For example, Harper and Griffin (2011) found that Black male collegians attending highly selective universities often received outside support through independent access initiatives (such as the program Prep for Prep, which places low-income students into prestigious private and boarding schools and offers tuition remission and academic guidance) and talent-based programs at the secondary level. Moreover, Black male students in the study attended universities (such as Harvard, Amherst and Stanford) that provided no-loans and zero-contribution initiatives for students from low-income families. These programs allowed students to attend highly selective, expensive, private institutions without prohibitive cost to them or their families. Many of the participants in Harper and Griffin's study indicated that these initiatives were a necessity for their success. Additionally, once they arrived on college campuses, many Black male students

found that the intersection of race and social class differences between Black college students and their typically more affluent White peers led them to feel a sense of isolation at PWIs (Torres, 2009). These studies illustrate that socio-economic class has an impact on students' access, comfort and engagement in college.

Acculturation. Acculturation is "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members" (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Initially, acculturation was conceptualized as unidimensional with assimilation the ultimate goal; however, current research emphasizes the bidimensionality of acculturation (Berry, 2003; Obasi & Leong, 2010; Rudmin, 2003). The bidimensionality of acculturation indicates people's preference for upholding the values and beliefs of their own ethnocultural group while also understanding their preferences when interacting with other ethnocultural groups, typically the White majority.

Recent research indicates that acculturation is an important social identity for Black populations (Obasi & Leong, 2010). Obasi and Leong asserted that the acculturative patterns of people of African descent are not widely understood as past research has primarily focused only on racial identity development. These researchers argued that denying the importance of acculturation perpetuates the myth that people of African decent are culturally monolithic, when in actuality this population is very culturally diverse.

Currently, there is a scarcity of studies on Black acculturation using a bidimensional approach. Cole and Arriola (2007) argued that matriculation at PWIs can be an acculturative experience for many Black students due to the racist and

discriminatory actions that Black students may be confronted with at these institutions. These researchers found that Black students who had a stronger acculturative identity towards biculturalism viewed educational attainment as an avenue for upward mobility while also being aware that institutional oppression and structural barriers exist for Blacks. Moreover, students who reported a bicultural approach expressed feeling comfortable around their White peers, did not invest in impression management in academic settings, and did not feel stigmatized by the Black community when they performed well academically. This once again brings into question Fordham and Obgu's (1986) assertions that Black students need to distance themselves from their racial/cultural identity to achieve academic success.

Social Support

Social support, including family, peer and faculty support has been found to be beneficial to the emotional stability and academic achievement of Black collegians. Several studies have found that having an emotionally supportive family can result in decreased depression, suicide ideation and loneliness among Black students at both PWIs and HBCUs (Harris & Molock, 2000; Herndon & Moore, 2002; Kimbrough, Molock & Walton, 1996; Mounts, 2004). Moreover, families provide comfort, encouragement and guidance for many Black students regarding both academic and emotional concerns (Barnett, 2004; Herndon & Moore, 2002). The protective factors that are associated with strong familial ties can be linked to Black cultural beliefs of communalism and collectivism. That is, for many Black students, academic performance is not solely an individual achievement but a reflection of one's whole family and community (Harris & Molock, 2000).

Consequently, Black college students can feel both a sense of support and pressure from their family (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Walker and Satterwhite found higher levels of emotional support were also accompanied by elevated academic pressure from their families among both Black and White college students. These researchers noted the dual roles that families can play in college students' lives as they can both buffer the deleterious effects of stressful events in students' lives while also adding to them.

Family support has also been linked with academic support. While a direct relationship between family support and academic achievement (such as GPA or graduations rates) has not been found, Black students indicated that they often utilize family members as their primary support group when faced with academic difficulties (Chiang, Hunter & Yeh, 2004). Moreover, one study found that positive perceived family support was related to fewer withdrawals from college (Walker & Satterwhite, 2002). Oftentimes, Black students facing academic difficulties cope by participating in family activities, such as religious and other social events (Chiang et al., 2004). These coping strategies align with the communalistic values of kinship and community as a source for healing and support for Black people (Asante, 2003; Parham, Ajamu & White, 2011).

Peer support has also been found to be a key factor in the success of Black college students. Similar to family encouragement, peer support does not directly effect the academic achievement of Black students; however, research indicated that peers are one of the primary support sources for Black college students (Baker, 2013). Interestingly, Baker found that for Black men, peer support was more important to their academic

success than faculty support. The researcher posited that this discrepancy may exist because Black men may not have access to faculty and administrators who could aid in their academic success. Additionally, Black men at PWIs may establish strong bonds with other Black male students because they are members of a small community who share similar marginalized experiences in often racially toxic environments (Harper, 2006).

Harper (2012) noted that older Black male students serve as role models and mentors to younger students and provide both academic and emotional support. Many of the participants in Harper's study identified these informal mentorships as a significant factor in their success in college. A qualitative study by Solozano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) described that for many Black college students, study groups transformed over time into friendship and community groups, providing stress relief and encouragement to participants. In sum, peer support can offer both emotional support and academic guidance to college students, helping them to become more successful in college.

Lastly, faculty support can have a positive impact on the success of Black male college students. Faculty relationships can be important to academic achievement among Black male collegians in both formal (i.e., mentoring programs and diversity and academic services departments) and informal settings (i.e., social and networking events) (Baker, 2013; Museus, 2011). Research indicated that reliance on formal and/or mandated mentoring programs is often not efficacious for participants, while faith-based and informal forms of mentorship should be considered (Butler, et al., 2013; Harper, 2012). In a study of PWIs with high minority student retention rates, Museus described minority students' interactions with faculty members at social events, including cocktail

hours and barbeques, as an avenue to humanize faculty and administrators. As faculty and administrators became more individualized people, students reported feeling more comfortable in seeking institutional members for academic support, employment opportunities and guidance.

Student Organizations and Outside Engagement

While a direct relationship has not been found between extracurricular activities and academic achievement, research has shown that out-of-classroom engagement has been linked to several advantageous outcomes, including higher institution connectedness, positive transitions to college life and higher retention of students of color (Baker, 2008; Chavous, 2000; Chiang et al., 2004; Guiffrida, 2004). Specifically, research shows that Black students who engage in outside activities at PWIs, such as student council, orientation programs and student government, are more likely to feel connected to their university, which may serve as a protective factor against perceived discrimination and oppression on campus (Chiang et al., 2004).

While extracurricular engagement generally appears to have a positive effect on Black students, ethnic student organizations (ESOs) seem to be particularly beneficial (Deckman, 2013; Grier-Reed, 2013; Guiffrida, 2003; Guiffrida, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus, 2008, Renn & Ozaki, 2010; Strayhorn, 2011). ESOs can include Black student associations, gospel choirs and minority branches of professional organizations (e.g., the National Society of Black Engineers undergraduate chapters). Museus's (2011) study of universities with high minority student retention rates found that all of the institutions heavily invested in ESOs and provided these organizations with funding and resources to help support minority students on campus. For example, one institution

reported that 70% of their Black students were served by the Black student organization and that both students and administrators agreed that this ESO was helpful in the retention of Black students on campus.

Black students report that ESOs are beneficial for several reasons including providing a nonjudgmental community (Deckman, 2013; Grier-Reed, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Students often describe ESOs as a "family" or "home base," allowing students to feel a sense of belonging, which is particularly important for Black students at PWIs who often feel marginalized and isolated (Strayhorn, 2012). Moreover, ESOs offer a space for cohesion and the opportunity for members to let their guard down, which may produce a sense of safety and comfort among Black students (Grier-Reed, 2013). Black students often reported that they feel comfortable in ESOs because they are nonjudgmental spaces that automatically accept them for who they are, allowing them to express themselves authentically (Museus, 2008). Additionally, Black students are often exhausted from the hypervisibility/invisibility dynamics pervasively found at PWIs and use the ESOs as spaces of healing with community members (Guiffrida, 2003).

ESOs are also where many Black students can interact with other students with perceived shared experiences (Grier-Reed, 2013; Guiffrida, 2003; Museus, 2008). These perceived shared experiences promote cultural familiarity and validation of experiences for many students (Grier-Reed, 2013; Museus, 2008). That is, as students hear the struggles of their peers, they may see their own lives reflected in these stories and feel a deeper connection because of these shared experiences. Because of these deep, genuine connections, Black students often perceive ESOs as more open and friendlier than other student organizations on campus (Guiffrida, 2003). Guiffrida also noted that because of

shared experiences and interests among ESO members, many Black students feel they can socialize in a style that is more culturally congruent, including having access to culturally relevant foods, music and storytelling.

ESOs can be a space for emotional support as well (Grier-Reed, 2013; Museus, 2008; Strayhorn, 2011). Many Black students use ESOs as safe spaces where they can cope with the stressors of college life, especially at PWIs (Grier-Reed, 2013; Museus, 2008). Strayhorn examined the impact of gospel choir participation on African American students at PWIs and found that participation in the choir gave many of the students' solace, motivation and comfort to persevere in facing their academic and personal problems. Participants described worship and prayer as foundational elements of the gospel choir that offered support through difficult times and gave them a stronger connection to God. Additionally, ESOs can allow Black men opportunities to express their emotions and struggles in a safe space (Jackson, 2012; McClure, 2006). Jackson explored an all-Black-male ESO and discovered it offered a counter-space for Black men to express vulnerabilities without threat to their masculinity. Many of the Black men in the study indicated that this ESO was essential to their success and emotional well-being on campus.

Black students also describe ESOs as avenues to learn more about Black history (Deckman, 2013; Guiffrida, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013). Deckman (2013) conducted an extensive qualitative study on the Kuumba Singers of Harvard, the institution's oldest Black organization, and found that students often used the organization to understand the role music played in the history of African Americans in this country, from slavery through the civil rights movement to today. In this eloquent piece, the researcher

described one of the main missions of the organization is to uplift the Black community through a study of its writings, songs and dance. Kuumba students noted that the organization aided in their understanding past and contemporary race relations at Harvard. Guiffrida (2008) found that Black students who participated in ESOs often encountered cultural differences between members, supporting students understanding that the Black experience is multifaceted and complex.

ESOs also serve as conduits for enacting advocacy and empowerment for many Black students, especially at PWIs (Grier-Reed, 2013; Guiffrida, 2003; Harper, 2007; Museus, 2008). Black students in ESOs often discuss university issues that effect minorities and create responses to engage in institutional change (Harper, 2007; Museus, 2008). Black students describe ESOs as giving them a collective voice that can be heard and often times must be addressed by administrators leading to systemic changes (Grier-Reed, 2013; Museus, 2008). This commitment to Black students through a collective voice is used to dispel stereotypes and break down barriers between minority students and White students on campus (Harper, 2007). Additionally, ESOs often give back to the local Black community by giving to charitable Black organizations and volunteering in local community service projects (Guiffrida, 2003). This can offer deeper cultural connections between Black college students and the local community and demonstrate a commitment to advocacy and social justice.

ESOs also give its members' access to university administrators and the opportunity for cross-cultural relationships (Guiffrida, 2003; Harper, 2007). Through ESO leadership positions, Black students can interact with administrators who can forge relationships with internship programs and funding opportunities (Guiffrida, 2003). In

Guiffrida's (2003) study students in a Black student organization described meeting people of color in leadership positions as incredibly beneficial because it allowed them to interact with people who may hold similar values of communalism, which can lead to additional networking and job opportunities. Moreover, Harper (2007) found that participation in ESOs broadens students' multicultural lens beyond a Black and White binary. ESO leaders often interact with students and administrators from a variety of backgrounds and students learned about the oppression of other groups such as international students and other minority groups on campus. This supported students' multiculturalism and ability to interact with people from a variety of backgrounds (Harper, 2007).

Lastly, it should be noted that Black fraternities are an ESO that can be particularly important to the success of Black men at PWIs and HBCUs (Harper, 2006; Hutcheson, 1998; Kimbrough, 1995; Kimbrough, 2005; McClure, 2006; Ray, 2013; Severtis & Christie-Mizell, 2007). While many of the benefits of fraternities are similar to the ESOs described above, including providing emotional support, advocacy opportunities, access to administrators and community elements, fraternities do offer some unique advantages (Harper, 2006; McClure, 2006). Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs) have been linked to higher graduation rates than their White Greek-affiliated counterparts (Severtis, 2007). BGLOs are also a platform for members to hone their leadership skills (Hutcheson, 1998; Kimbrough, 1995). Specifically, Hutcheson found that BGLO affiliates perceived themselves to be better at conflict resolution, consensus building, group organization, and program planning than their non-affiliated peers. In addition, in several qualitative studies, Black men contribute their

academic success directly to their Greek affiliation (Harper, 2006; Harper, 2007; McClure, 2006; Ray, 2013).

Afrocentricity, African-Centered Psychology and Communalism

As noted above, Harper (2012) found that communal values had a significant impact on high-achieving Black males in his study. This value is a pivotal element within the Afrocentric (or African-centered) worldview (Parham, Ajamu and White, 2011). Afrocentricity is a term that has been conceptualized by several theorists, including Molefi Asante, Gerald Early, Thomas Parham and Joseph White; however, consensus regarding the elements of Afrocentricity has not been reached (Mazama, 2001). Many scholars believe that the Afrocentric worldview was born out of ancient African-Egyptian ideology focusing on the study of the soul and spirit (Parham, Ajamu and White, 2011). Within contemporary society, an Afrocentric worldview was demonstrated through the works of W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X., Ida B. Wells and other African American poets, writers and artists (Monteiro-Ferreira, 2009). A broad definition of Afrocentricity is "a perspective that allows Africans to be subjects of historical experiences rather than objects on the fringes of Europe" (Mutisya, 2005, p. 236). Mutisya also noted it is a means by which Africans who were displaced around the world can feel a sense of connectedness and cultural congruence with others of African descent.

African-centered psychology is rooted in Afrocentric values, which Parham (2009) described as, "a dynamic manifestation of African-centered principles where these ideas are used in the understanding of ordered and disordered behaviors in people of African descent" (p. 10). The foundational aspects of Afrocentrism that comprise

African-centered -psychology include: spiritualism, collectivism, communalism and constructed truths based on self-knowledge (Cokley, 2005). It should be noted that many of these values are not restricted only to members of the Black community. In fact, European Americans and other minorities hold many of these values as well (Vargas & Kemmelmeier, 2012). However, the origins of these values for people of African descent are rooted in ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) teachings (Parham, 2009).

The Afrocentric element of communalism is of particular importance to the current study. Communalism is defined as an "ethos that privileges values of interdependence, deference, relationally and social obligation over concerns for independence and personal well-being" (Mattis, Hearn & Jagers, 2002, p. 199). Phrases such as 'giving back to the community' and 'being of service' are often used when describing communalism (Moemeka, 1998). It should be noted that the use of the term communalism is intentional. Moemeka (1998) gives a thorough explanation of the difference between the terms individualism, collectivism and communalism. The author argued that individuals from collectivistic communities are concerned with self-preservation within a group context. Moemeka explained, "Collectivism is a social order that recognizes the rights of individuals to self-actualization and acknowledges that self-actualization would be easier to achieve if people banded together for the purposes of pooling resources and making decisions" (p. 123). Alternatively, individuals from communalistic society are an integral part of the whole, which shapes their behaviors and actions. As noted by Moemeka the goal of communalism is, "the maintenance of the supremacy of the community as an entity and the safeguard of its welfare" (p. 125). Moemeka argued that collectivistic individuals ask *how can I save face within this group*,

whereas communalistic individuals ask *how can I preserve the authenticity of this community from outsiders.*

While communalism has been described as a core value in the Black community, currently there is little empirical research regarding the function that communalism plays in Black people's lives (Mattis, Jagers, Hatcher, 2000). Moreover, it is unclear how communalism is articulated for many in the Black community. Extant research has typically focused on one-time volunteerism and has not explored communalism over a sustained period of time (Mattis, Hearn & Jager, 2002).

Transformation Theory

This study explored how participants understand their success within the context of transformative experiences. Consequently, this study is informed by Mezirow's theory of transformation (1991, 2000). Mezirow developed this theory to explore transformative learning in adult education. Mezirow posits that the assumptions and impressions we make about the world around us are based on our frame of reference and that these assumptions and impressions provide us with a way to interpret events (Meizrow, 2000). This meaning perspective, or frame of reference, is comprised of two factors: a habit of mind and resulting points of view. A habit of mind includes broad, generalized assumptions that "act as a filter for interpreting the meaning of experience" (Mezirow, 2000, p, 16). Habits of mind include moral-ethical values, psychological traits (such as self-concept), learning styles, religious beliefs and social norms and customs. Mezirow noted that habits of mind are constructed from cultural paradigms (such as systemic and societal beliefs and values) and the personal perspectives of caregivers.

Over time, these habits of mind are expressed as a point of view. A point of view, "tacitly directs and shapes a specific interpretation and determines how we judge, typify objects and attribute causality" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 18). A point of view dictates how we respond to situations and often operates outside of our awareness, as these beliefs, feelings and attitudes are often implicitly thrust upon us from a very young age. Because a point of view is closely connected to who we are and what we believe, our point of view is often strongly defended if confronted (Mezirow, 2000). Moreover, we seek out information that supports our current frame of reference and point of view to provide a sense of security and coherence in our lives.

It is when our frame of reference and point of view is challenged that transformation can occur. Transformation is the:

> process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference…to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

Transformation requires people to reformulate their point of view and meaning structures to more adequately reflect their current reality. Mezirow suggests that transformation occurs through a process of critical reflection, which requires the justifying of one's beliefs (1996). Reflection necessitates a critical analysis of the beliefs one holds to determine if these beliefs still reflect the reality encountered. While this critical reflection can happen in isolation, for true transformation to take hold, discourse with others must occur (Mezirow, 2000). Reflective discourse allows for people to understand how others make meaning and also to contemplate critically their own assumptions of the

world. Frosty (1998) specifically notes that within the Black community from reflective discourse "comes insights that psychic transformations involve a provisioning of self in the eyes and responses of similar others and/or beneficial cycle of desire, identification and re-appropriation of a stronger subjectivity through relations with those who themselves successfully transcend oppression" (p. 72). Reflective discourse provides a space for people of color to explore how they were able to maneuver through discrimination and offer insights and validation to others who are experiencing similar struggles.

Mezirow (1996) noted that transformation might be epochal, through sudden major life events, or incremental, involving a series of smaller insights culminating into a transformation of one's habit of mind and point of view. Because transformation requires the reconstruction of strongly held beliefs it is also an emotional experience that can elicit both positive and negative emotionality (Mezirow, 2000). Meizirow (2000) explained transformations occurs in ten common phases:

1. A disorienting experience
2. Self-examination of feelings surrounding the experience, including shame, guilt, fear and embarrassment.
3. A critical assessment of currently held beliefs regarding the experience
4. Realization of one's discontent and sharing of the process of transformation with others
5. Examination of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6. Construction of a plan of action
7. Gaining of knowledge and skills to execute the action

8. Testing out new roles, relationships and actions
9. Building of confidence and aptitude in new roles and relationships
10. Integration of the new perspective into one's life (p. 22)

In Warde's (2007) study of African American male graduate students the author explored how participants were able to successfully complete a baccalaureate degree. Participants in the study frequently mentioned having an "epiphany" about post-baccalaureate education. While the author briefly described a few of the epiphanies confronted by these students, including the loss of friends and family members and unemployment serving as a wakeup call, deeper exploration into these moments is warranted. Participants throughout the current study experienced both epochal and incremental moments of transformation throughout their journeys towards success.

In a meta-analysis of transformation theory literature, Taylor (2007) found that while this theory is still relevant to the understanding of learning within adult education, there are gaps within the extant literature. The author noted that the interplay between transformative learning and culture is not fully understood. Current studies have not explored how transformative learning tenets manifest differently between genders, racial identities or nationalities of its participants. For example, Ntseane (2011) noted transformative learning theory may be more useful in an African context if there is more attention to the roles that collectivism, spirituality and communal construction of knowledge play within transformative learning. While Mezirow (2000) does note the importance of reflective discourse in the transformation process, Ntseane posited transformation could also occur collectively within a community. Additional research is needed to understand how culture influences transformation in diverse contexts.

Consequently, the current study aided in our understanding of transformative theory in relation to Black male populations.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how successful Black men conceptualize service with a focus on their transformative moments and how they articulate communalism in their lives. In this chapter, the research design, sample selection, data collection procedures, data analysis methods, trustworthiness, researcher subjectivity and study limitations are described.

Research Design

Qualitative researchers seek to understand phenomena within a naturalistic setting by focusing on the voices and lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013). Adhering to a constructivist-interpretivist framework, qualitative researchers emphasize a subjective view of reality that is individually constructed (Ponterotto, 2005). From this perspective, multiple views of reality exist that are shaped by individuals' contexts. Consequently, when researchers and participants join together in qualitative inquiry, they co-construct findings and interpretations regarding the participants' lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2005). Ponterotto (2002) posited that qualitative methodologies are particularly relevant to multicultural counseling psychology research. He argued that past studies in counseling psychology were constructed with a Eurocentric bias and then operationalized on diverse populations, resulting in depictions of these diverse populations as deficient to the White majority. Constructivist and critical paradigms allow for the voices of marginalized groups to be heard and described their multiple

realities and lived experiences (Ponterotto, 2002). Moreover, Lyons and colleagues (2011) posited that qualitative research is culturally congruent with people of African descent. Beyond giving a voice to those who are often silenced or ignored, the authors noted that qualitative research aligns with several African American cultural values such as collectivism and holism. For example, the use of interviews in qualitative research can emphasize the importance of person-to-person interaction, which is a key African American value (Lyons et al., 2011).

This study focused on the experiences of successful Black men, a population that is often pathologized or ignored in both academic and popular texts. Consequently, using qualitative research allowed me to give voice to a marginalized population within a culturally competent framework. Moreover, it has the possibility of countering the deficit models that have been ascribed to Black men in the past (Harper, 2012). Describing their lived experiences as successful Black men may serve as a tool of empowerment to both the participants and to the Black community at large as it can illustrate that the Black experience is not a monolithic narrative of deficits and inadequacy. Because few previous psychological studies have focused on the experiences of successful Black men, a qualitative research approach allowed for a more complex understanding of how participants view their success, service and transformative moments. I co-created narratives on the experiences of successful Black men within a historical context that included race, gender and other social dynamics, therefore my study was informed by both critical race theory and narrative inquiry.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed by lawyers and activists in the 1970s who realized the significant gains made during the civil rights movement of the 1960s had stagnated and implicit forms of racism still needed to be addressed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). While CRT's historical underpinnings are in law, critical legal studies and feminist thought, it has been expanded to various disciplines including sociology, education and psychology (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT is defined as acknowledging the role that racism and other forms of oppression have had on marginalized groups with the larger mission of opposing this subordination through giving voice to those who are often silenced (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) described five basic tenets of CRT. First, they argued that racism is a regular occurrence for people of color within the United States. Additionally, because racism is so commonplace in American society, it is often ignored. One key example of this type of commonplace racist behavior is microaggressions in which people of color encounter implicit racial slights (Sue & Sue, 2008). Because these insidious forms of racism can occur unheeded, it is only the most egregious acts of discrimination that could be addressed in governmental and organizational policies, such as refusal to hire faculty of color or unfair housing practices.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) noted the second tenet of critical race theory is interest convergence or material determinism. Interest convergence means that Whites, regardless of social economic strata, benefit from racism. Rich Whites, both liberal and conservative, benefit materially from racism whereas poor and working-class Whites benefit psychologically. CRT posits that even significant civil rights gains, such as the

1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* victory, were achieved more because of the self-interest of White elites than for the advancement of Black people.

The third tenet of CRT emphasizes that there is not a biological basis for race; rather, it is a social construction that is used to manipulate and oppress certain members of society. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) noted "that society frequently chooses to ignore these scientific truths, creates races, and endows them with pseudo-permanent characteristics is of great interest to critical race theory" (p. 9).

The fourth tenet of CRT describes deferential racialization and its consequences. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) described how the popular images and stereotypes of people of color morph and shift over time to fit the needs of the dominant society. For example, there was a point in history when Black people were portrayed as simpleminded and content to serve White people (the film *Imitation of Life* [Laemmle & Stahl, 1934] is a prime example of this stereotype). However, this stereotype of Black people, especially Black men, over the years has shifted to a narrative aligned with violence and aggression (Delgado & Stefancic).

The last tenet of CRT is offering a voice to people of color to share their unique perspectives. CRT acknowledges the tension that this role brings—of being viewed as a representative of an entire race while also representing one's individual experiences—and notes the importance of offering one's distinctive experience as it may be a perspective that his/her White counterparts may not be aware of.

Solorzano and Yosso (2002) argued for a similar conceptualization of CRT, although they emphasized one key factor of CRT that was vital to my study: a commitment to social justice. The authors described their views of social justice research

as working towards "the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowerment of subordinate minority groups" (p. 26). The authors posit that providing a counternarrative resisting the master narratives of marginalized populations can support these goals. Demonstrating a counternarrative was paramount throughout this study and was of particular importance when creating the constructed dialogues; consequently, counternarratives will be explored in further detail in the *Constructed Dialogues* section.

Utilizing CRT was crucial to this study as my assumptions and values align with this theoretical framework. As has been evident in previous studies, students' racial identity is intricately linked with their academic development and success (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Griffin, 2006). Consequently, many participants in my study explored how their Black identity and connection to the Black community have impacted their lives and achievements. The concept of interest convergence is an important theoretical foundation as well. As noted by Paulo Freire (1993), whose work heavily influenced CRT founders, both the oppressor and the oppressed suffer from dehumanization and are not allowed the freedom to be truly whole. By presenting a monolithic view of the Black male experience in the United States, not only do Black men continue to be relegated to the position of Other, White mainstream society is restricted from understanding the complexities of all human existence. Freire described two stages that are crucial to the liberation of all people: exposing the world of oppression, leading to transformation for both the oppressed and the oppressor and allowing this transformed narrative to become the narrative for all people. These stories of successful Black males are not just *Black* stories or *male* stories but are stories for everyone in contemporary society that explore people in the process of being and becoming.

Narrative Inquiry

I used narrative inquiry as a companion framework alongside CRT in my study. Because CRT does not have a specific set of methodological approaches, narrative inquiry satisfies this need and many of its ontological beliefs align with CRT. Narrative inquiry is:

> a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in the same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individually and socially. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)

Narrative inquiry was influenced by the work of John Dewey, who described the nature of reality as relational and transactional (Clandinin, 2013). People's environments heavily shape their experiences of the world. Consequently, narrative inquirers seek to join into a relationship with participants in which both individuals are impacted and changed.

Narrative inquiry includes three commonplaces of focus—temporality, sociality and place (Clandinin, 2013). Both the participant and the researcher engage in collaboration during a specific time in their lives that influences the stories the participants tell and how both the participant and the researcher engage in the research relationship. While narrative inquiry asks participants to focus on past stories, the study conditions and their future selves influence how stories are shaped and told as well. Participants' interactions with the larger society also impact their narratives and must be

attended to during the research process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants' social conditions, such as their institutional, cultural, and familial experiences, shape who they are and the stories they construct. Within the social context, participants experience moments of turning inward, in which they focus on their emotions and reactions, and moments of turning outward, when they focus on other people and events (Clandinin, 2013). These moments of self-reflection and external observation must be explored with participants to fully understand their stories. Lastly, place is an important element of narrative inquiry. Place can include both geographic location and social identities, such as social economic status. Participants' place impacts the stories they construct and how they reflect and interpret these experiences. All three aspects of narrative inquiry—time, context and place—are inextricably linked and shape our experiences and narratives (Clandinin, 2013).

Narrative inquiry is an appropriate approach for this study for several reasons. The focus on memory and how the development of stories is formed in the midst of one's time, context and place orientation supports understanding how participants tell their stories of triumph and success. Furthermore, the emphasis on relationship—between the researcher and the participant and between the participant and the world—is aligned with Afrocentric values and beliefs typically held by people of African descent (Lyons et al., 2011). Lastly, narrative inquiry draws attention to individuals' stories and is not concerned with constructing a theory or universal principles (Clandinin, 2013). Given the dearth of understanding about this population, exploring participants' stories comprehensively with thick, rich description is beneficial for future research on Black male success.

Sample and Recruitment

Recruitment employed purposeful sampling from the alumni membership of the Institute for Responsible Citizenship (The Institute). The Institute is a leadership academy for high-achieving undergraduate Black men with the primary goal "to inspire and equip the nation's best and brightest African American men to use their extraordinary talents to serve others" (The Institute for Responsible Citizenship, 2013). The Institute offers participants an intensive two summers program including internships with top business and governmental agencies in Washington, DC. There are approximately 150 alumni members of The Institute, all of whom graduated from college and approximately half went on to additional educational training (such as business school or law school).

Members of the Institute were recruited for the program in a variety of ways. For example, Stanley, a participant in this study, heard about the program when the Institute's founder, Bill Keyes, presented at a conference. Peers of Michael and Oliver (two additional members of this study) suggested they explore the program, while Josh and Edward were told about the program through mentors at their universities. There are several ways that Black male colleges students became aware of the program but it typically appeared to be informal networks and word of mouth recruitment that were the most common avenues of recruitment.

Purposeful sampling allows researchers to recruit participants who can provide information with rich insights into the concept being explored (Patton, 2002). Specifically, maximum variation sampling was used in this study. Maximum variation sampling aims to use a heterogeneous selection of participants to find themes that arise within a diverse group. A strength of this form of purposeful sampling it that "any

common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton, 2002, p. 235).

Sample

Inclusion criteria for the sample included men within The Institute alumni membership who self-identify in two areas: 1) Black and 2) graduated from an undergraduate institution before August 2011. Participants participated in a 60 to 90 minute face-to-face interview. This study filled a gap in extant research on successful Black males, which typically focuses on success at the college level (Brooks, 2012; Comeaux, 2013; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Harper, 2012), as the current study focused on participants who had graduated at least three years before the time of the interview. It can be difficult to fully grasp and reflect upon experiences whilst in the midst of the experience; consequently, a brief time lapse provided a benefit of distance and ability to reflect upon past experiences more holistically. As noted by Clandinin (2013), "the past is always told from the present time, place and relationships. What meanings we make—that is, how we tell those remembered stories—are told from the now" (p. 195). The way we interpret and make meaning of our stories shift and morph as our contexts change. Therefore, how participants conceptualize their successes and understanding of service after they have left their undergraduate institution could offer new insights into their experiences.

Recruitment

Once the UGA Institutional Review Board was approved for this study, the gatekeeper of my study posted an email of interest to potential participants on The

Institute's listserv (see Appendix A for script). This email included a brief explanation of the study, inclusion criteria, notice of compensation ($25 gift card), link to a pre-screening questionnaire, and my contact information. Interested persons completed a brief informed consent and an online pre-screening questionnaire (see Appendix B) that included demographic questions such as age, undergraduate affiliation, social class status, generational status, profession, fraternal affiliation and willingness to be contacted for a follow-up telephone interview.

While all of the demographic questions allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the sample, only certain criteria were used to reach maximum variation sampling: age, undergraduate institution, fraternal affiliation, and social economic status. These four areas were chosen based on the extant literature on this population. For example, it is documented that the experiences of Black students at predominately White institutions (PWIs) can be very different than Black students who attend historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), including reactions to racially toxic campus environments and access to supportive faculty members (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Consequently, this study considered participants who attended both PWIs and HBCUs to achieve maximum variation. Undergraduate institution was also noted as a key demographic differences such as if the prospective participant attended a public or private school, a small liberal arts school or a large flagship state-funded university.

Research has shown that membership in historically Black fraternities and sororities can affect participation and engagement in the classroom (Harper, 2007). Therefore, fraternal affiliation may have an impact on participants' understanding of

success, transformative experiences and service. Consequently, participants were recruited who are and are not fraternal members to reach maximum variation.

Social class was used as a maximum variation factor because research has found that low-income students are less likely to apply to four-year college institutions in comparison with their more affluent peers (Fitzgerald & Delany, 2002). While a relationship between social economic status and performance in school has not been established, social strata is part of the decision process when considering higher education (Bowen et. al., 2005). Consequently, interviewing participants from different economic backgrounds was beneficial to determining what themes emerge across those who had varied access to resources. Thompson and Hickey's (2005) social class designations were used for these two self-report questions.

Twenty-four potential participants completed the pre-screening survey, however two were disqualified because they did not fit the inclusion criteria (i.e. they had not yet graduated from their undergraduate institutions). Consequently, twenty-two potential participants remained. From there I focused on the maximum variation components: age, undergraduate institution, fraternal affiliation and social class to determine participants. Secondarily, I took into account other information gathered from the demographic survey such as being a first generation college student, current profession and generational status. Based on these criteria, 15 participants were identified and each potential participant was sent an email informing them of their status (Appendix C). Participants who were selected for an interview were given my contact information and asked to email me their availability for an interview. Of these 15 potential participants, 12 contacted me and interview times and dates were established. Unfortunately, one

participant had to drop out the day of his interview because of work obligations; consequently, 11 participants were interviewed. Participant demographics are noted in Table 3.1. It should be noted that the information given in Table 3.1 is offered to give contextual demographic information of participants, not to establish correlations between participants' backgrounds and the findings described.

Table 3.1

Participant Demographics

Pseudo	Age	Undergrad Institution	Frat	SES		Occupation
				Past	Pres	
Alex	28	Pub PWI	No	UMC	UMC	Non-profit manager
Edward*	27	Pub PWI	Yes	LMC	LMC	Pharmaceutical consultant
Josh*	25	Pri PWI	Yes	P	WC	Elementary school teacher
Kyle	28	Pri PWI	No	WC	UMC	Law clerk
Michael*	28	Pri PWI	No	UMC	UMC	Private high school director of admissions
Oliver*	28	Pub HBCU	Yes	LMC	UMC	Attorney
Patrick*	30	Pri HBCU	No	UMC	-	Analyst
Poindexter*	31	Pri HBCU	No	LMC	LMC	Doctoral student
Robert	30	Pri PWI	No	P	LMC	Lobbyist
Stanley*	31	Pub HBCU	Yes	UMC	LMC	High school teacher
Tony*	29	Pri PWI	No	UMC	WC	Doctoral candidate/instructor

Note. Pri HBCU = Private Historically Black College/University. Pri PWI = Private Predominately White Institution. Pub HBCU = Public Historically Black College/University. Pub PWI = Public Predominately White Institution. Frat = Fraternal Affiliation. Pres = Present. UMC = Upper Middle Class. LMC = Lower Middle Class. WC = Working Class. P = Lower Class/Poverty. * = Participated in member checks.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants during The Institute for Responsible Citizenship's Alumni Weekend event, July 3, 2014 through July 8, 2014. The details of data collection are outlined below.

Interviews

Engaging in interviews is one of the primary modalities used in qualitative research and often used with narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Creswell, 2013). Building a collaborative relationship with participants is instrumental to listening to and understanding their stories and one of the most efficient ways to establish rapport is to step into conversation with participants. Additionally, existing studies on high achievement among Black males use interviews as the main source of data collection (Bimper, Harrison & Clark, 2012; Brooks, 2012; Comeaux, 2013; Harper, 2007; Rascoe & Atwater, 2005).

In-person interviews took place in various locations around Washington, D.C. including participants' work conference rooms, public libraries, and in a classroom at American University. Interviews were approximately one to one and a half hours in length and I conducted no more than three interviews a day. At the onset of the interview, I summarized the informed consent (Appendix D) and provided the participant a copy to read, question and sign. Each participant also received information on mental health services, in the event that the interviews brought up unresolved issues that may require additional support (Appendix E). Once more the research was explained. Then, I used a semi-structured set of open-ended questions to begin the discussion (Appendix F).

Questions in the semi-structured interview protocol were initially established based on the three research questions of interest with consideration to narrative inquiry and critical race theory tenants. Much of the protocol was then modified in three meetings: during my prospectus with my dissertation committee, and meetings with Dr. Freeman and Dr. Johnson-Bailey, both qualitative methodologists.

While questions from the interview protocol were modified based on the answers given by participants, a natural progression occurred with all participants. With each participant we began by talking about their current profession, if they saw themselves as successful in their profession and what their conceptualization of success included. Next we explored various aspects of their life history including the people who shaped them, the opportunities/events that pushed them forward and the challenges they faced. Then we focused back on the present, exploring how their level of success affected their life choices and personal relationships. Next we explored the communities they feel connected to (including the Black community). Finally, we would conclude with two reflection questions regarding what they would tell their younger selves and what advice they would give to young Black men striving towards their own success. The interviews were audio recorded to assist me with data analysis. After each interview, I noted my observations including body language and affect of the participant in my autobiographical narrative field text.

Autobiographical narrative field texts are used within the narrative inquiry approach to help establish an autobiographical narrative analysis. This type of analysis "allows us to understand who we are, and are becoming, in relation with potential

participants and particular phenomena" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 43). This aspect of the research process will be discussed in more detailed in the *Trustworthiness* section.

Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis

I transcribed all interviews and two levels of analysis were used: thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and constructed dialogues.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the first level of analysis. Thematic analysis is, "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" and focuses on important threads between the narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). This method of analysis acknowledges the active role that researchers take when discovering themes rather than the passive role often described by other methodological approaches. This approach is also in alignment with narrative inquiry, which can focus on the threads that emerge across narratives to determining similarities in experiences over different contexts, times and places (Clandinin, 2013).

Braun and Clarke (2006) note that researchers make a variety of decisions when conducting thematic analysis that impact the themes that are constructed. The authors focused on five key decisions researchers make including:

- Determination of a theme
- Analysis across the data set or one specific element of the data set
- Inductive versus theoretical thematic analysis
- Search for semantic or latent themes

- Epistemological approach: essentialist/realist versus constructionist thematic analysis

The authors noted the importance of how researchers identify a theme and what constitutes a theme. In the current study, themes were constructed based on its presence in the majority of narratives. Additionally, this study looks across the data set for themes; it does not focus on one specific aspect of the data set (such as experiences of racism).

Another decision that needed to be made was if the themes were constructed using inductive or deductive analysis. Inductive analysis strongly ties the themes to the data while deductive analysis focuses more on the researcher's theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The current study used an inductive analytic approach that did not focus on a specific theoretical guide; rather themes were constructed based on the data provided by the participants.

Another question that was explored was if the data was being analyzed at the semantic or latent level. Semantic analysis focuses only on what participants explicitly said whereas latent analysis "goes beyond the semantic content of the data and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualizations—and ideologies that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). The current study uses latent analysis as I am focused on how participants articulate success and service in their lives. The analysis goes beyond simply the words said during the interviews but also the intentions and assumptions behind what success means to them and how they articulate service in their lives.

Lastly, Braun and Clarke argue that researchers using thematic analysis should consider their epistemological stance. Specifically, they question if the researcher is using an essentialist/realist approach that focuses on direct relationships between language, experience and meaning or if the researcher is using a more constructivist approach, which values the importance of the sociocultural context when creating themes. The current study uses a constructivist approach as participants discuss how they understand their conceptualization of success and service. Additionally a constructivist approach is in alignment with critical race theory, which argues the impact of race and other social identities on experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six steps to thematic analysis: knowledge of the data, constructing initial codes, exploring for themes, reviewing themes, labeling themes and producing the final report. The first step requires the researcher to examine the data deeply and in a meaningful way. For me this step began during the transcription process, as I familiarized myself with the data on a minute level while transcribing every word and utterance of my participants. After transcription, I listened to each transcript for accuracy and began to explore the narratives more holistically.

Next I began constructing initial codes from the data. Initial coding allowed me to organize the data in a meaningful way to determine patterns across the narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using a constructivist inductive approach, I manually coded all the data giving each narrative and line of data equal importance. Examples of initial codes can be found in Table 3.2:

Table 3.2 *Initial Coding Examples*	
So it's always an understanding of sacrifices and that kind of thing that informed us and it was also the understanding of how you always have to give back. So it's my dad picking up random people giving them a ride, my mom, I mean, they they ah they modeled for us what it meant to be successful, quote on quote, in our community standards because ah my grandfather was the type of guy that would go out on the river you know catch a lot of crab, fish, shrimp, whatever and he would go around to the community and share it with people, you know. (Poindexter)	Necessity of giving back Value of giving back informed by ancestral practices Success definition in community vs. society definition
I see myself as in service to minorities, not just specifically the Black community but I include the Black community in it. Um, beyond my job [teacher] I mean we do service I do service with my fraternity to like area homeless and uh like uh soup	Service to minorities Service as a teacher Static events as service

kitchens and drives and things like that and um, that's fulfilling. (Stanley)	
Um so ah being like a Black man and sort of being successful for me creates like obligations that I don't mind having and I think are important. Not only for myself but also for like I said for for the community I tend to take care about which tends to be like Black folks. (Kyle)	Success creating obligations for self and to community Positive obligations towards service

While constructing initial codes I also kept extensive notes through memo writing. Charmaz (2014) posited, "Memo writing is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing drafts of papers. When writing memos, you stop and analyze your ideas about the codes in any—and every—way that occurs to you during the moment" (p. 162). This process not only allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the data but it also continued the interpretive process as I looked within and between the narratives for common threads and themes. Additionally, through memo writing I reflected on my experience with interviewees and emotional responses elicited from co-constructing narratives. For example here is one memo I wrote while coding a narrative:

> "I mean I teach, that's a big service. Um and actually um this is a debate that we have in the Institute…I do feel indebted like I felt a sense of I need to give back, it is my duty and my responsibility um but also too that like I have and um I'm kind of seeing like no it's okay for me to like put myself first and then my community"

(Josh). *I think this struggle over what is prioritized, communal or individual needs, is something that seems to be expressed with many of my participants. Josh notes the importance of giving back to the community as a teacher but then there's a need to prioritize self by going to law school (and perhaps into the private sector) in the next few years. This may be a lifelong struggle to know how and where does community fit in relation to personal goals. It's helpful when your professional endeavors line up with personal values but what happens when that doesn't occur?*

These memos were instrumental in helping me gain a deeper understanding of my data and generate the themes constructed for this study. Lastly, while memo writing I often constructed timelines of my participants personal and professional life journey's so I could gain a better understanding of how time and sociocultural context impacted their views and experiences. This technique is in alignment with the narrative inquiry approach, which focuses on time, place and social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The next step in thematic analysis is to construct themes. The themes constructed for this study were based on the transcriptions, memos and initial coding of the data. Themes were generated by creating a codebook, which chunked initial codes together into similar topics (Charmaz, 2014). My codebook was a Word document using the notebook layout that allowed me to thematically chunk different codes into different categories. For example, I had different categories for communalism as expressed in the past, present and future. Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested the use of visual representations for constructing themes and I created a comprehensive thematic concept map for each research question regarding success, transformation and service.

This concept mapping helped me understand how the various aspects of success, transformation and service expressed by participants were related to each other.

The last three steps of thematic analysis are to review the themes, label the themes and present the final report. Reviewing the themes required two levels of analysis. First, I looked at initial codes generated in individual interviews and explored how they were related to the constructed themes. If codes were identified as not relevant to the themes constructed they were analyzed to see if additional themes could be constructed based on these codes. In the current study no additional themes were constructed from this process, however some additional initial codes were identified as fitting into the previously constructed themes.

The second level of analysis in the review stage is to look across the dataset to see if the themes constructed accurately represent the participants' narratives. It was through this process that the subtheme of *Self as Service: Visibility and Representation as Black Men* within the communalism theme was constructed. This is an element of communalism that was initially overlooked as its connection with the participants' experiences did not become clear until the dataset was examined holistically.

The next step in thematic analysis is to label the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke note that it is during this step when a researcher "identif[ies] the 'story' that each theme tells, it is important to consider how it fits into the broader overall 'story' that you are trying to tell about your data" (2006, p. 92). It is during this step illustrative extractions were identified to explain the themes and the names for the themes were chosen.

The last step of thematic analysis is producing the final report, which is given in the *Results* section.

Constructed Dialogues

The second level of analysis used constructed dialogues. This analysis presented two constructed small group discussions and one constructed large group discussion using participant interview data. In other words, while all of the data presented was actually said by participants, it was not said within the context of group discussions, but rather during one-on-one interviews with me. Some transitions between participants were constructed for clarity and readability purposes. This methodology was informed by several approaches including narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013), ethnodrama (Cannon, 2012), and counter-storytelling (Solorazo & Yosso, 2002), and the works of Freeman, Mathison and Wilcox (2000) and Harper (2009).

Clandinin (2013) argues that narrative inquiry reports can be written in a variety of different ways including using direct transcription of the data, transforming the data into stories or the use of other literary devices (such as poetry). Moreover, Bold (2012) agreed that narrative data can be presented in a plethora of ways but noted the importance of maintaining the voices of participants. The author explained, "respect for the participants in research requires the researcher to retell the stories so that participants' voices are heard in a way that best represents their situation" (Bold, 2012, p. 147). Presenting data as constructed dialogues respected participants' voice, as the dialogues included real data from actual interviews. Additionally, presenting data as a dialogue is an effective strategy because as noted by narrative inquiry, participants experience reality within the context of the world around them. By displaying the data as a dialogue,

readers can clearly understand how participants' experiences do not occur in isolation but rather in tandem with those who have had similar and different experiences.

The presented constructed dialogues were also informed by ethnodramatic and counter-storytelling methodologies. Ethnodrama is defined as, "a method of transforming data into performance" (Cannon, 2012, p. 583). Ethnodramas can include theatrical plays, screen plays and constructed dialogues as presented in this study. Cannon argued that ethnodrama "can facilitate engagement, more nuanced representation, reflexivity and even action from the researcher, participant and audience" (p. 583). Presenting constructed dialogues pulls the reader into the narratives in a creative and thought-provoking way, as the reader can explore how the experiences of the participants converge and diverge. This is the reason why two of the dialogic narratives are presented at the beginning of the themes in the current study—they are used as literary devices to draw the reader in to the experiences of these participants. Also, presenting data in this way offers a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences as it showcases relevant stories that have impacted their lives. Lastly, it required a high level of reflexivity from me as a researcher as I considered how individual participant's narratives related to each other. This will be explored in more detail below as I explain my procedure for constructing the dialogues.

Counter-storytelling is used to resist the majoritarian, deficit-based narratives that are often told about people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso posit that there are four main functions of counter-storytelling. First they noted offering counternarratives could build community and humanize the experiences of marginalized communities. This was one of the key reasons why I choose to include constructed

dialogues; I wanted to have a space for readers to understand the resiliency and successes of participants by demonstrating what it would be like to be in conversation with participants. Additionally, as with the ethnodramatic approach, offering more nuanced narratives of participants can help readers to differentiate participants as individuals and not as representatives of Blackness or maleness.

According to Solorzano & Yosso (2002), the second function of counter-storytelling is disrupting the current belief systems about marginalized groups. The constructed dialogues presented in this study do this in a variety of ways. For example, when exploring the effect of parents/caregivers views and behaviors on participants' understanding of their own success, participants described an array of experiences with parents. Some participants had parents with high expectations who were proactively engaged in their educational attainment, whereas other participants' parents were not as involved or completely absent. This disrupts the myth that the Black male experience is monolithic and the public perception that all Black parents are not as engaged in their children's education as are presumably their White counterparts. As the constructed dialogues indicate, the question of parental engagement and participant success is much more complicated.

Solorzano & Yosso (2002) argued the third function of counter-storytelling is to show others in similar positions that they're not alone in their experiences. Throughout the constructed dialogues, participants had similar and different experiences with regards to how they became successful but one commonality amongst all participants is that they all had challenges and triumphs throughout their journeys. Demonstrating this through

dialogue may help younger Black males to see themselves within the narratives as a source of validation and support.

Lastly, the authors argued that counter-stories highlight not only the individualized story of the person but also the societal context a person lives in. This view is in alignment with narrative inquiry, which highly values the sociality of participants' narratives (Clandinin, 2013). Throughout the constructed dialogues, participants described how race, social class and other social identities impact their lives and ability to be successful. Considering elements of counter-storytelling in the constructed dialogues presented allowed for the richness of the participants stories to be told in a relevant manner.

Two exemplar studies guided my constructed dialogues; studies by Freeman et al. (2000) and Harper (2009). Freeman and colleagues explored the experiences of parents and standardized testing for their children. This study included three performativity dialogic acts using data from focus groups. The authors indicated that they focused on the overall themes that emerged from the data, rather than explore individual experiences in individual classrooms with specific teachers. Moreover, they noted that they "blended" the voices of several participants to reduce the number of speakers in the performance. Freeman et al.'s work was imperative to the current study as it gave a concrete example of a creative way to represent data.

Harper (2009) had a similar impact on the current study. Harper used data from his large qualitative study on Black male higher education achievement to construct a narrative of five Black men sitting at a lunch table talking. The counternarrative is based on information from his study however the five characters are composites of participants

and the counternarrative is presented as a constructed short story. Harper's work was instrumental to the current study as it offered a creative way to tell Black male stories. Moreover, it modeled techniques that are relevant to Black men in conversation with each other and appropriate transitions that can be used.

There were several steps I took in constructing the dialogues. First, I once again familiarized myself with the data by re-reading all of the interviews and noting all of the themes identified in the thematic analysis. Next, I decided how to split the participants into two groups; one focused on success and the other focused on communalism. It was here that the "art-informed approach" (Bold, 2012, p. 147) to research was implemented and required my use of creativity and intuition. Participants were placed into groups based on how they were represented in the thematic analysis and how they articulated the theme discussed. For example, Alex had several interesting stories and perspectives on communalism, however he was not fully represented in the thematic analysis. While his perspective was subsumed by other participants' explanations, his specific narratives weren't fully explored. Consequently, he was a good candidate for the communalism constructed dialogue.

Groups were also chosen based on divergent narratives. For example, Josh grew up on a rural farm in the northwest and lived in poverty, consequently his experiences were often different from many of the other participants. Drastically divergent experiences of one participant can often be suppressed when exploring themes across a dataset. Therefore, by placing Josh in the small group about success can demonstrate to the reader similarities and differences between Josh's life journey and other participants. It was important for me to place participants with similar and different narratives together

in the same group to show the diverging paths that participants' walked that led to similar end results.

Once groups were determined, within each group I focused on the relevant data related to the theme explored by that group. As I read the data I paid attention to how participants "call and respond" to each other. For example, in the dialogue regarding communalism, Kyle described how he struggled with holding his communal values while also pursuing a career that didn't value these beliefs. As I read Kyle's narrative I was reminded of Poindexter's similar feelings as a graduate student and Poindexter offered a reframe for this dilemma (focusing on being of service to others) to combat this internal struggle. While Kyle and Poindexter were never physically in a room together, they were responding to each other through validation and an offering of support through a reframing of communal values. Using constructed dialogues allowed me to present the data in such a way to illustrate this "call and response" phenomenon.

The constructed dialogues were created to draw the reader in, offer nuanced perspectives and illustrate the similarities and differences between participants. The constructed dialogues begin the first two themes *Success and Transformation* and *Communalism* and conclude the last theme, *Visibility and Representation*. As discussed the reason why the first two constructed dialogues are presented in such a manner is to increase reader engagement and to help the reader feel what it would be like to be in conversation with participants. The last constructed narrative is presented at the end of the chapter for several reasons. Much of this study is focused on communalism and "giving back," and the third constructed dialogue demonstrated how participants and I can give back to young Black men who are in the midst of becoming successful—by

giving advice and guidance. Additionally, by ending the *Results* section with a constructed dialogue it gave participants' the final word, which is important to preserve participants' voices within the study.

Trustworthiness

As with quantitative research, qualitative studies note the importance of trustworthiness of research findings as they may impact future studies and practices (Patton, 2012). Trustworthiness is defined as "being balanced, fair and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple interests, and multiple realities" within a study (Patton, 2012, p. 575). Qualitative researchers have often debated how to contextualize trustworthiness in qualitative research and three approaches are typically taken (Hope & Waterman, 2003). The first approach is for qualitative researchers to try to use quantitative terminology to express qualitative research, such as validity and reliability. However, the disadvantage of this approach is that the competing epistemological underpinnings of qualitative and quantitative research make it difficult to use quantitative terminology with qualitative research (Hope & Waterman, 2003). As noted by Davies and Dodd (2002) quantitative researchers focus on objectivity, generalizability, and standardization makes, "quantitative notions of rigor to qualitative research a poor instrument for evaluating qualitative research," (p. 281) which focuses on the subjective nature of reality and the possibility of multiple truths.

A second approach to identifying scientific rigor in qualitative research is the use of alternative terminology that is in closer alignment to qualitative researchers' epistemological and ontological beliefs (Hope & Waterman, 2003). These terms include credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability, which are used by

qualitative researchers to shift the understanding of scientific rigor from a positivistic lens towards a more interpretative focus (Rolfe, 2006).

The final approach to discussing scientific rigor in scientific research is to abandon the concept of a universal approach to trustworthiness in qualitative research because a unified concept of qualitative research doesn't exist (Bradbury-Jones, 2007). As noted by Rolfe (2006):

> Any attempt to establish a consensus on quality criteria for qualitative research is unlikely to succeed for the simple reason that there is no unified body of theory, methodology or method that can collectively be described as qualitative research; indeed, that the very idea of qualitative research is open to question. (p. 305)

Rolfe posits that because qualitative research is expansive and diverse in conceptual foundation and methodological techniques, it is not possible to assess the scientific rigor of qualitative research in a uniform manner. Rather Rolfe argued for research to be evaluated on a study-by-study basis.

It is my belief that the epistemological foundations of qualitative and quantitative research are significantly different, consequently to use quantitative terminology to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research would be inappropriate. However, while the field of qualitative research is vast, the use of qualitative research related terminology to identify scientific rigor is helpful in understanding the decisions and actions made throughout the research process to establish strong trustworthiness. Consequently, trustworthiness of this study is explored in relation to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility, "allows others to recognize the experiences contained within the study through the interpretation of participants' experiences" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 152). Credibility asks the question, *is the representation and interpretation by the researcher credible?* (Bradbury-Jones, 2007). The current study employed several strategies to increase credibility including triangulation, member checking, using an auditor and reflexivity. Denzin (1970) described four types of triangulation: multiple researchers, multiple theories, different sources of data, and different forms of data analysis. This study used multiple sources of data, I conducted interviews with 11 participants, and two different forms of data analysis. It should be noted that while the primary goal of triangulation is to identify thematic convergence amongst participants; contradictions and inconsistencies within the data could be beneficial to the study as well (Mathison, 1988). Highlighting contradictions and inconsistencies within the narratives illustrated the complexities of what it means to be a successful Black man in contemporary United States.

Two other strategies utilized in this study were member checks and using an auditor. Participants had the opportunity to review all of the themes found and clarify and/or modify their narrative accounts via email communication with me. Eight participants responded to this request (noted in Table 3.1) and offered no changes to the data. An auditor with knowledge of this population was also used to check emerging patterns from the narrative accounts. The auditor provided information that was instrumental to the formation of the *Discussion* section of this study as he suggested how his own life experience converged and diverged with the participants' narratives.

Lastly, reflexivity was employed as a credibility strategy for this study. Reflexivity is, "the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry" (Etherington, 2004, p. 32). Reflexivity allows for researchers to acknowledge their own subjectivity through the awareness of their societal context, thoughts, feelings, and reactions as it relates to all aspects of the research process. Patton (2012) described reflexivity as a process of self-questioning and self-understanding in which the researcher finds one's own voice and owns this voice. It requires researchers to face their own biases, assumptions and limitations throughout all aspects of the research process. Patton explained that personal reflexivity involves answering such questions as, "What shapes and has shaped my perspective? How do I know what I know? With what voice do I share my perspective?" (p. 66). Because qualitative researchers do not adhere to the idea of objectivity in research, a focus on subjectivity, of both the researcher and participants, is paramount. Explorations of how my cultural background, experiences and biases that may influence my research can be found in the *Subjectivity Statement* below. Additionally, throughout the research process, I kept a research journal and made use of my committee to facilitate this reflexive process.

Transferability focuses on movement of research findings or methods to different populations and settings (Thomas & Mailvy, 2011). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the use of thick description to enhance transferability. Rich, thick description "involves providing…enough description and information that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match, and thus whether findings are transferred" (Merriam, 2002, p. 29). Offering both thematic analysis and constructed dialogues introduced two

ways in which readers can see themselves reflected within the study. Maximum variation sampling has also been recommend as a way to enhance transferability (Merriam, 2002). As previously discussed, maximum variation sampling was used to emphasize themes that traverse diverse human experiences including different social economic statuses and university affiliations. Maximum variation sampling helped broaden the range of applicability of findings to successful Black men within The Institute from a variety of backgrounds and contexts.

Dependability is the ability for other researchers to follow the thought process and decision-making of the researcher (Barush, Gringeri & George, 2011). Barush and colleagues suggest that a common strategy to demonstrate dependability is by having an audit trail. An audit trail includes the specific purpose of the study, the process of sample selection, discussion of data collection protocol and information regarding the analysis and interpretation of data (Thomas & Mailvy, 2011). My audit trail was devised through extensive field notes and memo writing, which was transformed into this *Methods* section.

Lastly, trustworthiness of qualitative research is established through confirmability. Confirmability is reached when credibility, transferability and dependability have been established (Thomas & Mailvy, 2011). The confirmability strategies used in this study include recursive reflexivity and writing field notes. Recursive reflexivity requires the researcher to continuously reflect upon their biases and preconceptions throughout the research process. For example, you will note that I returned to my subjectivity statement during the analysis and interpretation process.

Keeping extensive field notes throughout the research process supported this recursive reflexivity process as well.

Subjectivity Statement: My Background, Experiences and Biases

One of the most important questions when embarking upon a narrative journey is, "Who are you in this narrative inquiry?" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 81). Understanding who I am within this work influenced the research questions constructed, how I interacted with participants and how I interpreted the stories that they shared with me. Reflecting upon my own subjectivity was not a single exercise, but a continual process that was attended to throughout the duration of the study. It required me to explore how my background, biases and experiences shaped not only who I am but also who I am becoming as an individual, researcher and co-creator of knowledge with participants.

I am a biracial woman who self-identifies as biracial or Black depending on the context. My mother is Black and my father is White, and I had very few Black male role models when I was growing up. In fact, besides the pastor and other members of the congregation at my childhood church, I did not have very many interactions with Black men or boys besides my brother. While I recognized the pastor, deacons and others as leaders of the church and the Black community at large, I never equated their leadership with success. I saw it as their way of tending to the Lord's flock and being of service by sharing their orations and generosity with others.

I have a brother, several uncles and cousins who self-identity as Black and many of them have been incredibly successful in their chosen professions and yet during my formative years, I never conceptualized them as successful. I think there were many reasons why they never struck me as successful, but one of the most prominent reasons is

that they were not in my immediate proximity (many lived in far-away cities and states). Consequently, I never really got to hear their stories of challenges or successes. Because of my limited exposure to Black men, Black male leadership was evident, and yet my conceptualization of Black male success was never fully developed.

It was not until I was in college that I was exposed to a variety of people, thoughts and ideas and my understanding of the Black male experience was broadened. I engaged in conversation with my Black male peers and listened to their stories of navigating systems of power and oppression in higher education. I became a film studies major and took an independent study course on Black film with Professor Jeff Wray. We would meet once a week to discuss Black cinema and also his own life experiences as a Black filmmaker. We engaged in spirited debate over the merits of storytellers such as Spike Lee, John Singleton, Melvin Van Peebles and Oscar Michaeux. We discussed the implications of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Peebles & Gross, 1971) on the concepts of Black masculinity and sexuality. We explored urban life in 1970's New York City and its complex gender and racial dynamics through young Troy's eyes in *Crooklyn* (Lee, 1994). Professor Wray's class gave me not only a history of Black cinema but also a history of Black life and culture. It is then that I began to realize that the story of Black folks in America is incredibly nuanced and multifaceted.

However, Black male success was still rarely displayed on the movie screen, so I learned about the difficulties that Black men in higher education faced through conversations with my peers. I listened to their stories of racial slights and microinvalidations, seeing my own experience reflected in some ways but also realizing their experiences were drastically different from my own. As I advanced in college with

triple majors in English, film and education, I was keenly aware that there were very few Black male students in my classes. Consequently, my understanding of Black male success was often shaped by silence and absence.

After college I joined the Peace Corps where I was stationed in Malawi, Africa for two years. I am often asked about my choice to enter the Peace Corps. I would like to tell you that it was because I was raised to be a very communal person; consequently, I wanted to give back to others using my recently gained skills as an English teacher. However, I could also tell you that I was in my mid-20s, exceedingly bored and thirsty for adventure. The truth of my motivations probably lies somewhere in between both of these sentiments. While in the Peace Corps, I began to understand what it means to be Black in an international context.

On my first day teaching at a small village school in Mulanje, Malawi, I was greeted by the vice principal. He was incredibly kind, gregarious and introduced me to all of the teachers and staff at the school. Towards the end of the day, during a brief moment alone, he turned to me and said, "I will tell you everything you need to know about surviving in my country. Never trust this," and he traced his dark brown skin from elbow to wrist with his index finger. His proclamation confused and startled me. However, over the course of several months, what I believe he was trying to convey to me became clearer—do not ever trust Blackness. I began to understand the detrimental effects internalized oppression has had on this colonized country and its citizens. People who were successful in the village were often eyed with suspicion and skepticism as to their means and ability to becoming so affluent. Through my own research and conversations with Malawians, it became clear that this attitude was formed out of a

historical context of domination and oppression. White colonizers intentionally turned Malawians against each other in a scheme to divide and conquer and one of the quickest ways to accomplish this task was to have Malawians question the intentions of their friends and neighbors. Consequently, success was viewed as a negative attribute that should not be attempted.

My time in Africa transformed my understanding of race, racial politics, oppression and colonization in a global context. My understanding of success was transformed as well, as I realized that success could be viewed as a curse (quite literally, as Malawian farmers who used modern irrigation techniques resulting in flourishing crops were often accused of witchcraft) or a gift. My understanding of my own success was once again transformed through my journey in counseling psychology.

I feel uncomfortable with the term psychologist; this profession and I have been strange bedfellows. I came to psychology, and counseling psychology specifically, through the backdoor of school counseling. While in the Peace Corps I created a girls' group in which young women would come to my home, cook and share stories about their lives. They discussed their challenges and strife (including the devastating impact HIV/AIDS and abject poverty has had on their families) and also their interests and passions. My kinship with these young women sparked my interest in becoming a school counselor. I also had romantic notions of living in New York City after returning from Malawi, consequently I applied to and enrolled in the counseling psychology master's program at Teacher's College, Columbia University, specializing in school counseling. While I very much enjoyed this program my mentors at Columbia, Dr. George Gushue and Dr. Laura Smith, encouraged me to apply to doctoral programs in counseling

psychology to broaden my professional possibilities, which is advice I ultimately followed.

When I think about becoming a counseling psychologist I feel incredibly conflicted. I hear the pleas of the men in the Tuskegee experiment begging for relief from debilitating syphilis. I see the tears of the children who were negatively impacted by the implications of the *Bell Curve* (Herrstein & Murray, 1994) who were told that due to their genetic inferiority they will never be as smart as their White counterparts. The term psychologist congers up my brother's voice that says, "remember Erin, regardless of what happens, never let them get into your head," to which I reply, "Robert, you do realize that that's basically what I do all day, right?" We both laugh; not so much out of amusement but in wonderment of who we have become.

When I feel the rise of anxiety towards my chosen profession I think of my mentors from afar: Joseph White, Thomas Parham, Janet Helms, William Cross, Beverly Green, Lonnie Duncan (who was kind to me during a very difficult moment in my life and is gone too soon) and countless others. I picture the brave Black men and women who walked out of the 1968 American Psychological Association conference because their voices weren't being heard and were often actively silenced. I see Rosie Bingham at the Multicultural Summit in Atlanta in 2015, laughing and running around greeting people—she looked so at peace. *If they can feel comfortable here, within this professionally world, so can I, right?* This is a crucial question I must ask myself regularly because for me acceptance and the ability to feel successful are intricately linked. If I'm not allowed to be my full, authentic self the possibility of feeling successful is tenuous.

Unfortunately, throughout my doctoral journey I have been confronted with situations in which it was abundantly clear that who I am and what I represent is not wanted. My year in the supposed liberal utopia of Oregon taught me that it's incredibly easy to say you are an ally when you've never met a person of color. In Oregon I often felt like I was an outsider looking in. As I faced daily microaggressions and microinvalidations I felt my personal and professional selves slipping into uncertainty about my future. Perhaps I was just a brown-skinned girl from a working class home that didn't belong here. Perhaps I would never be successful in this world.

It was when my academic and cognitive abilities were questioned that I finally woke up. During this period of professional strife, I learned the importance of self-advocacy. I learned the importance of powerful allies who can help alleviate the burden of oppression and discrimination. I learned that my own sense of success and accomplishments were often based on faith—on beliefs that were often not validated by those around me. I had to believe in my own capacity when those in authority questioned it, which unfortunately wasn't a new feeling. When I was in elementary school I was told I had a reading disability, my mother disagreed, as I was a voracious reader and later in life I became an English major. When I was a junior in high school I was discouraged from taking Advance Placement courses because my guidance counselor was afraid I wouldn't be able to "keep up," even though I had straight As in all my previous classes. When I graduated from high school I was encouraged to first attend community college because I was told once again by a guidance counselor that I "may not be ready" for a four year institution. I proceeded to graduate from a four-year institution with honors, attend an Ivy League school and pursue a doctorate at a prestigious university. The

young man from the I Am Harvard project (2014) that began this study noted, "Blackness is having faith. Having faith in what you don't see." I often experienced success in the same manner; I had faith in my own success because it was often not seen or affirmed by others.

Ultimately I decided to transfer to the University of Georgia. The process of transferring was not easy; it required a significant level of tenacity, navigational skills, persistence and hard work from allies and me. Being a mid-year transfer student hasn't been easy either; I often feel isolated and alone from other students who enrolled with a cohort. However, through this transfer, I have been able to mend pieces of myself that were once fractured. I have been able to internalize messages of competence, success, and acceptance. Sometimes I still feel like I'm standing on uneven ground but positive experiences on the BIEN research team, Department of Family and Children Services psychological assessment project, and productive conversations with my committee members have led me to believe that I am successful and perhaps one day I will be able to fully embrace the field of counseling psychology. My own struggle towards success informed this research study, as I can empathize with participants who have experienced similar challenges while also demonstrating incredible resilience in their own journeys to success.

My international, domestic, personal and professional experiences have shaped my understanding of success and I come to this project with a desire to deepen this knowledge as it relates to Black men. I believe that Black male success exists; however, it is rarely emphasized or examined in psychological literature. The story of Black men in America has been written as a story of violence, indolence and deficiencies unless they

are throwing a ball or making a basket (and even then Black men are often pathologized and negatively portrayed). I do not think this harmful depiction is an accurate reflection of Black men in this country. As this study demonstrates, there are many incredibly successful Black men in the United States with unique experiences, talents and gifts. Their stories are important and valid for all of us to hear. This belief is in alignment with my values as a counseling psychologist in training, which emphasizes a multicultural and strengths-based approach to human experience and understanding. I was interested in investigating the strengths and resiliency factors of my participants, elements that are often not articulated in research. Their narratives broadened my beliefs and understanding of what it means to be Black, male, and successful in America and the hope is that they will broaden other people's views as well.

I would be remiss to not mention how the world has changed since I began my study. I conducted the majority of my interviews over the July 4th holiday in 2014. On July 17, 2014 in Staten Island, New York, Eric Garner was filmed being attacked and killed by several police officers for selling single cigarettes while he exclaimed, "I can't breathe." On August 5th, John Crawford III was shot and killed by a police officer in Beavercreek, Ohio for holding a BB gun in a Wal-Mart. Four days later on August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager, was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. A litany of other tragic deaths also came into my awareness: Walter Scott, Akai Gurley, Aiyana Jones, Freddie Gray and a plethora of others. All killed by police officers that were often never officially charged or indicted.

I cried for these young men and women. I prayed for their families. I fought the urge to call my brother incessantly. I watched as a narrative was constructed regarding

these victims; police officers described over and over again fearing for their lives against these unarmed Black young people. The one that left me bereft, aching, crying profusely on my bedroom floor was Tamir Rice. Tamir was an unarmed 12-year-old Black boy playing on a swing set near his home and was shot and killed by a police officer who felt that Tamir, "gave me no choice" (Trexler, 2015). He reminded me of my brother, my cousins and all the young Black men I have taught and mentored.

All of these incidents were the backdrop to my analysis and shaped my interpretation. When I became despondent over the latest slaying of a Black person by those in authority, I turned to my participants' narratives for comfort. Many participants described stories of triumph and resiliency that seemed to speak directly to the young Black men who were killed and those who live in constant fear of being killed. "I know it's hard right now," Poindexter's narrative explained, "but you can make it." "You have to believe in yourself and find others that believe in you," noted Josh. "Yes, you will be racial profiled and you will be discriminated against but we will be here to support you," exclaimed Oliver's narrative. The biggest bias that this situation exposed is that I truly believe Black Lives Matter and we are not defined by the stereotypes placed upon us. And loving Black lives is still, as noted by bell hooks (1993), a revolutionary act.

Limitations

My position as a woman may have been a limitation in this study, as participants may not have felt comfortable disclosing more challenging experiences to someone who has not had their particular gendered experience. This may be particularly true for the Black male participants in this study:

> Because of experiences of racism and oppression, [Black] men are socialized to develop a 'cool pose,' a stance that demonstrates a quiet, emotional strength and invulnerability. The cool pose helps men reclaim their masculinity through physical posture, style and speaking (Thomas, Barrie & Tynes, 2009, p. 118)

As described in the *Black Masculinity* section, participants of this study may or may not ascribe to the cool pose, however characteristics related to this stance (such as emotional restrictiveness) may have impacted my interactions with participants. Additionally, it is noted that the cool pose might be used specifically in interactions with Black women (Thomas, Barrie & Tynes, 2009).

Coming from another gendered experience may have allowed participants to understand my curiosity regarding their narratives as it may be assumed that my experiences as a woman of color may be very different from their own (Patton, 2012). My training in counseling psychology has also shaped my understanding of gender roles and socialization, which helped me navigate these interviews in a culturally appropriate manner. This limitation was also addressed by utilizing the skills I have honed as a therapist. I often drew on counseling foundational skills such as active listening, redirecting and attunement to the emotionality in the room to guide my interviews. Active engagement demonstrated to participants my willingness and openness to listening to their stories.

Lastly, as a woman who has some, yet limited, understanding of the Black male experience, which has been shaped by a discriminatory media, my co-creation of narratives with participants might have be influenced by my biases. Keeping a research journal, consulting with committee members, member checks and using an auditor

decreased the impact of my biases; however as is the nature of narrative inquiry, my subjectivities always remained a factor within my research process.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents results from interviews with a sample of men (n = 11) who self-identify as Black/African American/person of African descent and graduated from an undergraduate institution before August 2011. The *Success and Transformation* and *Communalism* sections will begin with constructed dialogues using real interview data to create a demonstration of how participants would discuss these topics in small groups. The *Visibility and Representation* section will conclude with a constructed dialogue with the same purpose as the other constructed dialogues with an additional focus on the future of Black male success.

Success and Transformation

Below is a constructed dialogue between a subsection of study participants regarding their definitions of success, people who have supported their success and the events that have elevated their professional and personal success. After the dialogue, a thematic analysis including data from all participants on the subjects of success and transformation is presented.

Constructed Dialogue

Setting: Classroom at American University in Washington, D.C during The Institute's Alumni Weekend event. Participants come in separately but greet each other, as many of them have known each other for years. Seven chairs have been placed in a circle and I am standing near a chair facing the door. I have met with each participant for individual

interviews regarding demographic information and informed consent compliance and I greet all participants with ease. All participants choose seats and the conversation begins.

Participants:

Researcher (Erin): Female, 32 years old, doctoral student

Edward, 27, pharmaceutical consultant

Josh, 25, elementary school teacher

Oliver, 28, attorney

Patrick, 30, analyst

Robert, 30, lobbyist

Stanley, 31, high school teacher

Erin: Today I will ask you about success—what the concept means to you and how it can be achieved. So to begin with: when you hear the word "success" what does it mean to you?

Robert: For me success is relative specifically to me. At the end of the day I think that's what you have to make it.

Edward: Yeah, I think it's subjective too. Like I'd say achieving whatever goals you have set out for yourself, was how I used to think about success. I think now, I think more so about the impact that you have on people, so to me being successful is helping folks. Had you not been there, had you not done something, they wouldn't have progressed to the point that they progressed to, so it doesn't have to be poor people, sick people, it could be successful people but helping them get to the next level, having some kind of impact, positive impact, on somebody's life. I think that's how I define success now. That wasn't always the case. It just

got to the point where it was like, alright nobody is setting any goals for me anymore and I had already achieved what my parents wanted from me to and it was no more of them being like, 'okay you need to do this next' it's more so, 'okay you've done pretty well, go' and so I had to set goals for myself. And so I think that's what changed for me; it was a mindset shift, not about achieving somebody else's picture of success, it's defining it for yourself.

Josh: The definition is evolving for me too. I used to think that like graduating from college would make me successful and then I realized that a piece of paper doesn't really mean anything [chuckles] and I've got to find a job.

Stanley: I mean I think globally success means power and money. And a side note to that also influence. So, I think that's what a lot of people strive for in success.

Robert: Along with that I would say financial comfort as well. Like I think I'm successful but I'm a person for, better or worse, that compares myself to other people and I know people way more successful than me financially…so in a way I don't know if I'm successful. I think that I'm ambitious and I don't want to think that where I am now is where I want to be next year, or five years or ten years or whatever. I want to continue progressing in whatever I want to do. So I guess I want to start there.

Josh: I feel the same. Like I think of success in two parts. There's success for yourself and then success for society in my head. So society's success is like having money and status and power, like Stanley said. But then I also think of success for yourself and we each define our own success so you know success could be just making it, you know a lot of students who struggle just to get to graduate

from high school and graduating from high school is their success. I'm the first person in my family to graduate from college, first one in my household to graduate from high school, go to college and graduate from college, so a lot of people would just consider that success and I don't think I'm successful yet personally. My ambitions are very high and you know I'm very hard on myself and I do want the money, the status and the power but I want to do that so that I can make bigger change. I want to affect the nation and so in order to do that I need to be successful and I'm not successful yet.

Stanley: Right, so there's that global success but then there's also personal success. Of course people have different definitions; happy family, happiness in general…that kind of success.

Patrick: Yeah, success is happiness you know? Like having set and accomplished a goal—that sort of more like personal accomplishment.

Oliver: Sure you should mature, have healthy relationships I think that's part of it. I mean being successful should be your whole being, right? Like who you are is part of your profession, it's personal, it's the way you interact. Yeah you could bracket these parts off but they're still part of like your day-to-day being.

Erin: So who are the people that shaped you and helped you get to where you are today?

Edward: My parents, definitely. My mom's from small town, grew up on a farm and worked hard. Went to school, got her degree, and worked at the same job for 35 years. Like that's crazy, it doesn't happen anymore. She's very driven, type A personality. So she's definitely been that driving force like 'you have to do this, you have to excel,' 'you have to be ten times better than everybody around you',

she's definitely of that attitude but also very loving and nurturing. I think my dad is more the philosophical person. So he challenged me to think a lot. He also grew up on a farm, went to school, he's an educator, so education is very important to him and that was just like an expectation like 'you're going to college, you have to get more than this one degree,' but he's definitely a thinker. My dad definitely pushed me to think and expand my mind.

Oliver: The value of education was totally instilled in me by my mother. I remember I used to have this little Florida State sweater. I was like, 'oh I'm going to go play football at Florida State'; like it was never a question about school. That was totally an expectation, 'you're going to do this so just figure out what you want to do because it's going to happen'.

Robert: Both of my parents were very influential. I grew up in a single-family household and my parents' split when I was young, eleven, and my dad was very influential when he was there. But my mom taught me never to quit. And my dad, he instilled confidence in me just saying that I literally can do anything I want.

Stanley: My aunt was a teacher so I think that's how she modeled her life in terms of education. She always instilled the importance of education and just doing the best that you can. She believed in no excuses just go after what you want, even on your worst day you gotta be your best. But then there are my parents. My mom….she did not know how to mother. I mean our relationship is even still strained to this day, but she did the best that she could and she treated me more like a friend but she gave me lots of respect. I would have liked to have had more

of a motivating figure in my life to kind of push me forward in high school. My father went to college, he didn't graduate, my mother went to college later in life, finally graduated. So education while it was important to them it just wasn't the most important thing and I think I kind of felt that.

Josh: Yeah I kind of had a similar situation with my mother. She worked a lot of jobs but she also made a lot of poor decisions in terms of the people she dated and brought around the house and the lifestyle that we lived. You know I lived on government assistance, got beat a lot as a child for some things but I just kind of thought at the time that's how everybody was. But she was good in the sense that she really made me go to school and like make sure that I had perfect attendance because you know I saw what was happening around me, she's bringing these men around me who were making bad decisions and I was like I didn't want to do that. But you know I'm a firm believer in I am who I am because of what I've gone through and [small laugh] sadly a lot of people growing up who shaped me weren't very positive but I am the person I am—I'm very independent and successful because my mom and my dad were just very absent from my life. My dad is a drug addict and an alcoholic who's spent most of my life in jail, he got out of jail when I was like thirteen. But then I had a mentor in college and that's when I really started to get that positive shaping. A couple of professors, my academic advisor, like they really brought me in academically and writing letters of recommendation and programs wise and student groups. A lot of support in college.

Edward: Yeah I had good teachers, you know not anyone specifically. Well, in college there's definitely a Black professor in the honors college, he kind of forced me to do things. Like I was in the honors college and wasn't going to write the thesis to graduate with honors because I just didn't feel like doing it and I had a lot of other stuff going on. He made me. He also introduced me to Mr. Keyes [founder of The Institute], who's another formidable figure in my life. The Institute was a life changing moment. Just expanding my horizons, expanding my way of thinking, I would have never gone to law school had I not come here. And Mr. Keyes just raised the bar of expectations.

Oliver: Mr. Keyes is important in my life too, like in terms of being an adult, like a man, you know?

Stanley: Yeah Bill Keyes was influential for me in college. I mean if Bill asked me to do anything to this day I would. I also had some really great teachers. I had some great teachers and I think that's the stuff that I try to model day in and day out in my classroom and just being a teacher in and out of the classroom. For example, Ms. J. Ms. J. always encouraged me. I just remember one day I stayed after school for something, maybe a game or something like that and she said, 'hey come here' and she just said, 'I haven't seen you in so long, what's been going on?' and we chatted and I literally think she might have said five more words after that but we talked for an hour. I talked for an hour and at the end of the conversation, she said, 'Stanley, you know I usually tell you what to do but in this case I think you know what your heart is telling you to do,' and I walked away and I was like 'huh okay'. And she said, 'if you need my help I'm here' and

that's it. And I think that's exactly what I needed to hear so from there I applied to college. I don't think my life would have been the same if I had gone to any other university, good, bad or indifferent it just was what I needed to do and it opened my eyes really to education. I think it was through Ms. J.'s just random conversation that I think it shored up what I was supposed to be doing and we still stay in touch through Facebook and she's still just you know a silent, 'okay, good to hear that, so what's the next step?' and she kind of puts things in perspective.

Oliver: Man, I had a really different experience in high school. In my high school there was no support whatsoever. I went to my guidance counselor about fee waivers. And I was like, 'hey can I get some fee waivers?' like 'what's that about?' and he was like, 'oh don't worry about that, just go to a community college' and I was like, 'oh great never talking to you again,' you know what I mean?

Robert: Yeah the career services at my school in college sucked. It was awful, everything catered around being an engineer and going to med school. Luckily, I was doing well in school, even though I didn't know what I was going to major in and basically Mr. Keyes came there and talked to the academic counselor and said, 'which Black males have the highest GPAs at your school that are sophomores?' I was on a list of three or four people. And so everything really took off from there because I had an opportunity to be a part of The Institute.

Oliver: I know this is going to sound really funny but one thing that really shaped me was movies. James Bond, like the Sean Connery stuff. This movie with Steve McQueen, *Bullitt*, I've watched a million times and the *Thomas Crown Affair*, like those kind of things, it's strange right? I was like so 'oh that's how a suit

should look', as a kid. Movies showed me how to look, how to talk. And just some of the behavior stuff; long pauses and like, 'oh he's thinking about stuff.… you know I should really think before I do certain things'. I don't know they just resonated with me.

Erin: Okay so what events or opportunities helped you become successful?

Robert: I'd say the number one thing for me was my high school. Luckily, I was able to go to a prep school in my area it was really college before college. It was academically, I think, harder than college, it's just that college is more work. But in terms of the strain, the academic strain, it was very difficult. It took me probably two and a half to three years honestly to get the hang of it. And you know it exposed a lot of weaknesses in my previous education. But it taught me grit and it also allowed me to interact with a lot of people with different races and different social classes, different ethnicities. It was just an awesome experience.

Josh: Yeah high school was big for me too. I went to one of the best schools in the nation. They had AP classes and leadership opportunities. But college was important too. College was such a bubble and a safety network for me, which is amazing. I cried the third year when I came back from the summer because that was the longest I had ever been in one location. I was just like "this is my home."

Patrick: I've had all types of opportunities; from church opportunities, from different social clubs, opportunities through school, opportunities through college, opportunities through internships and fellowships. I've had tons of opportunities that have all shaped me to be where I'm at today.

Edward: I just remember as a kid going to all these summer programs. I never stayed at home and did nothing, my parents always pushed me to go somewhere. Started at basketball camp….I'm not that good at basketball though, so that didn't last that long [laughs]. Then, let's see…came to DC for like a leadership program and it was definitely some of these experiences that pushed me and it expanded my horizons. I did the DukeTIP program, so I went to Duke for a summer. So those kinds of things where it's like you go out, you meet a bunch of people your age. And then there's The Institute, I think was especially special because it was not just people your age that are smart, but Black men your age that are intelligent and doing the same things that you're doing. And so I think that helps, definitely helps you feel comfortable, so like you may go back to school you may be the only Black kid in the class or you know seen differently because you're excelling while your friends are not really caring or slacking or whatever. Then you've met all these people [at the Institute] that are in a similar situation but are excelling anyway, so it's like—it expands your network, it makes you feel comfortable because you have a sense of community that's larger than just the folks around you. I think those experiences are the ones that I, when I look back like 'okay I'm successful because of those types of experiences'.

Oliver: I just find The Institute so reassuring. I didn't really understand this until maybe like a couple of years ago. I mean I knew I could do things but coming here I was like, "oh I can actually DO stuff." It was a total confidence booster in term of: this is what I want, this is what I'm going to do, because I can do it and that's it. [All present offer verbal and nonverbal agreement]

Erin: Thank you so much for meeting with me today. Our discussion has helped me understand the events and people that have helped you become successful and very much informs my study. I look forward to seeing you all again at the end of the weekend for a full group discussion.

Thematic Analysis

Participants described transformative moments in their lives as examples of how they became successful, consequently the two relevant research questions: *How do participants conceptualize success?* And *What transformative moments do participants identify on their journey to success?* will be examined simultaneously within this thematic analysis. Regarding success and transformation four main themes emerged including ambiguity towards being labeled successful, variability in the definition of success, identification of people who helped shape their success and the events/opportunity that lead them to become successful.

"I'm Not Successful, I'm Still Striving": Ambiguity Towards the Label

Several participants resisted my use of the label "successful" and often questioned if they would consider themselves successful. Here is an example of a common exchange I had with participants:

Erin: When you hear the word success what does it mean to you?

Oliver: I don't know. It's kind of like shut up, you know? [small laugh] I don't know everybody measures it differently, you know? Like you could have like a great profession and be totally lonely and empty inside and you know like success in what, I guess would be my next question. It's broad so I don't think of anything. I think of the next question: what are you talking about?

> Erin: Yeah, so for me it's when will you be able to look at your life and say, 'oh, I am successful'. Is there ever a point that that's going to happen?
>
> Oliver: Ah, no. I mean you look at things like 'this was good'. Life's kind of so fluid, all these different ups and downs and to say, 'oh now I'm successful' it's like, it doesn't work like that. So yeah, I can say I've been successful thus far: I've had a federal clerkship, law school, like you know all these cool things, graduated from The Institute. But it's like I'm still kind of striving so, I don't know…..

Oliver illustrates some of the main difficulties that participants had with labeling themselves as successful, such as the relative nature of the term, the varying elements of the term and the idea of success as an end goal. The definition and various elements of success will be described in the next theme, however three subthemes emerged as potential reasons why participants often resisted the label of successful included being in a moment of transition, shifting priorities and how they perceived success as an end goal.

Moment of transition. Several participants described being in a moment of professional transition, which may have impacted their understanding of self as a successful person. For example, Alex, a non-profit manager, explained:

> I think there are ways in which I am successful as a professional in the world and there are ways in which I have been successful professionally at many different things even before coming to [current employer]. But you know I've been a political operative and staffer, I've been a community organizer, I've done some form of non-profit management I've done data science and policy research and organizational strategy and so I've done a lot of different things skill-wise in my

> life and I think I've been—I've had moments of like high success in each of those plains. I've just been at [current employer] since March so this is like a brand new space for me and brand new organization that came out of three years of working in local government.

Alex described how it is difficult for him to quantify his success in his current position because he had only been in it for four months. Similarly, Michael had only been a director of admissions for one year, Kyle graduated from law school in May 2014 and was preparing for his new career as a corporate lawyer and Oliver disclosed that he's only been a lawyer for two years. As noted by Alex and others, it can be difficult to conceptualized yourself as successful when you're in the midst of a professional role transition and are unsure of the fit of this new role. Conversely, Stanley has been a teacher for over eight years and had no difficulties embracing the label of successful, which may be due to his concrete conceptualization of himself as an educator. For participants, professional success appeared intricately linked to professional identity and concreteness of professional role.

Lifespan development and success. Another reason why embracing the idea of success appeared to be difficult for many participants is because their definition of success has shifted as they have gotten older. For example, many participants described a movement or moving from focusing on professional goals to more personal goals. Michael explained how his definition of success has changed:

> I think even for myself I feel like that definition is sort of shifting a little bit for me. I think as you get older your priorities change a little bit. I think you know for the last few years out of college I've been somebody who's been very focused

> on success meaning being at the top of the game that I'm playing but I think in a lot of ways it's sort of shifting to now just sort of being a little happier with lifestyle and you know not having it be all consuming.

Michael noted that as he's gotten older his views of success have moved from professional accomplishments to lifestyle and personal goals. Michael mentioned that this was a recent development in his life ("this last year"), consequently as his definition of success shifts from professional to personal goals it can be difficult to apply the label to himself, as he has been consumed with achieving professional satisfaction thus far in his adult life.

When asked how his level of success affects his personal relationships, Josh described a similar phenomenon:

> As I'm getting older too you know I'm trying to think about relationships and kids and the type of father that I want to be, but I'm not in that stage right now. So I'm getting older I feel like I'm at a point where I need to start like dating more and finding, you know, a significant other and all that crap [small laugh] but no I shouldn't say it like that, that's part of the reason why I'm in this situation, but I've always been dedicated to my work. I'm starting to consider like am I going to have to scale back on work to have a personal life and to start dating and trying all that stuff out?

As Josh begins to prioritize personal goals such as a romantic relationship with a partner, his definition of success changes; consequently, while he continues to move towards this new definition it can be difficult for him to perceive himself as successful with this new conceptualization in mind. Many participants indicated that aging caused a shift in goals

towards personal and family-oriented objectives. Therefore, ambivalence towards the label of success was often due to beginning to work towards these new, modified goals.

Success as an end goal. Several participants described being successful as an end goal. For example, I had the following exchange with Poindexter about his feelings towards his own success:

Poindexter: I don't think I'm successful. I mean I guess I'm still striving.

Erin: Do you think you'd be able to see success in yourself if it was there? Or would it always be like, 'I don't really think I am successful'?

Poindexter: Well I think why live if you're not working towards something?

Poindexter noted that embracing his own success means he's no longer moving forward. As noted above, Oliver noted the same belief when he was asked about his understanding of self as successful ("I'm still striving so, I don't know…"). In an informal conversation with my gatekeeper, even he stated success is an end point ("saying you're successful means you're not grinding").

As described in the constructed dialogue Robert noted difficulty embracing his current success as well ("I don't want to think that where I am now is where I want to be next year, or five years or ten years or whatever. I want to continue progressing in whatever I want to do.") While Robert didn't describe success as a specific end point, he clearly stated that he isn't able to hold on to his current level of success because he has goals he wants to reach which are many years in the future. Consequently, Robert mentioned his discomfort with the label of being successful.

Participants of the current study oftentimes had difficulty with the label of success and many of them discussed this discomfort due to a transition of roles in their

professional life, shifting definition of success as they've gotten older and the belief that success is an end point. As a researcher I did not anticipate this level of resistance to this label and believe that it has many implications for the mental health of successful Black men (which will be explored in the *Discussion* section). Additionally, I observed within myself that when participants reacted defensively towards the label I often switched to using the term "high-achieving" instead of "successful." This term was met with no resistance as it is an undeniable fact; they were all college graduates, many with advanced degrees; consequently, this label was in alignment with all participants' sense of self. Moreover, "high-achieving" is a concrete term with clear requirements regarding educational attainment, "successful," however is a much more abstract term which can evoke a variety of interpretations as will be discussed below.

"You Gotta Define it for Yourself": Definitions of Success

All participants uniformly agreed that one's definition of success is relative to specific individuals. However, within these idiosyncratic definitions of success, several subthemes emerged as important elements to be deemed successful. These elements included identification of core goals and values, achievement of traditional Western/capitalistic markers of success, achievement of communal markers of success and obtainment of holistic health.

Identification of goals and values. Several participants expressed the importance of constructing their own goals and values to determine their definition of success. For example, Stanley noted the following:

> As cliché as it sounds I would say define what success means to you and I think that begins with its values, like what do you value? If I gave you a list of all these

> things, what are your top things, would it be love? Would it be work? Would it be sex? Would it be perseverance? What? Whatever it was, determine what, define what success is by determining what are the five values that you would not turn your back on.

Stanley emphasized the intricate link between success and a person's belief system. Additionally, he articulated that the subjective nature of success is relative to the values that one holds. That is, the person who values perseverance over love may establish different goals and pursue the completion of these goals very differently.

Tony described a similar belief:

> I would define success as being able to both visualize goals, like tangible goals, and actualize those goals. So I imagine successful people saying, 'I'm going to do this project or I'm going to set out to accomplish this' and imagining those steps and they have the discipline and the persistence to set a plan in motion, stick to a plan and achieve.

Tony described the connection to goal setting and success however he also illustrated the need for proactive engagement to achieve goals and become successful. Tony went on to note the importance of knowing the steps needed to accomplish goals. To achieve success a person must go beyond simple goal setting and have the appropriate tools available to reach those goals as well. Participants described goal and value setting as foundational activities to becoming successful. They noted that goals and values inform if and when a person will identify their own success.

Western/capitalistic markers of success. Several participants defined success as including traditional western/capitalistic aspect of success such as the attainment of power, status, influence and wealth. For example, as noted in the constructed dialogue, Josh explained, "there's like success for yourself and then success for society in my head. So society's success is like having money and status and power, things of that nature." Alex also noted that "personal comfort, skill set, credentials and financial security" are all key elements in his conceptualization of success. While these traditional markers of success were important to participants they were not the only elements in their definition of success; communal values and personal success appeared to be important as well.

Communal markers of success. Participants noted the importance of giving back to the Black community as a key aspect in their definition of success. Poindexter stated, "the only way to be successful in life is to have a greater purpose that helps other people." Kyle expressed a similar view when he noted, "[success] in it's most basic sense I think for me it's also feeling like I am contributing in whatever ways I feel like God put me here to contribute. Being selfless in that and making sure that my work doesn't just benefit me but also benefits others, particularly communities that I care about." Participants clearly expressed the importance of giving back to society, particularly the Black community, as part of becoming successful.

However, participants demonstrated a significant tension between communal and western/capitalistic elements of success and the difficulties of choosing one conceptualization of success over another. As a researcher I found this tension to be particularly relevant to participants whose professions do not appear communal in nature (such as Michael, who is the director of admissions at an elite private high school with

few students of color) or when participants were considering a career shift from a communal role (such as a teacher) to a more individualistic role (such as a corporate lawyer). This tension is evident in the lives of several participants and impacts their professional conceptualization of self and their definition of success. Below the narratives of Josh, Michael and Oliver are given as prototypical examples of this phenomenon.

Josh has been a teacher for three years. He participated in Teach for America for two years and worked at a "failing," level four high school in a northeastern city. This past year Josh transferred to a level one elementary school in the same city. Josh is now contemplating going to law school and considering staying in the public sector or going into the private sector:

> I have been grappling with corporate and public; I've been public focused mainly but I do think that I'm going to go into corporate, just 'cause I do want…I grew up in very modest means and so you know money is something that I didn't really have and now that I see the lifestyle that it gets you, I want to live that and so I think that's a big part of why I haven't reached my success because I'm not financially there yet and then the status too, which is just you know I'm still just a teacher.

In this passage, Josh illustrated how his past experiences living in poverty affect his goals for success, such as financial security. Moreover, he identifies the low status that teachers have in United States and how a switch to corporate law could increase his status in society. However, it is clear that Josh struggled with his decision to leave the public sector, which is more in line with the communal values that he expressed throughout the

interview, or venture into the private sector, which offers more money and security but may not be aligned with his values.

Later Josh noted how this decision, to remain in the public sector or entering the private sector affects his articulation of service to the Black community:

> This is a debate that we have in The Institute. I felt indebted like I felt a sense of I need to give back, it is my duty and my responsibility, but also it's okay for me to like put myself first and then my community. And yes I have all these opportunities but you know I put in my time, like in TFA [Teach for America] I put in my two years, but like let me put in three or maybe four years— I need to go make some money and you know put me first…um so yeah.

Josh demonstrated his commitment to the Black community in this passage and throughout his interview, especially as it relates to his role as an educator. However, Josh illustrated that he is wrestling with the ideals of communalism and his ability to live comfortably in a western/capitalistic highly individualistic society. By placing a three or four year time limit to focus on individualistic goals demonstrated Josh's deep commitment to communalism and giving back to others; focus on self is described as a temporary need, rather than a long-term want. Also, Josh noted that this tension between communal and western/capitalistic ideals affects several other Black men within The Institute, indicating this may be a pervasive issue amongst successful Black men in the program.

Michael and Oliver also struggled with how communal values affected their professional roles and definition of success. For instance, as previously mentioned, Michael is the director of admissions at an elite private high school in northern California

that has few students of color. Michael noted that he has received "push back" from members in the Black community for not giving back enough and for working at his current school. He stated:

> I think that the push back that I get sometimes is because it's at a small private school like you're not doing that for enough people. I just go back to my own experience [at a private high school] and I go, sure I recognize that there might be positions where I can do this with a broader net but I think about the kids who might be in the position that I was in [as one of few Black students in the class] who are sitting in that room and they need that coaching really bad. They need that coaching too because if this is something that you want to pay forward, those are the kids that need to be ready for battle and be comfortable in their own skin, be able to navigate these situations. Even though I'm not an advisor, I mean if you're an African American male especially on my campus you know who I am. Because I'm going to make sure you know who I am, I want to let you know that I've got your back and I'm going to hold you accountable and I'm going to be your first supporter but your harshest critic. I take that very seriously because I recognize the opportunity that they have and what they're going to be able to achieve possibly if they take advantage of the opportunity. I think that's the reason I do the work that I do; is to provide those kids that opportunity and to give them that agency. I've seen the trajectory and these kids need that mentorship too and that's where I feel like I can give off having some real meaning because I lived it.

Michael connects his own experience at a private high school to his role as a director of admissions at a similar private high school. He also noted that while some of his peers might not see his professional role as in alignment with communal values, his work as an advisor, mentor and guide to Black male students on campus is a direct articulation of communalism. This perspective allows Michael the ability to give back to the Black community in what could be perceived as a nontraditional communal role. Michael also noted the unique challenges that are faced by students of color in predominately White private school spaces and how they need to be prepared for "battle," which can include experiencing microaggressions and other oppressive experiences. Michael's strong communal values offer him the opportunity to serve as a unique role model in Black students' lives.

Oliver discussed similar experiences of push back from members of the Black community due to his role as a prosecutor in New York City. Oliver indicated that some see his profession as a prosecutor as incongruent with communal values (a role that is typically relegated to defense attorneys who presumably fight for those who are innocent) and described his connection to the Black community thusly:

> You know, um, and I guess it's weird, not weird, I have an interesting take because I'm a prosecutor and like these people—the defendants are Black and Latino. But you know the reason why I became a prosecutor is just this sort of explanation. So when I lived in [NYC outer borough neighborhood] building of like I want to say maybe 200 [people]…there was about ten people that fucked it up for everybody. About ten dudes, you know, slinging drugs, doing all kinds of stuff, having drugs and just not okay stuff, fucking up the stairway, these kind of

> things. And you know look, all of us are in the same position if we're all living here, you know, so there are 190 people who are deciding not to do that, you know what I mean? People the same age, boys, Black boys, girls, adults, there's like you know mothers who were just going to work trying to make it okay for their kids and you guys are fucking it up. You know what I mean? So like when I say, yeah I think I'm in service to the Black community, I'm thinking of those 190 people. I'm thinking of those 190 people, when I'm doing stuff like, when I'm prosecuting somebody for trespassing the stairway, don't be in other people's stairways smoking weed. You don't fucking live there, don't do it.

Oliver described his deep commitment to Black community members and how his role as a prosecutor serves to find justice for those who are victimized. Oliver also noted that while many of the defendants are Black and Latino, many of the victims are people of color as well. He seemed to indicate that others do not often see his role as a prosecutor as articulating communal values but he personally does through his advocacy and work with victims. Because of Oliver's demonstrated commitment to the Black community and communal values it's imperative that this reframe in his role as a prosecutor fits into a communal paradigm so that he can feel successful and find professional fulfillment. Participants often described the difficulty of reconciling communal values within western/capitalistic values, especially when others within the Black community may not deem their professional roles as communal enough. This tension often caused participants to reflect and reframe their professional identity considering their communal values. The intersection of communalism and success will continue to be explored in the *Communalism* section.

Personal success. Several participants noted the importance of personal success such as healthy relationships, emotional wellness and happiness. Poindexter and Tony both defined this as "holistic health" and Oliver named it "holistic success," which goes beyond professional fulfillment and included personal satisfaction as well. For example as mentioned in the constructed dialogue, Patrick stated, "success is happiness, you know?" while Poindexter noted that, "having a meaningful relationship" was important in his definition of success. Poindexter goes on to explain various aspects of personal success including:

> Eating well. You know practicing safe sexual health, all of these things are about taking care of yourself. Loving yourself, looking in the mirror and saying, 'you know what I'm a good looking guy' you know what I'm saying? Just beginning okay with yourself first. Yeah. And having a solid foundation spiritually and I'm a Christian but by that I mean that could be anything to you, it could be Buddhism, you gotta have some type of grounding force in your life that helps you to know that there's something bigger than you and that although you might be going through an obstacle, there's a bigger plan at work.

Poindexter highlighted various aspects of personal health including diet, safe sexual practices and positive self-image. Poindexter was also the only participant to specifically name spirituality as an important aspect of personal health leading to a successful life, however spirituality and religion were alluded to by other participants and may be important aspects to their conceptualization of success as well.

While personal health is important to participants' conceptualization of success many indicate the difficulties of balancing these priorities alongside their professional

goals. For instance, Michael noted balancing his professional responsibilities and personal life is a "work in progress" and Alex noted the importance of "self-care" but also noted that he's "bad at it." Several participants indicated having very strong boundaries between their personal and professional lives, which they believed helped them be more effective and successful. For example, Edward noted, "When I come home on the weekends, especially when I'm traveling Monday through Thursday it's all work, like 15, 16 hour days, like ridiculous. But when I get on that plane and touch down in DC Fridays after work, I enjoy myself, like I hang out with folks."

Edward described his personal and professional boundaries are clearly set between the workweek and the weekend. Later in the interview he confirmed that he does not take work home with him and uses his weekends as a time for relaxation. Oliver noted similar behaviors when he explained:

> Yes, I do not do work at home. I will go into the office to do work before I do work at home. I mean I'll check my work email sometimes but not really. Yeah I totally leave it there [at the office]. 'Cause it's like, the stuff that I deal with is not, these aren't happy situations. Oftentimes people are in bad places and do things. So it's not like a very uplifting thing.

Oliver explained that because of the emotional strain of his job as a prosecutor he has to have clear boundaries between is personal and professional life. Later in the interview he also went on to note confidentiality concerns related with taking cases home with him. While some participants are still working towards finding an effective strategy to achieve balance, most indicated the importance of having appropriate boundaries and balance in order to become successful.

Participants also noted the impact that being professionally successful can have on their personal relationships, which impacted their personal conceptualization of success. For instance Alex noted:

> Getting back to where I started about how I define success or in what manner I would maybe not describe as successful, self-actualized as I want to be is that I think that one of the threads that I'd be looking at…it's funny that you handed out the mental health resources, that is anxiety. Is that I think that for a series of things that are unresolved in my life about like, "who am I going to spend the rest of my life with?" but like I have very little job anxiety.

Alex explained that not having a romantic partner causes him anxiety. He indicated that this unknown in his life leaded him to feeling less successful as he would like.

Robert indicated that his dual role as a lobbyist and as a master's student in a business management program (which he graduated from one month prior to the interview) caused him to reflect upon his friendships and social support:

> Because I was going to school part-time and I was still working, it is tough. Before I liked to go out, I love DC but there's a couple of things that were very important to me: pursue my profession no matter what, I love to be active, I love to go out, I love to be around my friends. I just realized I couldn't do all that stuff. So I had to let some things go and so essentially, unfortunately, I just had to stop some of my relationships with my friends, not because I didn't want them but because I didn't have time, I didn't go out really anymore, I focused literally on going to work, going to school and when I had time being active 'cause I just needed that—my own stress relief. And right now I'm trying to pick up the pieces

> with my friendships. Basically I got to see where I am in about six months from now, really, and I think I'll have a better sense of my relationships. But I think I'll be able to balance it pretty well. It's just a little unique of a situation because of school part-time.

Robert explained how his professional and academic obligations affected his personal relationships. Because of time constrains and prioritizing professional and academic success, Robert had to limit his interpersonal interactions. It caused him to critically reflect on his relationships and make difficult decisions about the value of his connections. This situation impacted his sense of holistic health however he appeared interested in rededicating himself to those he cares about.

Of all participants, Kyle struggled the most with how his level of success affects his personal relationships. Here is our exchange on how his level of success affects his relationships:

> Kyle: It doesn't in the most basic sense but it does a little bit. In the most basic sense it's like if you talk to like anyone who's known me since I was very little, people who've seen me over a long period of time, in the most basic sense it hasn't affected my ability to relate with people. You know I guess I have homies who've done time but you know I can, we can still talk about stuff, which is important to me, it's always been important to me. But in another sense it's been like the way people view me has been a little weird? In like dealing with the compliments….
>
> Erin: Can you give me an example?

> Kyle: So yeah so like I was talking to a friend on the phone like two days ago—we've known each other for like-15-years-type friends. And he's like 'yeah man, you know I'm just so proud of you man like I really appreciate what you're doing' and I'm just like you know, yeah I appreciate that but it's— I have to be aware that that's like my perspective. I've had a range of experiences that shaped my perspective, I always feel like there's always more things I can do. But I also have to like reconcile that with the fact that there are people that haven't had those perspectives or at different places but like what I'm doing seems like 'oh my goodness like this is crazy!' So that's kind of been a struggle but not not not not in a way that's been like major. But it has affected some of those relationships. It's like people hold me in higher esteem, then they used to which can make me uncomfortable 'cause I don't look at myself in that way. I think in some ways people ask for more things nowadays. I got a friend literally hit me up last night, he was like 'yo man can you wire me some money'. And I'm just like, 'whatever' so like I'm going to you know send him a little something after this. Or like people ask for legal advice and you I'm like, 'well you know I'm not really an attorney yet' but whatever.

Kyle highlighted the various ways that his relationships have morphed and changed as he's become more successful. However, first he noted how many of his core, lifelong relationships have not been impacted by his success. He illustrated the importance of his ability to connect with friends and others who come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. But, he then goes on to note how relationship dynamics have shifted since he became more professionally successful, as is placed in a higher, more powerful

position in his relationships. Also he discussed how the complements he received from his friends impacted power dynamics within his relationships, as Kyle reached a higher educational and professional status. This change in relational dynamic makes Kyle uncomfortable and he noted the responsibility he has as a successful person to continuously give back to his community. Lastly, he explained how people's expectations of him changed including the want for financial and legal support. As Patrick noted in his interview, "your dance card gets full when you're doing something great," meaning people's expectations of you change as you become more successful, which appears to summarize part of Kyle's experience. The tension Kyle described as it relates to personal relationships and success highlighted many of the struggles that other participants described such as feelings of obligation towards others and changes in some relationships while others remain consistent. Maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships leading to holistic health and personal success was often deemed as a crucial element in participants' conceptualization of success.

"Man, it Really Does Take a Village": Social Support and Success

Participants highlighted several people that shaped them and led them towards success. The most common people noted included parents, school personnel, mentors, peers, and public figures. Participants also noted the importance of personality characteristics and disposition leading them towards success.

Self. Participants noted the impact that humility, perseverance, self-awareness and passion had on their lives leading to their current level of success. Edward noted the importance of being humble at work, "I try to keep a humble attitude and I think the

clients appreciate that." Similarly, Robert described the role that humility plays as a lobbyist:

> I'm pretty humble so I'm willing to do whatever work is necessary. So whether that's calling people or editing, writing letters. Oftentimes people dole out the grunt work and I think that's what actually makes you really good is being able to really write well, to speak well, to develop arguments and having those soft skills of being able to be sociable with people.

Robert emphasized the importance of humility and how this characteristic increased his professional competency. He noted how his ability to be flexible with job responsibilities lead him to having better communication skills with others.

Most participants noted the importance of perseverance in reaching their goals to becoming successful. The subtheme of hard work came up numerous times with Michael. For example, he noted his need for perseverance in his role as high school director of admissions, "I've worked very hard to study the hard skills as well as the soft skills to make it work." He went on to describe "hard skills" as the technical aspects of his job while "soft skills" included proficiency in written and oral communication skills. He also described how his perseverance affects his future sense of self: "I've already reached a point where you know I've had to fight hard to get here so in that respect I'm not worried about things working out." Lastly, he noted how his natural competitiveness drives his professional perseverance: "Especially within my professional life, within the job that I have, I don't stop. I want to keep working, I want to keep working hard and I think it's that competitive piece—like I want to win." Michael highlighted the connection between his competitiveness and striving for professional success, however

his disclosure that he "doesn't stop" emphasized how this drive may negatively impact his mental health leading to overwhelming stress and exhaustion. For example, later in the interview Michael described often waking up an hour before his alarm clock went off because of work related anxiety and his inability to "not stop" thinking about professional tasks.

Several participants discussed the importance of self-awareness. For example, Tony noted the importance of being "aware of yourself, both your strengths and limits." Similarly, Alex described the significance of knowing his limitations: "Being highly effective in executing things will require me admitting that there are things that I can't do, which is like owning those things and accepting that and being okay with that." However, Kyle noted the powerful impact of not allowing yourself to be ruled by perceived limitations. He explained how he and his peers in college were able to get an administrator removed from her position and he explained, "it was important for me in terms of success because it showed me that there are things that I thought I couldn't do that I actually can do so it just made me motivated, it made me think bigger in other areas of life." Self-awareness of who they are and their strengths and weaknesses played an intricate role in participants' success.

Participants uniformly agreed on the significance of leading a passion-driven life. For example, when Poindexter was asked what advice he would give a young Black man who wanted to become successful he noted, "I think [part of] the discussion is about passion. What makes you come alive?" Edward had a similar response when asked the same question, "I'd try to get him to figure out what he's passionate about and once he figured that out then I'd say, 'go do that. And if you follow your passions you'll be a

success.'" Josh recognized passion within himself as an educator, "I have a lot of passion for my kids [students] and what I do, anything and everything I do I have a lot of passion." Identification and seeking out one's passion appears to be universally important to the participants in this study leading towards success in their endeavors. Overall, personality characteristics such as tenacity, grit, self-awareness and passion were indicated as important elements in achieving success.

Parents/Caregivers. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that parents/caregivers impacted their ability to be successful. The key ways in which parents influenced their success was through encouragement/support, value of or in educational attainment, and exposure to racial realities. Participants disclosed several of their transformative moments through the discussions of their parents/caregivers. Specifically, Poindexter and Robert described transformative moments that occurred with their parents that ultimately pushed them towards their current success.

Poindexter described being very close with his parents; he indicated that they are his "best friends." He shared several stories about the positive impact his parents have had on his life including two detailed below:

> I was in geometry, geometry was tough particularly because the teacher who taught honors, he was known to fail kids, so everyone got an F at the at the midterm, but he's like, "but we're working through it" and you end up getting like a B or C or whatever like that. Math was always my toughest subject I had to work really hard, I had a tutor at school, I had another tutor, I mean really really tough. So what I didn't know is that my dad would stop by the school every morning before he went to work and talk to my teacher. [small pause, increased

> emotionality] You know not like threatening him but kind of just checking in, "how you doing?" you know? Kind of checking in to show that I am a parent and I am very concerned about my son's well-being and I want you to know that I'm involved in his life. But all these things to this day I didn't know about until recently.
>
> My mom is a funny one too because my mom worked in [neighboring town], which is about an hour away. So my mom was more of a parent away because she would parent me over the phone, which is so funny. So the toughest thing is that when I get my report card or progress report I have to call her and tell her what my grades were. Oh god. What I didn't know is that she had already called the school to find out [chuckles] you know? But I mean just to show you the level of engagement these people had in my life as parents. So yeah I love them to death.

These two stories depicted the support and encouragement of Poindexter's parents but also their active engagement in his academic pursuits. Poindexter's father diligently went to his school without Poindexter's awareness to ensure his development and academic achievement. Moreover, his mother's decision to call his school prior to her conversation with Poindexter indicated her proactive commitment in his education. Throughout his narrative Poindexter did not indicate that this engagement lead to undue stress or pressure, rather it led to awareness of his intellectual capabilities and active support from his parents.

Robert noted a transformative moment with his mother:

> So, I still remember this to this day, I'm a small guy but I think I'm pretty athletic, I'd like to think so and I wanted to play football and I signed up and I was playing

> and I thought I was pretty good, one of the better players on the team but for someone who hasn't played football before the first day that you put on pads (you train like for a month without pads and then you put on your pads) and you gotta start hitting. And once we started hitting the next day I've never been sore in my life and I was just extremely sore and I said, "I'm not playing anymore" and she's like, "no way are you going to quit, if you don't want to play next year that's fine but you told me that you wanted to do this and you're going to be a man of your word and so once you made that commitment to those people around you, I'm not going to allow you to quit, you're not going to grow up to be a quitter." And really from that moment forward I realized that if I say I'm going to do something, I have to do it. If I make a commitment I'll do my damnest to make sure it goes through. And I think that was the biggest take away that I've gotten from her.

Robert explained how his mother instilled in him perseverance that impacted his perspective on seeing challenging situations through to the end. He described how this incident affected how he viewed failure throughout his life. Consequently, his mother had a significant impact on how he views himself and his success.

Another factor that influenced participants' success as it relates to their parents/caregivers was exposure to the racial realities of living in the United States. For instance, Michael, who is biracial, explained how his mother, who is Black, would have conversations with him about being a Black man in society:

> Michael: With mom it was always kind of like, "okay, be careful and you know make sure you know you're taking a step back and seeing everything for what it

> is." But with her it was just very much just you know "be careful." And I think she was obviously from the beginning much more mindful of the fact of me being Black, the school that we were at [a predominately White private school] and you know much more quick to sort of pass on certain lessons of what that meant.
>
> Erin: So she actively had those conversations with you?
>
> Michael: Yeah. Yeah.
>
> Erin: What did those look like?
>
> Michael: Ah, I think it was like I said I think it was lot of those just sort of "just be careful" and you don't understand it for a long time until you get to situations where it's like, "oh this is what you mean" and that was always, especially being an interracial [couple] that was always something that my dad [who's White] didn't— I mean he knew obviously what the case would be with us. But she was the one much earlier who was very cognizant of that and making sure we had the foundational pieces of what to look out for. I think once I started to experience more myself, being in certain situations even with my dad, it sort of became more real in that respect. So she was the person I think much more early on who made sure that those were lessons that we were going to be very aware of very early.

Michael explored how the conversation with his mother impacted his life and awareness of how he is perceived as a Black man in the United States. He noted that the influence of these conversations became even more relevant as he experienced discriminatory situations in his life. Instilling racial awareness in participants by parents/caregivers appeared to be incredibly important to participants' success as it helped them navigate oppressive systems, supported their understanding of the world around them and aided

their survival skills when interacting with a society that is often hostile towards Black men.

School personnel and mentors. The majority of participants expressed that school personnel (including teachers, counselors and administrators) impacted their ability to be successful by being able to see their potential. Overall, participants noted that school personnel provided encouragement/support and exposure to academic opportunities however some participants reported negative experiences with school personnel that impacted their views on their own potential as well. Both Kyle and Josh described transformative experiences with school personnel that significantly impacted their lives; however Josh's experience was positive and Kyle's was negative, and both had a long-lasting influence on their lives.

Josh explained:

> It was in the fourth or fifth grade that I like got that knock on the head that was like, "Josh get your shit together" like "you don't have the luxury to like get in trouble and to waste time." You know I was very eager I would raise my hand a lot and when the teacher didn't call on me I'd get upset and I'd be like, "I don't want to do this then" and I see that a lot and it's so easy in boys because you're excited you're involved and as soon as you don't get picked you feel like your teacher hates you or something. It was Mrs. M, my fifth grade teacher, who was like, "Josh stay after class" and I always had good grades but every report, "talks too much, is a problem, can't stay in seat, too energetic." She [Mrs. M] sat me down and was like, "Josh I'm so happy that you're excited and you're involved but you're not the only student in the classroom and I can't pick on you all the

> time because the way you feel right now is how other people feel if I always call on you," 'Cause I always knew the answer, always me. But I was like, "Oh! That's it? You don't hate me, you're not racist? Like…oh! I can deal with that." But it was her being grown up enough to treat me like an adult to just tell me the truth not yell at me, not send me to the principle's office, just explaining it. I was a very logical person at a young age and it made sense.

Josh explored how this incident with his elementary school teacher helped him understand his teacher's actions of not calling on him in class; because of the needs of other students and not because of biased views or not liking him. Later in the interview Josh explained that this event motivated him to become a fourth grade teacher, which he is today. This experience also highlighted the difficulty that students of color can have when faced with perceived injustice, as they are unsure if it's due to the specific circumstances, actual bias or both.

> Kyle had a transformative experience with a guidance counselor. He explained: I remember pretty vividly when I was in high school; it was probably my junior year, when I was talking to my guidance counselor at the time. So I was like, "yeah I'm thinking about maybe looking at [prestigious PWI] and I wanted to know what you think" and she was like, "yeah you know that's like a really competitive school you should stick with some of your other schools you're looking at…" I was looking at like some local schools, state schools. And it was like the underlying sort of doubt, more of a challenge to me like, "damn why does she think I can't go to [prestigious PWI]" I could have been like, "ah yeah you're right, you're right maybe I won't apply there" but I think for me it was just like,

> "nah, I did pretty well here [in high school] so I'm gonna, apply to [prestigious PWI] 'cause I feel like this is something I can do." I think it was a pivotal moment for me in terms of my later success in a sense—I mean I could have responded in a number of different ways, I could have been like, "yeah like you're right" but [prestigious PWI, which he ultimately attended] was such a difficult—it was a beautiful struggle, I'll say. That I feel like in many ways it has shaped me—like having opportunities. I learned a lot of things about myself and I feel I've picked up some skills and in many ways. I wouldn't have had that opportunity if I hadn't gone, if I had listened to this knucklehead counselor.

Kyle described how a negative experience with his high school guidance counselor influenced his decision to apply to a prestigious university. He highlighted the choice that he made between listening to this guidance counselor's advice or forging his own path. Similar to Oliver who was faced with a comparative dilemma in the constructed dialogue illustrated above, Kyle had the fortitude to realize he had the capacity to be successful at this university and mentioned how his guidance counselor's negative perception of him propelled him forward. This example illustrated Kyle's resiliency and self-awareness in the face of someone in power, a situation that was encountered by several participants in the study.

Mentors were often identified as influential teachers and professors. For example, as mentioned in the constructed dialogue, Stanley noted the importance of one Black high school teacher, Ms. J.:

> Even though I never had Ms. J. as a teacher, Ms. J. always encouraged me. Ms. J. took me under her wing and at the time I was just chillin' because it was easy

> work I didn't have to do much to get an A, I barely studied, I was involved in things but they didn't take much, I was good at them too. But she always pushed me. We had a Black history club and we would do community service and she would just, not in a forceful way, would just kind of say "you can do this, I think you should do this."

It was a common occurrence amongst participants to find mentors of color even if they didn't take classes with them because of their shared experiences and ability to help participants navigate predominately White spaces. Stanley also highlighted how mentors can serve as sources of support in implicit ways without necessarily explicitly telling mentees what life decisions to make.

Poindexter also identified several important mentors including professors and Mr. Bill Keyes, the founder of the Institute for Responsible Citizenship. He described the importance of mentorship as one furthers their career:

> I just had some people who have been very helpful in navigating phase two of my development. Because there is a time when your family maxes out. I'm the first person in my family to go to grad school full-time so that was new. And then the first to get a PhD and there was all these firsts. My dad, he's a worldly guy, he's read about this stuff but he'd never done it. So I think, I had to get a new set of sponsors. So I think the key to success is being able to identify sponsors to help you to navigate new territory and I was very thankful that I was able to do that.

Poindexter explained that mentors often satisfy that role that parents held during earlier development. Several participants discussed this idea of parents "maxing out" at a certain level, oftentimes because they hadn't had the educational experiences the

participants achieved. Consequently, it was imperative for participants to find mentors to fulfill this role and offer guidance and navigation leading them towards success.

Peers. Most participants mentioned the significance of peer relationships shaping their ability to become successful. They explained that peers offered support, critical reflection and varying perspectives yet similar goals. For example, Michael noted that his friends encourage him to have stronger boundaries between his profession and personal life and advise him to "leave work at work." Participants noted that peers often have similar goals and lifestyles, which was mutually beneficial as their friends are striving towards their own success. Edward explained:

> Most of my friends run in the same circles so we push each other and it's actually a great way to make friends 'cause I end up introducing my friends to my friends because they can help each other, you know. "Oh you're looking for a job here I know this guy over here," so it's more of a networking thing but we also have a good time and get along. I think it's helped me just because most of my friends are in a similar position.

Edward described how peers can encourage each other and also serve as informal networks for potential job opportunities. He noted the importance of his friends striving towards their own success. Sharing similar goals with one's peer group often came up for participants, however some participants noted that not all of their friends shared their professional or lifestyle goals. For example, in Kyle's narrative described earlier on how his success impacts his personal relationships he explained that he has friends who have been in the criminal justice system and he still feels connected to them. Robert mentioned similar experiences:

> The people I associate with are people much like me—just ambitious. I mean, I hang out with people who aren't college educated—I just want to be around people who want to be an artist in the sense where they want to continue improving their craft and whether it's cooking or personal training or being a lawyer or whatever it may be, you know I just want people who are moving forward and not staying where they are.

Robert described that the educational attainment of his friend group isn't as important as the values that his friends hold, which should be reflective of his own. He explained that he seeks out friendship with others who are progressing in their goals and striving for their own success. These types of relationships positively support his own success. Participants noted the value of having strong, healthy relationships with peers that shared similar beliefs, leading them towards achieving their own success.

Public figures. One surprising finding was the significant influence that celebrities, civil rights activists and other public figures had on participants' lives. Public figures often exposed what is possible for participants to achieve if they become successful and public figures also served as powerful role models. Patrick noted the importance of reading biographies, "My thing is to really learn your history, learn that history repeats itself, you want to be successful study biographies of people and study what they've done and implement that in your life." Kyle expressed a similar sentiment:

> Read about people, read about successful Black men who've done great things like it's one thing to say like, "yeah Martin Luther King, he did great things" but go read about him or read a book about Malcolm [X]. 'Cause I mean there's stuff

> I've learned from reading a lot of people. You learn new things but you also get to see how human they were.

Kyle noted that beyond understanding the life journeys of civil rights leaders, by reading about their lives it allows for others to have a more holistic understanding of who those leaders were and see their humanity.

In terms of exposure to possibilities, Poindexter described the tremendous influence that Bill Cosby had on his life and upbringing:

> The single biggest influence outside of my family was *The Cosby Show*. Bill Cosby [chuckle] Bill Cosby changed my life because as a kid I got to stay up late to watch *The Cosby Show* then *A Different World*. But what he did was he gave me reflection of what I could be. So Bill Cosby has an art collection, hmm, why not be a collector one day, which I am now. Or you know paint. Bill Cosby wears pretty cool, I never got the cool pajamas like him but you know just expanding the perception of who I could be. The cool music, the art, the beautiful Black women. You know that whole thing. But then *A Different World* and seeing young Black people and all the diversity at Hillman [the fictional university on the show]. I remember I wanted to go to Hillman. So that was HUGE huge huge huge affirmation and opportunities.

Poindexter emphasized how both *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World* impacted his perception of who he was and who he could become. These shows demonstrated that he could strive towards material wealth and also have pride in his own culture. *A Different World* specifically illustrated that college was in the realm of possibility. Bill Cosby, as

well as other public figures, served as important roles models that led participants to see what's possible and pushed them towards their own success.

"[University was] a Beautiful Struggle": Institutional Support and Success

Participants uniformly agreed that institutional support was imperative to their future success. Each participant noted some institutional resource or program that elevated his academic confidence, sense of self and leadership potential. These institutional supports fell into two categories: rigorous schools and extracurricular activities.

Rigorous schools. Participants noted schools that offered high expectations and a comprehensive curriculum provided them an opportunity to meet these expectations and flourish academically leading towards success later in life. For some participants, rigorous schooling came at the high school level, for others it was during their undergraduate education. For Josh it was the high school he attended, he stated, "I graduated from D High School, it's actually one of the best schools in the nation. [They] have AP classes and leadership opportunities, which were huge 'cause that's the only reason why I got to college because of leadership, I had a 3.2 GPA." Josh explained that he grew up in poverty and his high school experience offered him a way out:

> [There was] a lot peer pressure just in terms of like social economic status because I took school very seriously and I loved learning and it was like my escape. I was in AP honors classes but I was the only Black person and I was one of few poor people too so you know all my friends were going to lake cabins and going on vacations—I had a friend with a basketball court inside his house. So

> that was pretty hard and you know to make it even worst I didn't want to let anyone know that I was poor that you know all these things were going on.

Josh spoke to the intersectionality of race and class differences at his predominately White, mostly affluent high school. Within these two passages Josh described the tension that often existed for participants; rigorous academic training was often met with isolation as one of few Black students in the school. Ultimately, these challenging schools propelled participants towards success but there was often a price they paid for these opportunities—loneliness and isolation. This phenomenon will be explored in further detail in the *Visibility and Representation* section.

Extracurricular activities and educational programs. All participants noted a variety of extracurricular activities as being imperative to their development and success. These programs included gifted and talented programs, summer enrichment programs, specific fellowships and internships in their areas of interest, fraternal affiliations, race-based student organizations, athletics and college honors programs. These activities offered exposure to different professional and cultural experiences, networking opportunities, access to different students with varying perspectives and leadership development. For instance, Alex shared his experience:

> I was a student member on my school board my junior year of high school and I lobbied on behalf of all the middle and high school students in the state my senior year so I've always—part of my passion with education came from the fact that my first chances to manifest some involvement in government and politics and social change making was working on behalf of students as a student advocate dealing with primarily a lot of student and school related issues. And in the

> process just learning a lot about education and urban education and how school systems and districts work, it made me really interested in taking on a lot of the related issues that kind of leads me to how we create more opportunities for kids that don't have a lot.

Alex currently works for a non-profit that addresses just that issue; how to provide academic resources to underfunded schools. Consequently, it is clear that his role on the school board when he was younger influenced his current career choice and current level of success. He gained leadership and advocacy skills that he still draws upon today.

The majority of participants noted the importance of the Institute for Responsible Citizenship in their lives. Several even described it as a "life changing" experience. The Institute played a significant role in participants lives in the following ways: it offered exposure to powerful leaders, peer support and community, demonstrated what's possible and offered professional and academic development. For instance, Poindexter recounted his interaction with congressman John Lewis:

> As a history major I was like blown away because the civil rights movement, only living person that spoke in the March on Washington, you know because of who I am, I was just blown away and we were there for about FOUR hours. He's telling stories and so blown away. But what got me Erin was the fact that I looked in his office and there are a lot of Black men working there. And there are Black men who look like me, who had darker skin and something clicked in that moment for me about The Institute and what the purpose was. Michael [a staffer in John Lewis' office] looked like me, had a big nose like me, had darker brown skin like me, and he was the chief of staff in Washington DC and he worked for John

> Lewis, and he had on a suit and a tie, you know what I'm sayin? In John Lewis' office seeing Michael and seeing him it all clicked about The Institute and the fact that wow, who you can be or who your parents hope for you to be or who you want to be is really possible. It just came together and that's The Institute for me because I think it's possibility you know, it's support but it's possibility more than anything.

Poindexter's experience in John Lewis' office highlighted the multitude of ways that The Institute impacted his life. It gave him personal exposure to a civil rights leader and role model, it showed him that men who look like him could achieve status and power in significant governmental roles and it allowed him to see what is possible within himself. Poindexter is one of many participants who described similar experiences when interacting with powerful leaders and governmental officials during their two summers in The Institute.

Several participants described the sense of community they have with other members of The Institute. For many of the participants, they went to predominately White undergraduate institutions and were often the only Black male in their classes. Consequently, when they came to The Institute, they experienced deep connections and fellowship with other Black men, what both Oliver and Alex noted as "fictive kin." Tony shared similar feelings about The Institute, "A space like The Institute you can forget that this is not what you see everywhere else so it's kind of like, you don't really have to code switch as much." Tony described that similarity of experience and cultural background allowed Institute members to be their authentic selves and feel a strong sense of

community. The Institute served as a space for support and encouragement and also critical reflection to push members forward towards continued success.

Interestingly, extracurricular reading came up repeatedly as a significant factor in participants' lives leading to their current success. This element is of particular interest because there is limited research regarding the impact of reading on Black males and their future success. The majority of participants noted the importance of reading in their lives to increase their self-esteem and exposure to other perspectives and cultures. For example, when asked what advice he would give a young Black male, Michael expressed the following, "Read. Read and don't stop. Read and don't stop." Tony noted, "[There were] always a lot of books in the house so that [was] a big thing growing up." Poindexter explained his parents often took him to the library when he was younger and stated, "I mean I love the library I felt at home there." Kyle expressed that his father encouraged him to read:

> [My father]'s very big into reading so he had me read a lot of stuff that reinforced the idea that you are a Black man in this world and what that means. So from the time I was like 11 or 12 I was reading *The Isis Papers* or *Black Robes, White Justice* or you know different sorts of things that kind of made me aware of what things were going on. Also stuff around self-esteem, there's one book he had me read called *From Niggers to Gods* that I thought was very, very good particularly at the age that I read it, I think I was in junior high. But it's just being aware of who you are, where you come from and I mean it very much spoke to my generation, to Black men.

Kyle described how reading various source material increased his understanding of the historical context of Black men in the United States. It was important to Kyle's father to inform Kyle of the racial realities of Black men in this country. Additionally, reading increased Kyle's self-esteem and self-worth. While reading about public figures' lives was noted above, general reading on a variety of topics was important to participants as well. This activity lead to exposure to life's possibilities and increase self-esteem, which lead to their current successes. In summary, rigorous schooling, institutional supports and extracurricular activities (including reading and involvement in The Institute) impacted participants' personal, professional and academic development leading them towards their current successes.

For participants in this study, success is clearly a multifaceted, subjective and abstract concept. In fact, the idea of success was often so slippery that it was frequently difficult for participants to identify themselves as successful. Participants explained that one's definition of success is informed by a person's values, which inform their goals and ultimately lead them towards a personalized definition of success. However, even though all participants' definitions of success varied there were some common themes including western/capitalistic markers of success, communal success and holistic health. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of key figures, such as parents/caregivers, peers, school officials, mentors and public figures to encourage and propel them forward. A range of extracurricular activities, institutional supports, and educational programs were also instrumental in participants' lives. While each participant's journey is unique, it was clear that a variety of people, institutions and organizations served as their "village" to help them get where they are today.

Communalism

The concept of communalism will be explored below first as a constructed dialogue between a subgroup of study participants then through thematic analysis using data from all participants. Participants in both levels of analysis will discuss how they articulate communalism in their lives including the activities they participate in and the motivations behind participating in these activities.

Constructed Dialogue

Setting: Classroom at American University in Washington, D.C during The Institute's Alumni Weekend event. Participants come in separately but greet each other, as many of them have known each other for years. Six chairs have been placed in a circle and I am standing near a chair facing the door. I have met with each participant for individual interviews regarding demographic information and informed consent compliance and greet all participants with ease. All participants choose seats and the conversation begins.

Participants:

Researcher (Erin): Female, 32 years old, doctoral student

Alex: Male, 28, non-profit manager

Kyle: Male, 28, law clerk

Michael: Male, 28, private high school director of admissions

Poindexter: Male, 31, doctoral student

Tony: Male, 29, doctoral candidate/instructor

Erin: In each one of your individual interviews you mentioned a connection to the Black community and that is what I would like to focus on today. To begin with I was

wondering what does it mean to "give back" to the Black community? And why is it important to you?

Alex: For me it's like I'm a Black man who cares about creating opportunities for kids in America. So you know, it means that something like My Brother's Keeper, the presidential initiative around young boys and men of color and that concept, those kids matter a lot to me.

Poindexter: Yeah, for me it was something that my parents really instilled in me. Both my parents grew up in a place where the Gullah culture was pretty prominent. It's a culture that bodes a lot of Africanism and community and that kind of thing. So it was always an understanding of how you always have to give back. So it's my dad picking up random people giving them a ride and my mom—I mean, they modeled for us what it meant to be successful, quote on quote, in our community standards because my grandfather was the type of guy that would go out on the river and you know catch a lot of crab, fish, shrimp, whatever and he would go around to the community and share it with people.

Alex: It's interesting that you mention success based on community standards because I'm a big believer that our country, both in terms of its systems and process, in a lot of big ways but also in a lot of small ways, does not appreciate how interdependent we are as a society and so for me a lot of like my work that is around service, around impact is very much about trying to you know foster a greater sense and energy of mutuality in a number of different ways.

Kyle: Yeah, I've been feeling the tension between community values and my career path lately. 'Cause I feel so conflicted because the work that I'll be doing probably for

the next couple of years is like the antithesis of what I feel represents my values. In the sense that I'll be working with big companies to help them get bigger. I mean yeah sure the companies are based out of Latin America but it's like you know that in many ways doing the same sort of things that you know US based companies are doing.

Poindexter: You're not alone there. Being in graduate school now this feels very self-serving and very selfish. But I came to a realization that the only way to be successful in life is to have a greater purpose that helps other people. I don't know…. I think there's a wrestling or struggle between the world's success and what I see as success for myself. Like you know, I want to be rich— I mean I couldn't care less but I want to be wealthy 'cause I want something to pass down to my kids, and I don't want my parents to not have to worry about working, does that make sense? So I'm more concerned about the tangible things of paying forward for people who were there for me, not so much material wealth.

Michael: I always found it interesting because it's many more of my friends of color, my Black friends, who would go into service fields as opposed to my White friends. I always in my head sort of attributed that, or hopefully they attributed it to you know the importance of reaching back and paying forward the opportunities that you were able to have and try and give someone else those opportunities for agency or for success on their own. I think that comes from a place of having really good opportunities and having that sense of duty to be helpful to others to have those same types of opportunities. That is something that I think might be distinct among people of color…yeah I think it comes from a place that you know

we value those opportunities that we were able to have and I think it's just kind of a natural thing to go back into that position where you want to be helpful to other folks because you know what you've been through and you know what you're family's been through, you know what your ancestors have been through. That's an important part of what's gotten you to that point so doing what you can to be helpful to others is something that I don't think we are able to remove ourselves from.

Tony: Yeah, I just think it's one of those things…. where it's like when you imagine yourself like how does being quote-unquote successful impact others? There's a lot of kind of… like you have to be a role model, you have to give back. I mean yeah there's always kind of a feeling that you could do more but and I think there's like, I hit a point where it's like—to do the stuff that I really want to do long term I have to make sure that I don't stop and help everyone out and kind of like get involved in every side project.

Alex: I just think it's really important to help anyone overcome a lack of opportunity or some form of disadvantage, just like how can you connect the dots for people who need help.

Erin: So how do you personally give back?

Tony: I tutor Saturday mornings with elementary school aged kids. I try to help people who are doing that kind of work with youth.

Alex: For me my job is a big way I give back. I am a youth connect network director at a nonprofit in which we make strategic investments in organizations, both big and small, that helps youth ages 0 to 24. So like we make grants and we want more

kids reading and doing math at grade level. We want to make sure kids have successful transitions from college to some form of post-secondary certification and then the workforce. Then making sure that older youth, between 14 and 24 have a successful transition to adulthood. So in that vein I manage a network of nonprofits that include four organizations that we made large traditional investments in. For me the problems I really care about and am passionate about are you know creating opportunities for kids, which I define as education, community development and economic growth.

Kyle: I too am interested in economic development but from a global perspective. I think a lot about how we, in the Black community, can more clearly participate in the global community so we don't get left behind. I mean I've been blessed to have done a lot of traveling; I've been through like most of Latin America, I've done some stuff in East Africa, I've been through some parts of West Africa, I've done a lot of Europe, I was in China for a semester last year. So I just like seeing a lot of perspectives and stuff is becoming more and more international it's like you know my brothers, my sisters we're not learning a lot of things like a second language or taking it seriously. You know if you think about Black owned businesses, when we own a business are we thinking globally? Are we figuring out how to channel resources or like how to serve the broader, global consumer? So that's kind of what I feel like I'll operate somewhere in between sort of international and domestic, making connections to where we can think through development. Like I could see myself working for a Black owned bank or a community development bank, you know just general council or maybe like

switch to the business side at some point. But it hasn't really been super coherent right now. Yeah I don't have— my plan isn't as coherent as it was a couple of years ago. But if we're talking about sort of Black folks and like contributing it'll be in that space— development.

Poindexter: Honestly, one of the big ways I give back is by being available. And answering my phone. I had a conversation with a young man yesterday. So we're talking you know normal stuff, high school, what's your future looking like that kind of thing. And he's talking about how he had a bad year; you know a family member died that kind of thing. He said, "you know, I tried to commit suicide, a family member assaulted me and I ended up in the hospital" all this stuff like that. But the thing that got me is that a former friend of mine was the one person this young man wanted to talk to, that he reached out to during that time and the guy didn't answer his phone. He fell off the face of the earth for three months and that just made me so angry. And so I told this young man I said, "dude listen. Add me to the list of people you call" you know what I'm sayin'? And that's my brand you know I am the friend I didn't have in high school, I'm the mentor that I wish I had, so my phone is on and I answer my phone when people call me but also reach out to young men who I've had the opportunity to cross paths with just to check on them. So whenever I'm on the Megabus or whenever I'm taking a long trip, I go through my address book and I text people, "yo what's good? How's it going?" just to check in. Because I think my faith probably inspires me to do it but also I don't take the blessing or privilege of being a mentor lightly, you know?

Michael: I totally agree with you about the importance of mentorship as service. You know I think what I do [as a director of admissions at an elite private school] really does have meaning and I remember walking out of the very first admissions committee that I did and stopping for a second and thinking we changed some lives today, you know? Sure 70 percent of the kids whose families are incredibly wealthy, they're going to be fine regardless; I'm not worried about them. But you know that other 30 percent of the kids who we're providing financial aid for, this is a life changing opportunity for them. So I mean what I was most excited about is providing opportunity for them to have no limits on how high they can go and to hopefully be part of that mentorship team that will be there and will have their back. I get a lot of meaning out of that because especially now the position where I'm the person in control of who gets those opportunities, it's like I know where you live, I know your mother, I know all of the things that are in your way and this is a way that everything could change for your family for generations after this.

Erin: Thank you so much for sharing your stories and perspective with me. We, in the Black community, often talking about "giving back" however the motivations behind it are often not know. You have helped me and others in the psychological community have a better understanding of the importance of this value. I hope to see you all at the large group discussion at the end of the weekend.

Thematic Analysis

"Just Someone on Their Team": Service to the Black Community

All participants in the study self-identified as having a connection to the Black community and being of service to this community in some way. For example, here is a typical exchange I had with participants:

> Erin: Do you feel in service to any communities?
>
> Robert: Yeah man. That's why I do the work that I do. Education is the one reason why I'm here so that's what I've dedicated my life to being involved in Ed policy, at least right now and I've done it for the last seven or eight years and so you know that's my sense of me giving back, I'm giving my career to try to provide opportunities or enable law makers and people to decide things in a way that can help my community.
>
> Erin: And which community is that?
>
> Robert: Black! Black males! So I'm like everything's from the slant, like is this going to help Black people? Is this going to help Black males? And if the answer is yes then go for it, if it's not then I'm like how can I do this?

Robert clearly stated his commitment of service to the Black community and how it has impacted both his personal life and professional goals. For participants in this study being of service meant giving back to the Black community specifically, as noted by Robert.

Several participants described key family members and institutions that instilled the value of service in their lives. For example Poindexter told the following story:

> So my grandmother was a church secretary for fifty plus years, we had a celebration for her and this lady in the community, she was telling this story about how my grandmother would tell them to meet her at the woods. So they [this community member and her family] would come to the woods and she [Poindexter's grandmother] would give them clothes because they were very poor. So whenever my grandmother made clothes for her kids she would make them for them too and give it to them but no one knew, 'cause you don't want the kids to feel whatever. So that's how we operate as a family. So these are just values that you're never better than anyone else, you always give back, if I'm eating you're eating.

Throughout his narrative, Poindexter explained that he was raised in the Gullah culture, which as noted in the constructed dialogue, highly values communalism. In this passage specifically, Poindexter noted the value of giving back to others, especially to those in need, is passed down generationally through direct actions towards others. Poindexter also identified the need for respect when serving others to not elicit shame or embarrassment.

Alex also expressed that his grandparents instilled service in his life:

> My grandparents are people who are very hard charging people, like in their retirement they do a whole bunch of volunteer stuff including starting a Habitat chapter and so I think that spirit of community involvement I definitely identify [with] a lot.

Additionally, Patrick noted that his parents instilled the value of service in his life, as did his church community, he explained, "if you want to do something great be like Jesus and

serve somebody." Key family members and institutions serve as a model to many participants on how to engage in service to others. Participants demonstrated four themes related to service including a focus on the past, present and future and the impact of visibility and representation as Black men.

Service: Focus on the Past

Ancestral sacrifice. Participants expressed looking towards the past, including the sacrifice of family members and the sociopolitical contexts of Black Americans, as sources of understanding and articulating of service.

Several participants stated that having an awareness of ancestral sacrifices influenced their need to give back to others. For instance, when discussing the people who shaped his life and values, Michael noted the influence of his grandparents:

> Yeah so [my grandparents are from] from a tiny little town in North Carolina and my grandpa, he's 95 now, and you know he's very quick to always bring up you know "my grandparents were slaves" and that's real. And the house that he grew up in was their house like on a plantation so you know I'm very thankful for him not allowing me to sort of forget where I come from. I think like I said all those conversations at the dinner table [with his grandparents and other family members] it really always came down to I think more than anything you gotta do well for yourself but I think doing well for yourself so your able to be the best you can be to other people who probably need it more than you. So ah yeah, they don't let us forget it.

Michael demonstrated the impact that his family's slave ancestry has had on his beliefs and importance of service in his life. Michael also expressed that while individual success is important it should be used as a catalyst to help others in need.

Stanley noted the sacrifices his aunt made when he was a child that allowed him to attend an elite independent middle school, which he "credited with making me the scholar I was to become":

> She [Stanley's aunt] sacrificed personally to get me into Pennsylvania Academy. The school was 30 minutes from where we lived so she had to drive me to the bus stop at [a local] medical center and I had to ride the bus from [the] medical center [to the school], which was 30 minutes away every single day. I often got the bus back to [the local] medical center and had to wait for her to get off of work to come pick me up or my grandmother would come pick me up, usually it was her though. And then from there after she had worked a full day we would go back to [local town], essentially which is another 30 minutes away where she would work a part-time job for our church, she had a day care center so she was an administrator at the day care center, so she would do that very late into the evening. And then we'd go back home. So it was a struggle and she did it and I think because of that I grew up to be the person who I am today.

Stanley has been in the field of education for over eight years and he credits much of his drive to serving and helping others (specifically students of color) related to his experience at Pennsylvania Academy and his aunt's sacrifice. It is through this modeling of sacrifice for his academic achievement that he developed his own need to help others through mentoring and teaching.

Sociopolitical history. While ancestral awareness and sacrifice was instrumental to participants' understanding and articulation of service, so was an acknowledgement of the sociopolitical history of Black people in the United States. For example Stanley stated:

> I find it very empowering just to know the struggles of Black people I mean our culture is not perfect, but to know that we have overcome so many things and to find inspiration in that. I genuinely believe that more so than any other culture we still have the ability to define what the future of our culture will be.

Stanley illustrated that the historical challenges of Black Americans can be used as a motivation to push the population forward. Additionally, he noted that the future of the culture is still malleable and can be shaped by those within the culture. Consequently, how members serve each other and the larger society will have an impact on future generations of Black Americans.

When discussing influential people, Kyle noted the impact of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Huey Newton and other members of the Black Panthers had on his life. He explained the communal nature of the movements behind these leaders:

> Because I feel like they thought about it more on a group sense which is that idea of sort of a moment of not necessarily revolving around one person but like how do you empower a community such that you have like you know your Fred Hamptons, your Bunchy Carters you get one of us, [but] you know there's still other folks.

Kyle described how reading about these influential Black leaders helped him have a deeper understanding of the communal nature of Black Americas that focused beyond

individual leadership towards the improvement of the entire race. Historical context and awareness of ancestral sacrifice was important to participants' understand and articulation of communalism, shaping their commitment to the Black community.

Service: Focus on the Present

Several participants noted service oriented projects and volunteerism they have engaged in. For example, Edward noted that he participates in a "social enterprising incubator in DC" and he also did a variety of community service projects with his fraternity in college. Patrick described, "participating in an HIV/AIDS walk, giving school supplies to children in need, delivering groceries, helping pay bills and feeding the needy," as tangible ways he gives back to the community. Additionally, Stanley explained, "beyond my job [as an educator], I do service with my fraternity to area homeless [shelters] and soup kitchens and drives—that's fulfilling." All of these activities are community service projects that are often described in the literature, however it should be noted that these are just the concrete events that participants describe and the other themes in this section lead to a better understanding of the motives behind these activities. For instance, current literature does not recognize the significant impact that ancestral sacrifice and the sociopolitical context of Black Americans has on the decision for these participants to engage in community oriented activities. By only stating that participants dedicate their time and resources to service projects doesn't thoroughly explain the cultural implications and motivations behind giving back to the Black community.

Service: Focus on the Future

Common service activities that participants indicated as important include mentoring, teaching and tutoring. While these activities impact students in the moment, participants also discussed how these events impact students' future as well. For example Kyle stated:

> I feel an obligation to other young Black kids in general but I think in some ways particularly young Black boys, which is why since I was in high school I have been involved in working with kids, like I've done day camps or summer camps, I was a tutor, I did recreation stuff, after school programs, that's why I like teaching it seemed like a natural outgrowth for me and I still do stuff. Being a Black man and being successful for me creates obligations that I don't mind having and I think are important. Not only for myself but also for the community I care about which tends to be Black folks.

Kyle described his articulation of communalism through tutoring and camp counseling as a necessary obligation as a Black man who values the Black community. Through his service work he can have a lasting, multigenerational influence on the Black community.

Josh, an elementary school teacher, explained the connection he feels to his students of color:

> I'm somewhat racially ambiguous, you know the hair throws people off so I kind of blend in and my students are very comfortable like, "what are you? Oh you could be me!" and so and they get so excited. Boys [of color] need to see people like them. Like this little boy M is just fascinated with my facial hair because he's like, "oh my god it grew over the weekend!" And I'm just like, "yes" and

> he's like, "I can't wait!" and it's so cute but he needs someone to talk to him about it, you know? He doesn't have a [male] figure in his life, his parents are immigrants from [a Caribbean country] and I think his dad is still over there. So it's just like I know what it's like to be a fourth grader like that.

Josh described the importance of visibility of Black men in classrooms for students of color as role models offering connection. While the phrase "what are you?" has often been used as a microaggression (Sue & Sue, 2007), in this context it is used by students of color to find places of connection with Josh. Josh also noted that because of his shared personal experiences with boys of color in the classroom he can be more attuned to their needs and adjust accordingly. Teaching is an articulation of Josh's value of communalism by showing students of color what possibly lies ahead for them both personally and professionally. Participants expressed that tutoring, teaching and mentoring as an act of service allowed them have a positive impact on young Black men specifically and to the Black community generally.

Self as Service: Visibility and Representation as Black Men

Several participants noted that Black male success is viewed as uncommon, which contributes to the negative perception of Black men in the United States. For example, when asked how being a Black man affects his level of success Oliver noted, "I don't know…I guess it seems like an anomaly, when it should just be a regular thing, which is sad." Kyle had a similar response when he noted, "Like personally how people perceive me I mean societally it's just like, 'oh my goodness this is such an anomaly!' Which…which bothers me."

Consequently, numerous participants discussed their very being in the world is combatting the negative portrayals of Black men for both Black communal validation and larger societal understanding. For example, Poindexter described growing up in a majority White town and feeling like:

> There's always these racial dynamics and I think that may have pressed me to project a level of perfection. Because I felt like I was doing something not just for myself but to debunk their [White community in his hometown] perception of what a Black man was or could be.

Poindexter explained the need for demonstrating perfection to the outside world as to not confirm negative stereotypes about Black men. This is connected to communalism as Poindexter's existence in the world serves as a testament to both White and Black populations as to what is possible. Edward, a pharmaceutical consultant, described how his race and gender impact perceptions in the workplace:

> I see being Black as an advantage actually. Number one, when I see clients and especially changing teams you come in, "oh this is the Black guy, how'd he get here? Is he the Affirmative Action guy? Is he going to be worth a damn?" So to me that's an advantage because people almost don't expect much out of you and then you perform and then they're like, "oh shit, you can read!" It's like, "yeah, I can…imagine that…." The whole underpromise, overdeliver thing is really easy, so I think it's kind of great. Because people just don't have very high expectations and then you blow their expectations out of the water and they think you're amazing so I like it.

Edward explained how his ability to be successful professionally serves as a counter-narrative that Black men are incompetent and deskilled. This is an example of indirect communalism because as Edward combats negative stereotypes about Black men in the workplace, it may change the perceptions of other employees, which will benefit the Black community generally and future Black employees at the company specifically.

Edward went on to note how his presence as a Black man is a service to the Black community:

> I think I see being successful and making sure that I'm stable financially and setting myself up to have a strong impact is part of my service. Because I see it as a lifelong journey, not an, "I'm going to volunteer for a couple of hours," because that doesn't do much to me.

Edward describes one of the key differences between communalism and volunteerism; communalism isn't a static event but a "lifelong journey" one embarks on that continues to change and modify as one gains new experiences. Participants' very existence in the world is a service not only to the Black community but society as a whole as they have the possibility of changing the negative stereotypes ascribed to Black men.

Visibility and Representation

Below is the thematic analysis on how the participants experience visibility and representation as Black men living in the United States. Following the thematic analysis is the last constructed dialogue featuring all participants of the study and explores advice to young Black men and boys and a reflection on their own journeys.

Thematic Analysis

Beyond an examination of articulation of communal values, visibility and representation as Black men in the United States came up frequently during co-constructed narratives with participants. While gaining a deeper understanding of what it feels like to be a Black male representative in society was not one of my initial research questions, this theme emerged consistently throughout my interactions with participants and it was impossible to ignore or silence. Consequently, to honor the voices of my participants, below I will explore the two major themes that came up for participants regarding how Black men are seen and represented in the United States: the experience of being one of few Black men in White spaces and how societal perceptions of Black men in the United States affect how they are perceived by others.

Playing "Double Dutch": Being One of Few

As briefly mentioned in the *Success and Transformation* section, all participants described being one of few Black males in predominately White spaces in their lives; for some it was elementary, middle and or high school, for others it was college or at their current job. Participants often described these experiences as isolating, lonely and often questioned their belongedness in White spaces. For instance, Tony and Poindexter described similar experiences as doctoral students. They both explained that they are the only Black men in their programs (Tony and Poindexter both study United States history at predominately White universities), which at times can be very challenging. Tony explained his experience as a Black man in academia:

> As a person of color there's not a lot of other people of color and the sociality of grad school life is, it's kind of very White and not in a way that's like explicitly

> racist I mean like it's just in a way that the social experiences that I have and what I'm used to I don't always see them reflected. So it's kind of like when you're out with grad students you end up doing the code switching a lot so, building like a social life or like, "hey you understand these references I get" or "you kick back the way I kick back" is hard. So I think you do this kind of double dutch, back and forth between two worlds, so… there's a tension where it's like I think to be successful in the academy it rewards people who are super comfortable spending most of their time in the academy. Whereas I mean I think to be a happy, healthy person of color you need the things the academy can't give you.

Tony noted the lack of shared experiences he has with others in the academy, which can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Also, he noted the need for constant code switching if he is to be successful in academia. This constant need to play "double dutch" can lead to feelings of inauthenticity and hypervigilance that, as Tony noted, can lead to dissatisfaction in academia.

Michael, Stanley and Josh are all in the field of education (Michael as an administrator and Stanley and Josh as teachers) and they all discussed the detrimental impact a lack of Black male teachers and leadership has on the field of education. Josh explained how a lack of other Black male teachers affects his professional life:

> There's not enough of us, Black men, in the field [of education] to make an impact, so I think that's what makes it a little bit harder too. You know I was at a school where there were a lot more Black men and it was a little bit easier, you felt like too there's less pressure 'cause if I don't wear a tie today—it'll be alright.

> There's everyone else dressed up so it's a constant reminder of what it's like to be a professional for these kids.

Josh described the differences between working at a school with several Black men and schools that having few to no other Black men. When he is the only Black male teacher at a school he is forced into the representative role. However, when other Black male teachers are present he can become individualized and no longer has to serve as a representative for an entire population. Josh noted how this affects his presentation of self at school through dress because when he's alone he's not just representing himself but all Black male teachers. Josh went on to discuss how being the Black male teacher representative affects interactions with colleagues and Black male students:

> People come from good intentions but there's always the troubled African American boy acting up and I strongly believe you know it's great to have Black male role model teachers and I would love to meet the kid but if I don't know the kid don't come get me to go deal with him because I'm a Black man….so it's like little things like that.

Josh highlighted the expectations that White teachers have of him to "deal with" Black male students who are being disruptive regardless of his relationship with the student. This microaggression assumes that only other Black males have the capacity to discipline Black male students. Josh also emphasized the inherent tension between wanting to be a source of support for Black male students but not solely as a disciplinarian. Moreover, Josh did not indicate having to "deal with" Black male students who are excelling for mentorship or guidance but only those who are struggling, leading to the false assumption that high achieving males don't need support.

Oliver shared a unique experience of transitioning from being one of few Black students at a predominately White high school to attending a historically Black college:

> Yeah going to college was great. It totally felt like you know before I was always like the Black Kid Oliver or whatever. And now it's just like some kid Oliver with a big mouth, which is interesting because it's probably the first time in my life where everything was based on my personality opposed to like my race. So yeah it was all based on personality and that was fantastic.

Oliver noted the identity shift he had from high school to college. In high school he served as a representative for all Black male students, however once he attended a historically Black college he was allowed to be seen for his individual personality characteristics. While he was still aware of his race, his relationship with Blackness and how others viewed him was modified because he moved into a predominately Black space. As participants described being one of few Black men in predominately White spaces they described the loneliness, isolation and pressure that comes with being a representative for an entire race and gender. This perception of self by others impacted how they navigate the world around them and their interactions with others.

"They Don't Know I'm a Prosecutor, I'm Just Another Nigga on a Bike.": Societal Perceptions and Representation

As noted previously, participants indicated that Black male success is often seen as an anomaly or rarity in the United States. Additionally, participants noted that regardless of status, power or wealth they will always be viewed as Black men first and are subjected to the stereotypes these social identities carry. For instance, Oliver described his interactions with police officers, "You know how they are, you know when I leave work

and I'm in the street they don't know I'm a prosecutor, I'm just another nigga on a bike. You know?" Oliver highlighted that regardless of his position (a position as a prosecutor that often works in tandem with the police), he is still subjected to the biases that are often placed on Black men in the United States. Michael spoke to a similar experience when he expressed that even though he is the director of admissions at an elite private high school, because he's a Black man, "you learn to operate—you're constantly trying to prove yourself and constantly watching your own back because you don't know who might have it." This sentiment emphasized the constant vigilance that many participants described in their professional lives because they are Black men.

Poindexter described how society perceptions perpetuated by a teacher in tenth grade affected his relationship with the United States and understanding of self:

> The teacher was going around the class and she's telling all the kids who we are— kind of describing our attributes. She gets to this White kid, this White male, red hair, she says, "you're all American." And in my mind I'm like, "I'm all American, how is he more all American than me?" I mean clearly it's because I'm a Black kid but still, "you're all American." I'll never forget that because I think I've always been in that situation where I feel like I'm very American, I love my country, I represent all American values, whatever that might be and the fact that he got all American and I didn't get all America has always stayed with me. Thinking through why I do this [pursue a doctorate in American Studies], why I do this as a Black man in that situation, I wasn't all American. So fast forward to American Studies I think it's a way to reclaim history, to claim it and

> also to promote it for our people but for everyone, and also to tell our narrative, in fun and exciting ways. To expand this fabric that makes our country so cool.

Poindexter explained how his experience in high school effected his decision to obtain a doctorate in American Studies. This experience highlighted the "double consciousness" (DuBois, 1903) experienced by many Black Americans—not being identified as fully American and struggling to fully embrace this identity. Poindexter's narrative depicted his way of pushing back against this societal perception and dedicating his career to broadening our understanding of the history of the United States that's more inclusive of narratives by people of color.

Many participants noted how societal perceptions, perpetuated by teachers, employers and governmental officials negatively impacted their lives. For instance, both Tony and Oliver described the powerful role that White privilege can play in their lives. Tony mentioned that he went to a "small liberal arts college" and he noted that his White counterparts, "they're not working very hard but they have the capital and the privilege where it's like all you need is the degree and then you can get through those networks you have to get [employment]." Oliver shared a similar experience he had in law school:

> A really good friend of mine from law school….you know I did everything, I spoke—I was one of the commencement speakers at my graduation, you know what I mean like doing—traveling to Alabama, doing civil rights work, I'm the editor of the moot court team, doing all kinds of stuff. Just to get gigs 'cause if you're Black you have to be the best, you can't be just like an average Joe because then they [White employers] don't trust you, know you what I mean? So it's made things harder in the sense that I have to do more to get the same. So I'm

> doing all this stuff—get a clerkship, get a federal clerkship in the most competitive district in the country, you know what I mean? When the clerkship's over I can't find a gig. But my buddy, he found a gig he's just a regular White dude, smart you know, really great guy, didn't do anything in school— I'm getting all these kind of awards from my law school and like a federal clerkship but I can't find a job because who the fuck knows. They'll [White counterparts] find a job at these little small firms, which pays decently, those guys don't trust me, who the fuck knows why, probably because I'm Black not because they're racist but you know I think people always say, "I just want to meet you" but it's like these sort of subconscious things that they don't know that they're doing that makes them not trust me, unless I can say, "I'm the fucking bomb," you know what I mean? So I think it makes things difficult.

Oliver described how he engaged in a variety of extracurricular activities and leadership positions in law school because of his awareness that it would be difficult to find employment as a Black male lawyer due to racial bias and discrimination. He noted his White colleague's ability to use his social capital and networks to find employment directly after law school. He also described how this type of racial bias is implicit and often subconscious but has real world consequences to his ability to be successful. As Black men living in the United States all participants are subjected to the societal perceptions placed upon them that are often negative. These perceptions have a lasting impact on their academic achievement, professional development and sense of self.

However, even with all of these challenges, several participants described an incredibly positive relationship with their Blackness. Edward stated it the most

emphatically when he said, "I love being Black! I love it, I love it, I love it. I just like being Black, it's really cool." Uniformly participants agreed that there are challenges, including often being one of few Black faces in predominately White spaces and being impacted by negative societal perceptions of Black men. But as these narratives clearly indicated, resiliency is evident and success is possible.

Constructed Dialogue

Setting: Classroom at American University in Washington, D.C during the Institute's Alumni Weekend event. This is the last study related event for all participants; previously I have met with each participant for a demographic information and informed consent related interview and each member has also participated in a small group discussion.

Participants:

Participants include myself and all the members of the study. A full list of participants can be found in the *Sample and Recruitment* section.

Erin: First I want to thank all of you for your participation in my study. It has been an honor and a gift to listen to all of your stories and journeys. To conclude the study I would like to focus on self-reflection and the future. So to begin with, let's explore this question: if you could go back and talk to your younger self, what would you tell him and why?

[Moment of silent reflection]

Poindexter: Man, that's a really tough question because I had a really hard time growing up. I would literally walk around the playground in middle school looking at other people playing together and just dreaming about what that might feel like,

what does that feel like? To have that type of acceptance, to have that type of friends? It's tough, it's tough, it's a very lonely thing. But I think that I had to experience that to be the man that I am today. To be the great friend that my friends tell me that I am. I pride myself on that because I know what it feels like. I mean I guess to answer your question, hopefully when he sees me he would smile and kind of be like proud of what the future looks like [laughs]. But I would say, "man it sucks doesn't it? I know exactly how you feel. You're in the class of all these White chicks who you really don't relate to. The chicks that say, 'oh I just went to the tanning bed, we're almost the same color' or the ones that have subliminal racist comments that you just overlook, you know what I'm sayin? Man, it's all worth it. It is all gonna be worth it."

Kyle: For me it's all about just taking more chances. That's it, take more chances and don't be so hard on myself. I tell my current self that all the time too.

Poindexter: Yeah and stop taking myself so seriously, man. I mean you ain't going to not get into college because you decide to stay one hour later at a party, you know?

Stanley: I actually think parties are really important. I think it's where you can make meaningful connections and relationships. The one thing I regretted in college is that I didn't party more. I was in my books all the time 'cause I was worried about losing my scholarship. But I think it's valuable to make those connections particularly when you're younger.

Edward: Yeah I would tell myself to relax. That's the thing that comes along with high expectations, is the pressure. And learning how to handle that is a process and I

don't think I do a terrible job at it but it'll get better. Living in the moment, enjoying it, not thinking about what's the next thing, what's the next thing. Let's enjoy this right now and make sure you're connected with the people that are right here, right now instead of just always thinking what's next, what's next, so I think that would be my advice to myself now and myself back then.

Oliver: Right, I would just tell myself to take my time. There's no rush. Just take your time in everything. And appreciate certain things. I didn't not appreciate it but I could have maybe taken a vacation here or there. I was always just like, 'alright, life's not going to stop, let's keep going,' which probably isn't healthy.

Robert: Yeah, kind of similarly, I would tell myself to study abroad. You know I would tell my younger self to be a little more selfish in the sense to think about my own experience and not just my own home life, you know? 'Cause I probably would have done a few more things like study abroad, so that's a big thing.

Tony: I don't know…. I would try to tell my younger self to stay curious. Continue to see the world as full of wonder, fight cynicism. That's one of those things you really have to cultivate.

Michael: Like what Edward was saying about relax, I would tell myself to stop worrying about making mistakes. I mean not worry so much about failure, more than anything. I think some of the worry has been really helpful getting me to where I am but at the same time you know it can put you into a bad space. So definitely be more comfortable making mistakes and not worrying so much about what other folks are thinking about and worry about your own personal development.

Stanley: Yeah I think you have to seek out the challenges. It's my personal philosophy; just don't be afraid to seek the challenge. Pick a goal and work relentlessly for that. And stop waiting for life or opportunities to come to you. I feel I've had a lot of opportunities just come to me, there's nothing wrong with that, but realizing I could have done so much more or had so many different experiences, if I would have sought the challenge from the get-go.

Josh: I just think the biggest thing is, just be who you are. As I was growing up I was so consumed with other people's thoughts of me, I still have low self-esteem but I'm just so concerned about what other people think about me and saying about me and most of the time they're not even thinking about me and then I get depressed that they're not thinking about me. So just kind of be comfortable with who you are. And try really hard to have no regrets.

Erin: So, if a young Black man came to you and said, "I want to be successful" what would you tell him and/or what advice would you give him?

Edward: Man, I would just ask him questions; I wouldn't give him any advice. I would ask him: what do you mean by "successful"? How do you define it? What's important to you?

Josh: Yeah I'm a firm believer in there's no one size fits all. So I don't think there's anything that you can say without getting their story. Everyone has his or her own story so what I tell you might not work for you like, "be yourself! Be true to you! Always trust yourself!" well maybe you already do, maybe that's not your issues. I'd really need to get to know them and then give the advice.

Stanley: So my thing is that you have to know your core values. Define what success is gonna be by determining those core values that you have and then don't let anything stop you. I mean they might change, they really might change, but for the moment just pursue that and don't be distracted by what other people put on you.

Kyle: I completely agree. Part of being successful is like setting the foundation in terms of core values that you believe in, that you'll stand up for.

Alex: One of the things I would tell this young man is you have to try to cultivate an awareness and asking yourself constantly: what is my passion?

Poindexter: Right, I think you have to have a discussion about passion. What makes you come alive?

Patrick: Passion is important but so is hard work. It's okay to play sports and do other things but make sure you hit the books, you know? I would tell him to remember: it's okay to work hard.

Alex: Sure, I completely agree. I'm a very big believer in Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule from *Outliers*; it's like being really successful at anything and even the things that I'm not good at, like I'm really bad at personal effectiveness and I'm really bad at self-care, the only way I'm good at those things is just do more of them and more often, as unpleasant as some of that might be.

Poindexter: Anything in life worth attaining is gonna take hard work and discipline and sacrifice. And you have to determine early how much you want it. And I think that the things that are really worth it, you don't mind making the sacrifice and the hard work. But when you do find it just understand that you know okay, you're on

the right track but to stay and to grow but you're going to have to work hard and have discipline.

Robert: What I look for in people is that drive. Like, do you want it bad enough? I'm looking for people that are not sensitive in the fact that they're not going to let anything get in their way. I mean you have to have that drive or it's not going to work.

Alex: I also think almost every aspect of life has a system and a code of the street or rules of engagement, norms and dynamics that are kind of their own status quo. And no matter what you want to do professionally, or in your personal life, there are operating norms and assumptions that you have to make sense of and understand those dynamics if you want to be part of trying to change the game and not simply play the game.

Michael: I agree. I think it's important to be conscientious. I think for me it comes down to doing your best to establish a level of awareness of the system or the structure that you're working within, like Alex said. So if at school— recognizing what the teacher wants from you and obviously finding your way to deliver the best that you can and not sacrificing your perspective and yourself to do it. But recognizing what's necessary for you to be successful within that structure. So under that umbrella, if that means finding someone who can be a good mentor for you—do that.

Tony: I think mentorship is incredibly important and if you can find a good mentor regardless of race or gender, hold on to those people and use those people and

stay in contact and don't be afraid to ask for advice or ask for feedback, ask for criticism.

Poindexter: Mentors and sponsors are key. Seeking out people who know more than you, who are wiser than you that can help you get to where you need to go.

Oliver: See I would tell the young man, "be okay with being black" you know? Oftentimes we're not okay with that. So we think we have to do certain things. Like I'm not good at basketball and I'm totally fine with that. You know I go snowboarding 'cause I like that. And don't define your interests based on your color 'cause then we miss out on so much.

Kyle: I would also tell him to consider the contribution he's made to others. To the extent that you become successful, try to dedicate yourself to making sure you help others become successful as well.

Poindexter: Right, you have to be about service. It can't be about you so when you do make it you gotta give back and help open doors for other guys that are coming through after you.

Oliver: It's funny because I just had a conversation about this the other day. I'm at this bar and I'm outside about to smoke a cigarette and these kids, I think they like stole Citi bikes[1]. And one's like, "yo, you got a light?" and I'm like, "yeah I got a light." It's after work, I was in a suit. And he's like, "yo" he's like 19, "what do you do?" I say, "I'm a lawyer" and he was like, "no shit! For real?!" he was like, "yo I grew up on the lower east side" or whatever, we're talkin', he's like "I don't know what I'm gonna do?" I'm like, "dude, just do whatever you want, figure it

[1] Citi Bikes are a bike sharing system in New York City.

out, if you don't know what it is, go to school, take classes" but I was like, "do whatever you can, do the best you can. There's not like—no one ever had like a roadmap that's right—just follow what's in your heart, man." He was like, "yo I appreciate that man, I gotta get outta here," I was like, "go 'head, just don't get caught with those stolen ass Citi bikes." [everyone laughs] So yeah I would just tell him: believe in yourself 'cause that's it, right?

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Connection to Extant Literature

Dimensions of Success

> You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. (Baldwin, 1993, p. 7)

I read *A Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin while in the process of analyzing data for this study and this quotation spoke directly to me and the narratives described by participants of this study. It is clear through their narratives that participants of this study have defied the expectations society had for them, as many other Black men have defied these expectations as well. This study explored how participants were able to defy these limited expectations, expectations that are often demonstrated in psychological research through the use of deficit model paradigms, such as focusing exclusively on drop out rates, violence and underachievement of Black populations (Harper, 2012; Parham, Ajamu and White, 2011). Specifically, the purpose of this study was to examine how participants conceptualized success by identifying transformative moments in participants' lives and investigating their articulation of communalism.

This study identified several key findings. Participants often expressed ambiguity towards being labeled as successful. There were three reasons typically indicated for this discomfort; being in a moment of professional transition; shifting of one's personal definition of success from professional acclaim towards personal satisfaction; and perceiving success as an end goal. Participants offered a comprehensive definition of success including western/capitalistic aspects of success (such as wealth, power and influence), communal aspects of success (including the ability to give back to others within the Black community) and personal aspects of success (such as strong, healthy relationships and personal happiness). Participants also identified several central relationships that supported their success including parents, mentors/school personnel, peers and public figures. They noted the importance of specific personality characteristics such as tenacity, hard work and self-awareness to achieve excellence as well. Participants described various events and opportunities that fostered their success including attending rigorous schools and having access to educational programs and extracurricular activities.

Participants explored the cultural value of communalism through a discussion of the various activities they participated in (such as working at soup kitchens and volunteering at homeless shelters) and their motivations behind such acts (including a focus on their ancestral past and feelings of responsibility towards future Black populations). Lastly, participants explained visibility and representation as Black men living in the United States. They discussed how they navigated primarily White spaces and how societal perceptions about Black men shape their everyday lives.

Participants described aspects of success similar to extant literature, however the current study adds a more nuanced definition of this concept. For example, McClure's (2006) study of Black men in fraternities identified job procurement, career advancement and a commitment to the Black community as indicators of success for participants. In the current study participants identified similar characteristics related to success but they also voiced that their definitions of success are shaped by their goals and values often imparted to them by their parents. Similar to Groysberg and Abrahams' (2014) findings, participants noted the subjective nature of the concept of success, which lead many participants to not feel successful as their definition of success changed alongside their shifting priorities. For example, several participants indicated that as they've gotten older they are focused more on personal success, a transition that has left many of them feeling unsuccessful in this current moment. The current study gives a much more nuanced exploration of the various definitional aspects of success than what is currently in the literature.

The current study also supports much of the extant literature on the importance of social support for Black male achievement. Specially, the participants noted the importance of parental support and encouragement in becoming successful, which has also been described in the literature (Barnett, 2004; Herndon & Moore, 2002). One surprising finding in the current study was the importance of racial socialization by parents to support participants' success. Racial socialization can include parental messages related to racial pride, possibility of racial barriers, egalitarian beliefs of the equality of all humans and negative messages about Black culture (Coard & Sellers, 2005; Hughes et al., 2006). Current research has found that racial pride, awareness of

racial barriers and egalitarian message have a significant impact on the academic achievement of adolescent Black students (Hughes et al., 2009; Neblett et al., 2006). These researchers found a positive relationship between the positive racial socialization of Black adolescents and academic achievement. However, White-Johnson (2015) conducted a study with Black college students and found no relationship between positive racial socialization and academic achievement. The author hypothesized that perhaps no relationship was found due to the lifespan development of college students who are becoming more autonomous throughout their college career. However, this current study indicated that racial socialization from parents had a reoccurring effect on the success of participants after leaving university. For example, as noted by Michael, the conversations he had with his mother about "being careful," indicating the racial barriers he might face, still directly impacts his current racial awareness and ability to be successful.

The current study supports previous research that indicated peer support as an important factor to success (Baker, 2013, Harper, 2012), however this study added that peers also push participants to critically reflect on their actions and behaviors. For example, Michael described how his friends encourage him to have stronger personal and professional boundaries, "some folks are like, 'just relax a little bit,' you know they just kind of pivot my outlook at certain times…'leave it at work, leave it at work,' but that is something that I think is a work in progress for me." Stanley expressed similar sentiments when he said, "you have to surround yourself with people that can take you out of work mode—that will contribute to your success." Participants of this study describe how support from peers goes beyond simply encouragement but also offering

critical reflection to push them forward towards healthier boundaries and continued success.

Mentoring relationships with school personnel was important for participants of this study, supporting previous research with this population (Baker, 2013; Museus, 2011). The extant literature debates the merits of formal and informal mentoring relationships and participants of the current study exclusively discussed informal mentoring relationships. For example, Stanley described visiting a trusted teacher after school for advice and Edward mentioned going to a professor's office hours leading to him applying to The Institute. While formal mentoring programs may still be important, for participants of this study informal mentors appeared to have a lasting impact on their lives.

Participants in the current study confirmed the importance of extracurricular activities and outside engagement as noted in the literature (Baker, 2008; Chavous, 2000; Chiang et al., 2004; Guiffrida, 2004). Participants explained that these activities offered opportunities for networking, exposure to new professional experiences and leadership development. Interestingly, participants seemed to confirm Guiffrida's (2004) argument for students of color's "active engagement" in student organizations (p. 91). Guiffrida identified three types of students who participate in student organizations: noninvolved, overinvolved and actively involved. The author described noninvolved students as not consistently participating in student organizations and overinvolved students as deriving success through the leadership positions held in student organizations over grades achieved. The author noted actively involved students often held leadership positions in student organizations but not at the expense of academic achievement. The author found

that noninvolved and overinvolved students typically had lower GPAs and noninvolved students felt less connected to campus than other students of color. Guiffrida also found that actively involved students typically had higher GPAs than their noninvolved and overinvolved counterparts.

While many participants described being actively involved in student organizations (including holding leadership positions), Patrick described being overly involved at his university as student president. For example, when asked what he would tell his younger self he said:

> I would definitely tell myself to study more. Definitely because there were times I would not take academia too seriously. Towards the end [of college] I was barely going to class. I mean I was present but that wasn't—I was focused on too many other things. Everything was last minute. Like if I had a paper due at 9 I would get up at 5 in the morning, type it real quick, print it out and turn it in. Like it was awful. But I would make more time for academia [chuckles].

Patrick highlighted his over-involvement as student body president of his university and how this impacted his academic achievement. Consequently, while participants deemed student engagement outside of the classroom important, there was a threshold in which involvement could negatively impact their academic success.

Two surprising findings of this study were the importance of public figures and the importance of reading in participants' lives. Participants indicated that public figures served as role models and exposed life's possibilities. Participants also noted that reading (including reading about public figures and other topics of interest) lead to increased exposure to different cultures and lives, increased positive sense of self and

understanding of Black history in the United States. These findings can best be understood within the context of communalism and the idea of Sankofa. Sankofa is Ghanaian term that is defined as, "go back and fetch it" and "return to your past," (Temple, 2010, p. 127). As Blakey (2003) wrote, "It has to do with the idea that you need to go back and search in the past, to let the past be a guide.….That you have to look backwards in order to look forwards." (para. 5). Participants in this study may be using the knowledge gained when reading books about leaders and other topics of interest to inform their present and future selves as Black men. Sankofa is a value that will also be important to the understanding of communalism, which will be discussed below.

Transformation Theory

Participants described several transformative moments in their lives including Poindexter's father visiting his school every morning to talk with his teachers, Kyle's guidance counselor discouraging him from applying to a competitive school and Josh's elementary school teacher explaining to him why she had to call on other students. These experiences followed the trajectory of transformative moments as outlined by Mezirow (2000) including a disorienting experience leading to critical reflection and modification of point of view.

Two participants, Edward and Tony, disclosed that they haven't experienced any major transformative moments in their life (at least not that they recalled). For example, when Edward was asked if there were any pivotal moments in his life that propelled him forward he stated, "no…no because success was always expected." He explained that his parents had high expectations for him since birth; consequently, there was no incident in which this perspective was altered. It is possible that Edward experienced incremental

transformations as discussed by Mezirow (1996), however they did not seem to garner such a disorienting experience that he readily remembers such events. This example of incremental change highlights the limitations of transformation theory as currently described. It is difficult to imagine that Edward and Tony have never had a transformative moment in their lives however perhaps it is the limited scope of the definition of transformation that is of concern.

One of the major limiting factors to transformation theory as it is currently described is that it does not give enough credence to the power of culture and community within transformation, as noted by Johnson-Bailey (2010):

> Transformative learning theory speaks to how adults use learning to make meaning of major life events and changes. The focus is primarily on the individual's capacity to use critical reflection and other rational processes to engage in meaning making. This way of examining meaning making largely ignores culturally bound group learning experiences. (p. 82)

Josh's experience of being in a predominately White school in which he is one of few students of color contextualizes his interaction with his elementary school teacher. Even as a young child, Josh is aware of the impact his race and gender can have on authority figures. This awareness was cultivated within him through a process of racial socialization possibly from his primary caregivers and by societal messages of what it means to be a Black male living in the United States. Consequently, these cultural elements cannot be divorced from his transformative process. While transformational learning theory continues to be a relatively good model for illustrating change, results

from this study demonstrate the need for modifications to be made to include incremental change and cultural considerations.

Communalism

The current study significantly advances our understanding of communalism and the role of giving back to the Black community. Participants describe not only the activities they participated in but also the motivations behind these activities. The temporal relevance of communalism is clear—participants often discussed how the importance of giving back was influenced by their familial past and the Black community's future. Once again, the idea of Sankofa is key. Participants explained how engaging in community advancing activities is directly influenced by the sacrifices of their ancestors. The awareness of where they come from ancestrally drove participants to help others as the process of communalism is transgenerational and cyclical. Additionally, participants add to the argument that communalism extends beyond isolated volunteerism; rather, it is an integrated part of their lives and being (Mattis, Hearn & Jager, 2002).

Future Directions

There were two topics of interest that were cursory conversations with participants and deserve further investigation. One area of interest is the intersection of race, gender, success and sexual orientation and the other concept is the romantic partnerships of successful Black men.

Two participants in the study identified as members of the LGBTQ community—one identified as gay/queer and one identified as bisexual. One of the participants indicated that he is currently not out to members of The Institute; consequently, I will be

using double anonymity (names not affiliated with their above pseudonyms) for anonymity purposes. James gives a pivotal experience as a Black gay man in which he was at a work function in which employees were split up into groups by race except for LGBTQ members who were placed all in one group (regardless of race). James explained:

> This White male [employee] said, "why didn't you come to the gay one?" and I mean I tried to be nice but I was like, "well, because if you look at me and I don't open my mouth and don't move a muscle the first thing that you see is that I'm a Black male not that I'm a gay male but that I'm a Black male" and he just could not understand that and I was like, "well I'm sorry I can't hide behind the privilege of being a White male" but more often than not what people see is Black and I'm going to assume that if you have a problem with me it probably is not because of my sexuality because I'm not going to say, "hey I'm gay" and I going to assume it's because I'm Black.

During this work activity James is faced with the forced choice between two of his social identities (being Black and being gay), which is a marginalizing experience. Then a gay employee confronts him for his actions and questions his commitment to the gay community. While James is able to explain his choice the psychological impact of this microaggression is significant. James was forced into proclaiming one community and identity over another, which can be an emotionally stressful situation.

Both James and Malcolm expressed having to manage how out they are in professional environments and how much of themselves they want to disclose to others. For example, Malcolm noted how he functions at work:

> I think the most prevailing thought is transparency and candor. So I won't say it's deception, I'm very much functionally an out person— a few of my colleagues know but not everybody. It's people for whom I've had conversations that were just in the right context to have it and I wasn't going to lie to them. But I wasn't looking to have the conversation either, if that makes sense.

James described similar navigation, "I never hid my sexuality from anyone, I may not have told you but I didn't hide it, I mean that goes from my mother and my family to my colleagues and coworkers." Both James and Malcolm make numerous decisions on a regular basis regarding how out they will be in professional spaces (such as the difference between disclosing their sexual orientation versus attending a work function with a partner). Greene (2009) described the process of coming out as a "lifelong developmental challenge" (p. 315); consequently, it will be important for future research to explore how gay Black men navigate professional and personal roles. Additionally, future research should investigate how Black gay men's social identities impact their relationship to their own success. As a gay Black man becomes more successful he may often be in increasingly White, possibly heteronormative, spaces, consequently this may impact his navigation and future success in his chosen field. It would be interesting to investigate gay Black men's experience of the rainbow ceiling in vocational settings and the intersectionality of race, gender, sexual orientation and success.

Three participants—Kyle, Poindexter and Tony—discussed how their success has impacted their interactions with Black women. Kyle explained:

> Within the context of dating, it's just sometimes I think about when people have those conversations about there not being enough Black successful men in the

> dating market, right? That really bothers me because I mean I think it's like, "oh man you're at [Ivy League school] oh you good, you got the pick of the litter, you can do whatever you want." But I hate that. I feel like I've been very blessed to have a lot of really great women friends in my life. When I graduated from [undergraduate institution] our class was super close. And we do this thing called Tribute to Black Women every year and the year that we did it was the biggest; we cooked them dinner, we served them; we had all the guys participating in a way we hadn't had before. And to see a lot of them [the women] single it's like, "dang man." It really bothers me 'cause yeah I could try to be sort of loose, sleep around with a lot of women but at the same time…I want them to be happy.

Kyle described several dynamics as a successful Black man who dates Black women. He described how the common societal perception is that he could (and probably is) dating numerous women. This may speak to both the hypersexualization stereotype of Black men (Oliver, 2006) and the implicit assumption of promiscuity of successful Black men.

> Tony described how women treat him differently because he's successful:
> I think women will treat you differently and kind of give you slack that they probably wouldn't with others. You get the whole narrative of the "Black men are endangered and therefore you should date me." Like that whole narrative plays and you can see that playing out.

Both Tony and Kyle appear to be aware that they could have intimate relationships with many women because of the cultural assumption that there are limited successful Black men. And while it is factually true that Black women outpace Black men in academic achievement and Black men are at higher risk for incarceration and unemployment

(Thomas, Barrie & Tynes, 2009), it is evident from this study that successful Black men do exist and often are not interested in "playing the field." Thomas, Barrie and Tynes (2009) noted that there is a dearth of literature on the dating patterns of Black populations. In fact the authors note that the few studies on the romantic relationships in the Black community focus on domestic violence. By solely focusing on intra-racial intimate partner violence adds to the deficit model consistently employed when studying Black populations; consequently, it is imperative that future research expands it investigation into the dating lives of Black people.

A Call to Counseling Psychology

The present study has several implications, particularly in terms of research and clinical practice for counseling psychologists. One of the foundational principles in counseling psychology is a commitment to social justice and advocacy (Speight & Vera, 2008). If we as a profession truly value this perspective then it is imperative that we invest in strengths-based research and reject the deficit model of research. I did a cursory search of *The Counseling Psychologist* and *The Journal of Counseling Psychology* in the past ten years and found 15 and 26 articles, respectively, related to Black populations. While much of this work is focused on the important concept of microagressions (see Lewis & Neville (2015) and Mercer et al. (2011) as prime examples) there is a need to explore the perseverance and resiliency of Black populations. For instance, now that we know that microaggressions negatively impact Black populations, we need to explore the coping mechanism people use to manage these incidents.

One exemplar of strengths-based, anti-deficit research is Singh and colleagues' (2013) qualitative study on the resiliency of Black female survivors of child sexual abuse.

Moreover, the *Monitor on Psychology* (DeAngelis, 2014) presented a cover article on the resiliency of Black boys, which gave a summary of relevant literature on the topic. Members of the Society of Counseling Psychology have started a blog focusing on multiculturally appropriate responses and social justice aims of counseling psychologists after the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (After Ferguson, 2015).

Additionally, the *Journal of Black Psychology* provides numerous articles on the resiliency of Black populations, such as Brown's (2008) investigation into the role of social support and racial socialization as protective factors for African American populations. However, strengths-based research on Black populations should not be solely relegated to a journal specific to Black clinicians, researchers and those who have a vested interest in the Black community. As our world becomes more diverse, it is crucial that anti-deficit research should be embarked upon in the leading journals in our field. This practice will fulfill several aims. It will articulate our social justice values, offer a more holistic perspective of what it means to be Black in the United States and combat the stereotypes that have been projected on to Black people through psychological research for decades. Counseling psychologists could research in conjunction with positive psychology researchers in these areas, as positive psychology often comes from a strengths-based perspective however they have been slow to embrace a multicultural perspective (Caldwell-Colbert, Parks, & Eshun, 2009).

Counseling psychologists must also be willing to embrace innovative qualitative methodologies to present strength-based research. Qualitative research has been noted as an important research paradigm to be utilized by counseling psychologists and has even been identified as the fifth force in psychology (Ponterotto, 2002; Ponterotto, 2005),

consequently it is imperative for counseling psychologists to stay abreast of new qualitative techniques and employ them when conducting research. In the *Methods* section of this study, I explained the primary reasons why I used two levels of analysis, additionally I used these two levels of analysis to push the field of psychology forward. The majority of qualitative psychological research I've encountered has used grounded theory, phenomenology or basic interpretative qualitative analysis. I wanted to demonstrate that a more nontraditional approach of using constructed dialogues could be just as effective in reporting data as a more traditional approach, such as thematic analysis.

Using these two approaches was also incredibly advantageous to my training as a qualitative methodologist; to me these two types of analysis are a marriage of art and science. Thematic analysis offers the structure and rules similarly found in grounded theory and other step-by-step qualitative methods. The constructed dialogues have a more abstract analytic structure and provide minimal rules allowing for increased creativity and inventiveness. Both approaches are scientifically rigorous but I found that I activated different aspects of my personality and thought-process when engaging with the two analyses; I felt my scientific self shine through when creating the thematic analysis, whereas my artistic, storytelling, creative writing self was on display in the constructed dialogues. Both live within me and I believe both types of analysis can live within the world of counseling psychology as well.

This study has implications for working with Black men in clinical settings. Currently, research is inconclusive regarding the help-seeking behaviors of Black men. For example, Lindsay and Marcell (2012) found that Black men prefer to use their social

networks, community and family members for support rather than seek out professional counseling. The men in the authors' qualitative study indicated racial and gender socialization and lack of trust in mental health professionals as reasons for not engaging in counseling. Alternatively, Ward and Besson (2012) in a qualitative study with African American men found that participants who did not hold stigma against seeking out mental health services, have sought out services and recommended services to others. Consequently, there is no consensus regarding the help-seeking behavior of Black men, however it should be noted that race, culture and other social identities play a significant role in help-seeking behavior (Ward & Besson, 2012). One participant in the current study indicated the importance of therapy in his life, while another noted the possibility of seeking out services for anxiety. It should also be noted that several participants indicated the importance of social support in their lives such as family members and friends, consequently therapists who work with Black men may want to use an ecological approach that takes into consideration the impact of social support as a protective factor (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

One important concern that Black men, such as the men in the current study, may bring to therapy is coping with high visibility and tokenism. Wingfield and Wingfield (2014) conducted a qualitative study of professional Black men (i.e. lawyers, doctors and engineers) in predominately White work environments. The negative and positive impacts of hypervisibility and tokenism were highlighted. For example, participants noted feeling a sense of pride for showcasing how their hard work has led to their success and are able to be positive representatives of Black men for others in the Black community. These positive sentiments were demonstrated in the current study by

Edward who indicated being able to "underpromise and overdeliver" at work. He indicated pride in being able to break that stereotype of Black men "not being worth a damn."

However, Wingfield and Wingfield (2014) also described the drawbacks of tokenism and hypervisibility in predominately White work environments. Participants in their study indicated having a "smaller margin of error" (p. 4) to make mistakes. Participants noted that if they make a mistake at work they aren't able to recover their reputation in the same manner that their White counterparts can. Michael in the current study described similar sentiments. As note above, Michael disclosed often waking up an hour before his alarm goes off due to anxiety around job performance, competence and not knowing "who has my back." This level of anxiety related to perfectionism, tokenism and hypervisibility experienced by many participants in this study might need to be explored with successful Black men in a therapeutic setting. Maladaptive behaviors would have to be explored as they relate to being a Black man working in a predominately White space and how systems of oppression and discrimination may impact this aspect of his life.

Additionally, the currently study has implications for Black men who feel a connection to the Black community and are in therapy. It may be important for Black male clients who hold communal values to have access to others within the Black community that they can serve. Beyond the actual events of service, it will be important to process with Black male clients how a connection with others within the Black community affects their individual mental health. Moreover, an exploration of the motivations behind service will be important, as their motivations can highlight the

protective factor that communalism can have in their lives. In a meta-analysis regarding Black men who seek mental health services, kinship was noted as an important factor in their lives (Watkins, Walker, & Griffith, 2010), consequently continued connection to the Black community via service may positively impact their psychological health.

Final Thoughts

In the *Monitor on Psychology* (DeAngelis, 2014) article on the resiliency of Black boys Dr. Howard Stevenson, a social psychologist who trains teachers on supporting Black boys in the classroom, explained his work, "Our work is based on an African proverb that the lion's story will never be known as long as the hunter is the one to tell it. Part of our job is to help the boys tell their story and not follow someone else's script about them" (p. 52). I have approached this study in a same manner; I see myself as a conduit for my participants' who clearly refused to follow the scripts that have been assigned to them by society. Incidentally, this project has served as a transformative experience for me and for many of participants, in the Johnson-Bailey (2010) definition of the word as a "powerful tool for individual and community empowerment" (p. 81). Throughout member checks, participants commented on the honor and pride that they felt being part of this project. Throughout this project I felt honored and pride to hear their stories. And ultimately their stories serve to empower the entire Black community for generations to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Listserv Email

Greetings,

My name is Erin Unkefer, and I am a doctoral student studying counseling psychology at the University of Georgia. (I also went to undergrad at Michigan State with your colleague Christien Oliver—GO GREEN!). My dissertation research (University of Georgia Institutional Review Board Approval #581), under the advisement of Dr. Edward Delgado-Romero, is investigating the experiences of successful, high-achieving Black males—and I couldn't imagine a more perfect group of men to embark on this journey with! I will be attending your Alumni Weekend event (I will be in the Washington D.C. area July 3rd through 8th) and I would like to invite you to participate in my study. The criteria to participate in my study include:

- Self-identifying as a Black/African American/person of African descent male
- Graduated from an undergraduate institution before August 2011

The selected participants will participate in an interview with me where we discuss your experiences as a successful Black man. The interview will typically last between 60 to 90 minutes. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time, and those who are chosen to participate will receive a $25 gift card for their time.

If you are interested in participating, please fill out the following brief (5-10 minute) pre-screening survey here: https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_3z3BssAhHD3t8mp. **Please make sure to complete the survey by Monday, June 23rd at 11:59pm.** This survey will help me determine if you meet the requirements of the study. Once you have completed the survey, you will receive an email from me with additional information by June 26th.

I thank you in advance for your willingness to help with my dissertation research process. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at enu@uga.edu.

Regards,

Erin Unkefer, Ed.M.

Appendix B

Pre-screening Information

Pre-screening Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
PRE-SCREENING CONSENT FORM
SUCCESS, TRANSFORMATION, AND SERVICE: A CRITICAL RACE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESSFUL POST-COLLEGIATE BLACK MEN

Researcher's Statement
I am asking you to take part in a pre-screening for a research study. Before you decide to participate in this pre-screening, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you information about the pre-screening and study so you can decide whether you want to complete the pre-screening or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please email the researcher (Erin Unkefer, enu@uga.edu) if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: *Edward Delgado-Romero, Ph.D.*
Counseling and Human Development Services
706-542-1812; edelgado@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of high achieving, successful Black men who have completed at least an undergraduate degree.

Pre-screening Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to …
- Complete a 5 to 10 minute pre-screening demographic questionnaire

Risks and discomforts
- No risk is expected from participating in this pre-screening.

Benefits
- There are not direct benefits from participating in this pre-screening but if you are chosen to participate in the study your participation will help the psychological community have a better understanding of the experiences of successful Black men.

Incentives for participation
There is no incentive for participation in this pre-screening.

Privacy/Confidentiality

The data collected from this pre-screening will be used to determine your eligible for the study. The data collected from this survey will be maintained on a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the co-investigator (Erin Unkefer, Ed.M.). All information that can be used to identify you will be not be including in the study and will erased from the research record after data collection has been completed. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the pre-screening to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Taking part is voluntary
Your involvement in the pre-screening is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the pre-screening, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be erased.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Erin Unkefer, a graduate student at the University of Georgia. If you have questions, you may contact Erin Unkefer at enu@uga.edu or at 505-412-0037. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this pre-screening, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must click on the box below. Clicking the box indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation study! Please complete the following demographic information to determine if you are a good fit for this study. Please note that if there is a high demand for participation, not all eligible participants will be selected to participate in the study.

Pre-screening Questionnaire

1. What is your race?
    1. Black/Person of African descent/African American
    2. White
    3. Biracial/Multiracial
    4. Asian
    5. Latino/Hispanic
    6. Other [fill in the blank]

2. What is your sex:
    1. Male
    2. Female
    3. Other [fill in the blank]

3. Enter your current age (in years):

4. Have you graduated from an undergraduate institution?
    1. Yes
    2. No

4a. Enter what year you graduated from an undergraduate institution

5. Enter the name of the undergraduate institution you attended.

6. Were you a first generation undergraduate college student (i.e., neither of your parents/primary caregivers went to college/university)?
    1. Yes
    2. No

7. Have you attended graduate/professional school (law school, MBA, doctoral program, etc.)?
    1. Yes
    2. No

8. What is your current occupational title (student, teacher, mechanic, business owner, etc.)

9. What was your social economic status growing up?
    1. Upper class
    2. Upper middle class
    3. Lower middle class
    4. Working class
    5. Lower class/poverty

10. What is your current social economic status?
    1. Upper class
    2. Upper middle class
    3. Lower middle class
    4. Working class
    5. Lower class/poverty

11. What generation best applies to you?
    1. I was born outside the U.S. (1st generation)
    2. I was born in the U.S.; My mother or father was born outside of the U.S. (2nd generation)
    3. My parents and I were born in the U.S.; All grandparents born outside of the U.S. (third generation)
    4. My parents and I were all born in the U.S.; At least one grandmother or grandfather was born outside of the U.S. with remainder born in the U.S. (third

generation)

5. All my grandparents, both my parents, and I were born in the U.S. (4th generation)

6. Don't know what generation best fits since I lack some information.

12. Are you affiliated with a fraternity within the National Pan-Hellenic Council (Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma, Iota Phi Theta)?

1. Yes
2. No
3. No, but I am affiliated with different fraternity

13. Please enter your email address, so I can contact you about participation in this study.

14. After data from this study is analyzed, would you be willing to be contacted for a 15-20 minute follow up telephone interview?

1. Yes
2. No

Appendix C

Post-Prescreening email scripts

Non-Eligible Participants

Greetings,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study! Unfortunately, you do not fit the criteria needed to participate in my study because [include exclusion criteria here, such as graduated after August 2011].

However, I thank you for your interest and hope you have a great day.

Regards,
Erin Unkefer, Ed.M.

All Eligible Participants

Greetings,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study! As noted in the survey if there is a high demand for participation, not all eligible participants will be selected to participate in the study. However, I will contact you either way no later than **Wednesday, June 25, 2014**.

If you have any questions or concerns please let me know and thank you again for your interest!

Regards,
Erin Unkefer, Ed.M.

Selected Participant (10-15 people)

Greetings,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study! I would like to set an interview time with you. I will be in Washington D.C. July 2nd through 8th and would be happy to meet with you on a date of your choosing. The interview should take between 60-90 minutes and can be conducted at American University during the Alumni Weekend event (I have access to a private classroom) or an alternative location before or after the event. I am trying to prioritize people who are traveling to the DMV area for a limited time, so PLEASE let me know if you're local or not.

I know the agenda for the Alumni Weekend is still being solidified, which can make scheduling difficult; however, if you could give me some tentative dates and times that

work best for you by **Monday, June 30th at 11:59pm** that would be greatly appreciated.

I look forward to speaking to you soon and thanks again for agreeing to participate in my study!

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Regards,
Erin Unkefer, Ed.M.

Not Selected Participant

Greetings,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study! Unfortunately, due to a high level of interest in participation, I will not be able to interview you for my study. I truly appreciate you taking the time to complete the pre-screening survey and I hope I will have the opportunity to meet you during the Alumni Weekend event.

Thank you again for your interest.

Regards,
Erin Unkefer, Ed.M.

Appendix D

Informed Consent

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
SUCCESS, TRANSFORMATION, AND SERVICE: A CRITICAL RACE INQUIRY INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESSFUL POST-COLLEGIATE BLACK MEN

Researcher's Statement
I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: *Edward Delgado-Romero, Ph.D.*
Counseling and Human Development Services
706-542-1812; edelgado@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of high achieving, successful Black men who have completed at least an undergraduate degree.

Study Procedures
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to …

- Participate in an interview that will last two hours or less, which will be audiotaped.
- Answer questions and discuss experiences about being high achieving and successful.
- If you choose, the investigator will follow up with you after the data from this study has been analyzed to discuss the accuracy of the portrayal of the experiences you described during the interview.

Risks and discomforts

- No risk is expected from participating in this study, but you may experience some discomfort or stress sharing your experiences in becoming successful. To minimize these risks, mental health referral sources are available on the provided resources sheet.

Benefits

- There are not direct benefits from participating in this study but your participation may help others in the future. Your participation in this study will help the

psychological community have a better understanding of the experiences of successful Black men.

Incentives for participation
You will receive a $25 gift card for your participation in the study. Even if you decide not to complete the study or ask that your information be withheld, you will still receive the monetary gift.

Audio/Video Recording
Audio recording will be used to create transcriptions. Once transcripts are created, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

Privacy/Confidentiality
Pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy during this study. Electronic information, including digital voice recordings, transcripts, and personal notes will be maintained on a password-protected computer and will only be accessible by the co-investigator (Erin Unkefer, Ed.M.). All information that can be used to identify you will be removed from the research record after data collection has been completed. Digital recordings will be erased after the transcription is created. Researchers will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Taking part is voluntary
Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Erin Unkefer, a graduate student at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Erin Unkefer at enu@uga.edu or at 505-412-0037. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu.

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Appendix E

Mental Health Referral Information

Referral Services

The American Psychological Association (APA) provides an online Psychology Help Center featuring information related to psychological issues affecting your physical and emotional well-being. It includes information on stress, managed care and mental health, and relationship wellness.

This site also provides a psychologist locator making it easy to find a practicing psychologist in your local area. Psychologists support people through difficulties and can improve clients' physical and mental health. The locator allows for areas of specialization such as gender, insurance accepted, languages spoken and other considerations. If you would like assistance finding a psychologist that will fit your needs, I am happy to help you as well.

The APA Psychology Help Center can be found at:
http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/index.aspx

The APA Psychologist Locator can be found at: http://locator.apa.org/

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

[Informed Consent]
[Resources]
[Incentive]

OPENING STATEMENT

I am interested in the journeys of high-achieving, successful Black males and I would like to ask you some questions about your life experiences. Although I will be asking questions and seeking answers from you, I want you to feel free to take your time in answering the questions and feel free to refuse to answer any questions. My intention is to learn about your story. I have always loved to listen to others stories and it is my hope that this interview will be fun.

Pseudonym _____

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your current profession and the way you came to choose this profession.
2. What makes you a successful _____.
3. What does the word "successful" mean to you?

[NOW I WANT TO ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR LIFE HISTORY]

4. What events or people shaped you?
5. What events or opportunities helped you become successful?
6. What obstacles hindered you?
7. What challenges have you overcome?
8. What challenges were difficult to overcome?
9. How has your success affected your personal relationships?
10. How has being a Black man affected your ability to be successful?

11. Identify one important/pivotal moment that changed everything.

    [NOW I WANT TO ASK YOU SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR LIFE CURRENTLY AS A SUCCESSFUL _____]

12. How has your success affected your life choices?
13. Can you describe the community or communities you feel you most relate to or belong to?
14. In what way, if at all, do you feel you are in service to one of the communities you have described?

[NOW I'M GOING TO ASK YOU TWO REFLECTION QUESTIONS]

15. Looking back, what would you tell your younger self?
16. If a young Black man came to you for advice on how he could be successful, what would you tell him?

CLOSING STATEMENT

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. I've asked you a lot of questions, now it's your turn to ask questions of me: what would you like to discuss that hasn't been covered so far? What do you think is important for me to know about your story that I didn't ask about?

[Additional background information]