

Critical Race Theory As An Analytical Tool: African American Male Success In Doctoral Education

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ABSTRACT

While access to higher education for racial and ethnic minorities improved over the last half of the 20th century, the percentage of these populations obtaining terminal degrees does not approach their respective percentage of society at large. By interviewing five African American males who completed a doctoral program at a Majority White Institution (MWI), this study seeks to identify some consistent themes among successful graduates. Using Critical Race Theory as an analytical framework, meaning is constructed in an effort to provide insight into those traits, practices and situations that contributed to the success of the participants in the study.

Keywords: Access, retention, graduate students, graduate school, African American males, black students, blacks in graduate school, academic achievement, obstacles to success, academic advising, white colleges and black students, critical race theory, qualitative research, faculty and students, campus environment, college enrollment of African Americans, diversity, race

INTRODUCTION

Change in access to higher education across gender, race and ethnicity is readily obvious when today's student population is compared to university populations of fifty years past. In 2002, more African Americans were enrolled in degree-granting graduate schools than ever before. Blacks constituted 8.4 percent of the total enrollments in U.S. graduate schools; 170,241 of 1,850,000 individuals (National Opinion Research Center, 2006). However, only 29.5 percent of the 170,241 of them were Black men. For the year 2002, Black men comprised 2.7 percent of the total graduate school enrollment, or 50,221 of 1,850,000 graduate students.

However encouraging this may be, it is only by comparison to a bleak history that movement toward a more equitable society might be claimed. The purpose of this study is to expand on our understanding of African American success in graduate education by allowing the participants - African American males who have achieved academic success - an opportunity to chronicle their lives as they pursued their educational goal of a terminal degree. A depository of narratives not only augments history, but creates the basis of the story. Such stories, counter to the prevailing culture, have the power to begin the process of dispelling the beliefs, norms, and standards that perpetuate the tolerance of unjust conditions.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTEXT OF GRADUATE EDUCATION

One of the challenges of investigating phenomena that is constrained by definition is that the necessary review of literature must be cobbled together from various sources, none of which address the specifics of the current study. Most of the scholarship on African American males in the academy addressed undergraduate students. There was a large amount of information on graduate students, but little was found that specifically addressed African American male doctoral students and terminal degree completers in MWIs.

African Americans in Higher Education

African American doctoral students have been the focus of some recent studies in higher education. These studies could be organized into four broad thematic groups: (1) persistence/attrition/retention (Cuyjet, 2006; Bingman, 2003; Ford, 1996; Johnson, 2001; Johnson, 2004; King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Patitu, 1999; Patterson-Stewart, Ritchie, & Sanders, 1997; Rowser, 1997); (2) campus environment and mentoring (Harper & Patton, 2007; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Jones, 2002); (3) social support, (Williams, 2002; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993); and, (4) strategies for overcoming barriers to success (Bagley & Copeland, 1994; Johnson, 1993; Taylor & Anthony, 2000).

A large gap exists between Blacks and Whites in terms of graduation rates. The overall rate for Blacks is 38.2 percent and for Whites, 57.2 percent (“News and Views: Degree,” 2005). Graduation rates were calculated from the year 1996 and measured first-time freshmen that graduated within six years. However, a closer look at the statistics shows that Blacks are able to achieve near the overall average for Whites within certain institutional settings. African Americans tend to do well at the large research institutions and at liberal arts colleges, 51.3 percent and 54.3 percent respectively. Impacting the overall graduation rate through reduction, African Americans tend to do poorly at baccalaureate colleges and proprietary institutions offering two-year and four-year degrees, at only 18.3 percent.

African American males’ perceptions regarding their higher educational experiences form the basis of current research in the area of African American males in higher education. In relation to social support, however, many African American males accredited their success to a strong network of family, friends, mentors, instructors, religion, and fellow African American students (Johnson, 2004). In a study of African American graduate students, Adams (1999) revealed that students had a sense of self-efficacy, determination, exposure to motivating and stimulating educational environments beginning in childhood with parental involvement and reliance on spirituality in times of discouragement.

Gender Differences among African Americans

In looking at graduation rates, Carter & Wilson (1993) showed that the rate for African American women graduating from college was nearly 43.9% and the rate for African American men was around 33.8%. This is consistent with research by Anshel & Sailes (1990) and Schwartz & Washington (2002) that assert that African American males tend to have more persistent problems than African American females. In a similar vein that looked at African Americans attending MWIs, Fleming (1984) showed that African American women generally had higher grade point averages and higher graduation rates than their African American male counterparts.

By 2002, of all African Americans in higher education, the percentage of males was only 34.3 and the percentage of males awarded doctoral degrees was 29.5, suggesting that the gender gap is not becoming any less dramatic (“Graduate school enrollment,” 2005; “The striking progress,” 2001). Data reported in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* observed current degree recipients are almost equally men and women. However, a huge gender gap is occurring between African American men and women in U.S. graduate schools: African American males comprise only one-third of all doctoral students. Some have speculated on the enormous impact an educational imbalance will create economically, politically, socially, and personally within the African American community and the nation as a whole (“News and Views: Degree,” 2005).

African Americans in Graduate Schools

In 2001, the number of African Americans receiving doctoral degrees declined with few degrees in the sciences and the majority of degrees awarded in education (The number of Blacks, 2002). While the number of Black doctoral recipients has increased by 110 percent over the decades since 1985, the percent was still lower than the overall Black population percentage of the U.S. (“The striking progress,” 2001).

While more doctorates are being awarded to African Americans, there is a great disparity in the fields the degrees represent. In 2003, of the 1,742 degrees conferred on African Americans, 43.5 percent were in the field of

education, 5.4 percent in the physical sciences, 4 percent in engineering, and zero percent in 52 of the specialized science fields (“News and Views: Good News! A record,” 2005). Other indicators of doctoral progress show deficiencies for African Americans. While the average age of doctoral recipients was 33.9 for all Americans, African Americans were 37.4 (“News and Views: Good News! A record,” 2005). While 17 percent of all Americans were teaching assistants, only 8 percent of African Americans were. While the average time to complete the doctorate for all Americans was 10.1 years, the average for African Americans was 12.7 years (“News and Views: Good News! A record,” 2005). In almost every case of measure, Blacks are lagging behind other Americans.

Faculty Mentors and Models

Another critical trend is the lack of African American faculty in U.S. colleges and universities and the available pool of graduate students (Rikuda, 2004). Considering that only half of the small pool of graduate students plan careers in academia, there is little room to expand the number of African American faculty (“News and Views: Good News! A record,” 2005).

Even though data demonstrates that more African Americans are earning doctorates, there has not been a corresponding trend in hiring African Americans as they come into the academic job market; many are going into industry, foundations, and academic counseling (Hamilton, 2001). Academic communities can have their allure; however, such communities tend to be small for African Americans at institutions other than Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Hamilton, 2001).

Although more African Americans were enrolled in degree-granting graduate schools than ever before, Blacks have remained behind other groups. In the U.S., 8.4 percent of black students are enrolled in graduate schools - 170,241 Black graduate students in 2002 (National, 1997). African Americans make up a small number and percentage of the doctorates earned in the United States (Isaac, 1998 National Opinion Research Center, 1999; Willie, C., Grady, M. & Hope, O., 1991). The overall number of African Americans awarded the doctoral degree spiked in 1977 (Ford, 1996), but decreased by 22% overall, and by 47% among African American males between 1978 and 1988.

The number of African Americans completing doctorates at HBCUs is increasing (St. John, 2000). Officials at HBCUs contend that strong faculty with an emphasis on mentoring and teaching with greater student-professor contacts has been attracting more students, both Black and White (St. John, 2000).

African Americans in Majority White Institutions

The literature associated with African American males with terminal degrees from Majority White Institutions was found in bits and pieces among studies on persistence (Patterson-Stewart, 1995; Patterson-Stewart, Ritchie, & Sanders 1997; King, 2004); retention (Patitu, 1999; Rowser, 1997); and, stress and coping mechanisms (Damush, Hays & DiMatteo, 1997; Taylor & Anthony, 2000, Bagley & Copeland, 1994, Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson & Pisecco, 2002).

Few would argue that both African American males and females attending MWIs are faced with a multiplicity of related issues. However, research completed by Anderson (2005) hypothesizes that the two groups may address the same obstacles, but with different responses. Unique obstacles exist that influence their experiences in these environments in differing ways (Johnson, 2004). This contention, according to Anderson (2005) and Hubbard (2002), can be supported via a consideration of sociological influences, such as race, culture, and class.

One of the more prominent features investigated by researchers involves the role of the campus environment on student success. Williams (2002) reported that African American doctoral students who attend MWIs have more negative perceptions of the campus social environment than their White counterparts. Similarly, according to Johnson (2004), African American males’ perceptions of the climate of predominantly White colleges and universities was primarily negative.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Description

Critical Race Theory (CRT) refers to a framework used to examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly shape social structures, practices and discourses (Yosso, 2006, p. 4). Indeed, concepts of a social construction for the reality of race discrimination are ever-present in the writings of Critical Race Theorists such as Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and William Tate, as well as CRT pioneers W.E.B. DuBois and Max Weber (Delgado, 1995).

With roots extending well into the Black experience of the 19th and 20th centuries, CRT emerged in the mid-1970s in the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman as a response to what the originators viewed as a standstill in racial reform. Bell, an African American, and Freeman, who was White, felt that that the Civil Rights Movement had stalled and that many of its gains of the 1960s were digressing. Others joined Bell and Freeman in believing that new techniques and methodologies were needed to combat a more subtle, covert type of racism.

Examining many economic, social, and political aspects of racial issues from a legal standpoint, Bell challenged both the dominant liberal and conservative positions on civil rights, race and the law, using arguments in his analyses of racial patterns in American law. Bell posited that Whites will often promote racial progress for African Americans as long as it maintains and advances the self-interests of Whites, and Whites will not support civil rights policies that threaten White social status (Bell, 1993).

Consistent with most theories, CRT makes numerous fundamental assumptions. A key, underlying belief of CRT is that racism is a normal and common occurrence in American society. “Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture” (Delgado, 1995, p xiv). Given this *a priori* belief, equal opportunity laws and rules that claim to treat both Whites and African Americans equal are seen to only address the most overt and excessive cases of racial discrimination; official egalitarianism decrees do nothing to ameliorate the day-to-day acts of racism that result in much anguish, isolation, and desolation. Consistent with this is the belief that Whites only tolerate or encourage racial advancement when they (Whites) stand to gain or have some self-interests to promote.

We think that it is critical to note that this is not intended to suggest that the majority of Whites are organized with a goal of subjugating the African American population of our country. There are individuals that aspire to that end; however, most of the unequal structures in contemporary society might be more appropriately attributed to apathy rather than malice.

Given the multi-disciplinary origins of CRT, it is a useful framework for a higher educational study due in large part to Richard Delgado’s work regarding the conceptual framework used by people of color. Delgado (1995) contended that Blacks speak from an experience framed by racism; that the stories of persons of color come from a different frame of reference. A different frame of reference provides a unique conceptual understanding that gives voice to an experience dissimilar from the dominant culture and deserves to be heard (Delgado, 1995). The application of CRT to research in education has increased since the 1990’s. For example, Tate (1996) employed Crenshaw’s expansive and restrictive view in evaluating certain educational policies.

Since Critical Race Theory is a development of African American thought, post Civil War, the majority of CRT resources contain only American references. Legal scholars such as Bell, Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw have challenged the philosophical, traditional, liberal civil rights stance of a colorblind approach to social justice. The historical origins of CRT provide a contextual understanding for contemporary debates, research, and analysis concerning the effectiveness of past civil rights strategies and racial solutions in the current climate. It has been the conclusion of these scholars that the restrictive interpretation of anti-discrimination laws has inhibited African American students.

Rooted in Postmodern Thought

Postmodern theorists claim that it is impossible to establish a foundation on objective knowledge. Saalman (2006) posits that one cannot objectively understand reality because all knowledge is contingent on social convention. Those theorists who advocate postmodernism further argue that principles of law do not reflect universal truths but represent the culture of the dominant group in society. That is to say that the goal is to seek what is in the best interest of the dominant group rather than the group that suffered from injustices (Donner, 2005).

The postmodernism philosophy rejects the belief in universality and asserts that experience is personal, while also promoting an antiscientific path for the acquisition of knowledge. Habermas (1971) supported this philosophy by expounding that the prevalent paradigm in science was not reflective of people's reality and that defining reality through the use of experiments or observations usually resulted in cognitive dissonance and blindness. This mind-set fosters a tendency toward objectivism, which ultimately conceals the transcendental basis of facts and meanings of experience and action (McCarthy, 1978).

From a postmodern view, meaning and interpretation in legal situations is most always uncertain and arbitrary because the traditional manner of enforcing the law is not deemed effective; it does not embrace the culture of individuals and the social implications surrounding them. For example, language means different things to different cultures. The legal system has specific definitions for terms that individuals in some cultures may not fully understand even though they are governed by them. In this state of affairs objectivity cannot exist. This illustrates that the past paradigm of objectivity is not reliable or relative to the people which it affects.

Kimberlé Crenshaw argued that little difference existed between conservative and liberal discourse on race-related law and policy; she identified two distinct properties in anti-discrimination law: expansive and restrictive properties. The former stresses equality as an outcome relying on the courts to eliminate effects of racism, while the latter treats equality as a process (Crenshaw, 1988). Crenshaw argued that both the expansive and restrictive properties coexist in the anti-discrimination law. The implication of the Crenshaw argument is that the failure of the restrictive property to address or correct the racial injustices of the past simply perpetuates the status quo. As further illustration, the United States legal system is based on a set of expressed and implied duties that separate actions into categories of right and wrong or legal and illegal. These principles have traditionally operated under a system of objective, neutral decision-making which have proved insufficient when attempting to view the system holistically.

Elements of Critical Race Theory

In illustrating key tenets of CRT, Howard-Hamilton (1997) reports that “methods used to awaken the consciousness of disadvantaged groups are exposure to microaggressions, creation of counterstories, and development of counterspaces” (p. 23). Clearly this does not suggest that there is some structured method of exposing the individual to these practices. Life in a racist society has already done exactly that.

This may be better understood as empowerment through the naming of a situation, condition or practice, which is ignored by dominant social groups. This process of defining provides an avenue for individuals to discuss common lived experiences and oppose those incidents that might otherwise marginalize individuals or otherwise limit their participation in society. Furthermore, it can provide a framework that will allow insight into the social dynamic for members of the dominant group. The following paragraphs will briefly discuss the elements mentioned by Howard-Hamilton.

Microaggressions--Microaggressions are a type of subtle abuse aimed at minorities that can be visual, verbal, nonverbal, conscious or unconscious (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006). Although, this type of racism impacts the lives of African Americans and other minorities, little is actually known about microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Most theorists believe that it is not a particular incidence of microaggression that forms a marginalizing environment, but that the impact emerges from the accumulation of unintentionally demeaning acts and comments across many years.

Examples of microaggressions occur in situations in which Whites, when discussing the topic of African Americans with another African Americans will utter phrases such as, “You are not like other Blacks,” or, “I sometimes forget that you are Black,” or, “you [Black] don’t act like them [Blacks].” Whites are able to speak in this fashion “because cognitive habit, history, and culture [have made them] unable to hear the range of relevant voices and grapple with what reasonably might be said in the voice of discrimination’s victims” (Davis, 1989, p. 1576). Pierce (1974) maintained that African Americans and students in general should be trained to recognize instances of microaggression in order to take proper action at the beginning of any relationship.

Counterstories—Counterstories can be archives, testimonies, or discussions that marginalized groups use to respond to stories previously espoused by the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). They serve to cast doubt on existing myths and ideas of the dominant culture (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). The primary function is to highlight hegemonic inconsistency, thereby allowing non-dominant groups to expand the range of explanatory options.

Counterstories were born out of necessity. They were created as a means of conveying stories of experiences that have not been told, as well as a way to assess and counter dominant stories. These narratives are not fictional storytelling that discuss make-believe characters and events, but rather are grounded in real life experiences and empirical data, and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36).

Counterstorytelling helps to undo ethnocentrism and the “dysconscious conviction of viewing the world in one way” (Delgado, Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 172). By listening to counterstories, Whites are afforded an opportunity to see that which the dominant society would never see. Equally important, counterstories offer disenfranchised groups a forum to fully self express their injustices in a way that the mainstream may comprehend (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Delgado (2000) posits that for years, stories have been told by members of a loosely described “outgroup.” These outgroups represent a voice and a consciousness that have long been suppressed by a mainstream society, or the “ingroup.” “The cohesiveness that stories bring is part of the strength of the outgroup” (Delgado, 2000, p. 60). An outgroup creates its own stories which circulate within the group as a type of counter-reality. Ingroup stories are also known as “majoritarian” stories.

Storytelling is characteristic of both minorities and non-minorities. A counterstory recounts experiences of racism and resistance from the perspectives of those on society’s margins (Yosso, 2006). A common majoritarian story is an explanation of inequality between Blacks and Whites as being due, at least in part, to a misplaced value system. A counterstory of the Black outgroup could be that the laws and lawmakers who govern society are developed independent of experiential knowledge that many Blacks are not given opportunities comparable to the more privileged groups in society .

Drawing from the experience of people of color to create social justice epistemologies (Lynn & Adams, 2002), CRT seeks to answer questions regarding racism congenital in educational procedures and practices in the U.S. Storytelling is a tool used to counteract narratives dispelled by majoritarian groups. Counterstories contradict the beliefs, norms, and standards that perpetuate racism. The stories of people of color are emphasized at the nucleus of analysis. Hence, CRT is ideal for exploring racial inequality in society and in education. Although similar in many aspects, conventional scholarship and storytelling differ in some crucial areas. As addressed by Daniel Farber and Suzanna Sherry (1995):

First, the storytellers view narratives as central to scholarship, while de-emphasizing conventional analytic measures. Second, they particularly value ‘stories from the bottom’-stories from women and people of color about their oppression. Third, they are less concerned than conventional scholars about whether stories are either typical or descriptively accurate, and they place more emphasis on the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of narration (p. 283).

In illustrating stories and counterstories as they relate to education (Yosso, 2006, p.4), it is found that social scientists offer at least two types of stories to explain unequal educational outcomes - majoritarian stories and

counterstories. Furthermore, “a majoritarian story implicitly begins from the assumption that all students enjoy access to the same educational opportunities and conditions from elementary through postsecondary school (Yosso, 2006, p.4), a counterstory, on the other hand, begins with an understanding that inadequate educational conditions limit equal access and opportunities.”

Counterspaces—Counterspaces are also referred to as safe spaces and safe places. Safe spaces are venues that marginalized groups use to express their counterstories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). While minority cultures have traditions of resistance, they also inherited the tradition of accommodation, a legacy from the dominate culture. This often causes an internal conflict within the individual who is living with the dominate culture, especially within contact zones where different communities commingle. "Safe places" those social and academic spaces where minority groups can be communities of shared understanding, become essential to the emotional and mental survival the of minority race members. African American students become adept at using safe houses to resolve the complexities of their lives (Canagarajah, 1997). In the study, the academy was presented as a place where African Americans' identity is threatened, acting and writing "White" is expected, and the struggle to succeed is intensified. Safe houses provide another way "in which subordinate groups negotiate power in intercultural communication" (Canagarajah, 1997, p. 173).

METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological approach was chosen in an attempt to understand the empirical matters from the perspective of those being studied (Creswell, 1998). It utilized an exploratory design to determine the existence of life events among the respondents and contrast them with other studies. Data for this study were drawn from in-depth, unstructured interviews that focused on active listening and open-ended questions.

Eaton (2006, p. 9) describes phenomenology as the conscious experience of everyday life and the description of things as an individual experiences them. Eaton (2006) further explains phenomenology as the meaning that individuals report to believe, decide, evaluate, feel, judge, perceive, remember, and physically experience. In the study of phenomena, the focus is on the meaning it possesses for the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Schwandt, 2001).

The study employed unstructured interviews. Initial questions facilitated the scope of the research, however the researcher had the flexibility to guide the conversation in any direction that the conversation took while addressing the theme. This type of interview allowed for a broad, in-depth look at the richness of the subject being addressed.

The reliability of data were assessed through a variety of means. Triangulation was computed via interrater reliability by allowing another researcher (also a terminal degree recipient not directly associated with any of the participants) to read the completed transcript of each of the interviewees and compare the coding of the principal investigator. Interrater reliability is a measure of consistency of judgment among multiple observers (Boyatzis, 1998). Equally important to reliability of data are reviewing each taped interview numerous times. By repeatedly listening to the interviews, (Holloway, 1997; Hycner, 1999), the researcher was able to become more acquainted with the words, enabling the researcher to develop a holistic sense or “gestalt.” As a means of adding credibility of the study, each respondent “member checked” and confirmed by reading a completed transcript of their interview. Triangulation was again computed via interrater reliability.

The researcher had participants “member check” the information they had provided. By allowing the participants to review the researcher’s precision and fullness, new data can be produced and valuable insight can be obtained (Gall, M. D, Borg, & Gall, J. P., 2003). This afforded each participant an opportunity to check data for accuracy and clarify or correct any misinformation. Throughout the study, another terminal degree recipient acted as an outsider to confirm accuracy and precision.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this study were purposefully selected. Purposeful sampling is a method commonly used in qualitative research. The selection plan must be unmistakably defensible and rational (Garlough, 2004). In a qualitative study, the goal in selecting participants is not a random sample (Strauss, 1987), but a knowledge-rich sample that can illuminate the deeper structure of the research question.

Each participant completed their terminal degree program within five years of the date of the study. The four qualifying prerequisites for taking part in the study were identifying as an African American male, volunteering for the study, agreeing to participate without compensation, and obtaining a Ph.D. in Higher Education from a MWI.

Coach completed his program at a major urban research university with a campus enrollment of over twenty-three thousand students, undergraduate through post graduate. This institution has a graduate student enrollment of approximately 2,200 students with 171 of those being African American males. He earned his degree in Educational Administration and currently works for a public school system.

Polo and **Tre** graduated from the same university, a doctoral-research institution with a main campus enrollment of 26,994 and a continuing education enrollment of 2,840. In 2005, 73 percent of the students on the main campus were White Americans. Of the 4,266 graduate students, only 186 were African American and only 72 were African American males. **Polo** completed the traditional on-campus program in Educational Psychology. At the time of the study he had just accepted a university position as an assistant professor. **Tre** completed the continuing education program from various locations throughout Europe. Upon completion of the degree he returned to the U.S. and is the principal of a private school.

Dr. Phil attended a comprehensive public university with a long-standing commitment to teaching, research and service. This institution's campus enrollment is close to thirty thousand with a graduate student population of over five thousand. African American enrollment is only 2.3 percent of the total enrollment and there were only 170 African American students enrolled in graduate school. After earning his degree in Counseling Education, he accepted a faculty position at another institution.

Earl attended an institution with an enrollment of 19,950 students with a graduate student enrollment of over 3,500. Only 46 graduate students were African American males. His degree was in Higher Education and Applied Educational Studies and he is currently an adjunct professor.

FINDINGS VIEWED THROUGH CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is considered a development of African American thought. Its key tenets of microaggressions, counterstories and augmentation of safe or counter spaces provide the possibility of establishing a contextual understanding of the lived experiences of the participants in this study. Upon further scrutiny of the findings, the data were grouped under the framework of CRT. Table 1 illustrates the application of these elements to the study findings.

Table 1: Showing CRT in Interviews

Participant	Micro-agressions	Counter Stories	Counter/Safe Space
Coach	not addressed	none identified	interview family
Polo	admission attempts	none identified	interview rap music
Dr. Phil	denied admission	grade sharing mentoring	interview mentors and peers faith
Tre	predicted failure	differential treatment	interview faith family and friends
Earl	not addressed	not addressed	interview study group

The information presented in the preceding table recounts the richness of the data. It provides examples of the manifestation of CRT in the responses of the participants in this study. Each element of CRT will be discussed as they pertain to the findings and literature in the following paragraphs

Counter-stories

Counterstories are those testimonies that cast doubt on existing ideas of the dominant culture (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). As reported in review of literature, Stamps and Tribble (1995) claim that “most background characteristics do not contribute to the academic success or failure of African American male students.

A common majoritan story is that African American males don’t succeed at the doctoral level. On the contrary this study suggests that there are some African American males enrolled in the doctoral programs do not quit (it would be difficult to claim more as completion was a selection criterion). For African American males accepted in the doctoral program, failure is not an option. This belief is conjectured by the researcher and by each of the participants in the study, all of which vehemently resisted dropping out of the program.

A second majoritan story is represented as follows: Give them (Black males) a chance (i.e. admit them into the doctoral program), and they won’t take advantage of it.

Simply being admitted into the doctoral program is not necessarily an opportunity if it is given begrudgingly. At the minimum, a sponsor is needed to facilitate the process; at best, a mentor should be provided to help ensure success in navigating through the program. Contrary to the majoritan story, African American males need more than merely be admitted to the doctoral program. Simply being admitted is not enough for African American males to succeed at the terminal degree level. Black males need mentors and role models to nurture, support and guide them along the path to the doctorate to help ensure their success. Despite the fact that each of the participants in this study had a mentor, according to the literature, African American males rarely have mentors.

Safe Spaces

Retrospectively, a balanced view of findings must be presented. To this end, the study findings also supported claims made in the review of literature. For example, claims regarding the crucial role of faculty, nurturing environments, and cross-cultural relationships in the success of the African American males were supported. Participants emphasized that “no one completes a Ph.D. by themselves” and encouraged the establishment of support systems. In all actuality, it was these identified support systems that were the participants’ “safe spaces.”

It was with these venues that participants found unconditional love, support, relateability, and even received the permission to fail. The recounting of a group of African Americans pursuing graduate degrees named their group with the acronym MIS (Make It So). The group was a continual source of inspiration and encouragement as the name empowers the individual to persist in their individual quest. The identification of individual “safe spaces” produced rich data due to the fact that the individuality of each participant surfaced, which consequently required the researcher to examine societal implications on a deeper level.

One participant, **Polo**, identified two very unique safe spaces. One was during his quiet time, in which he communed with a departed relative. Although, initially ominous in the hearing, the researcher had to objectively analyze this response and consider how often individuals reach to the past in an attempt to find the peace and comfort encountered during a difficult time in one’s life. To embrace the memory of the figure or place of one’s childhood where one felt safe, secure and loved is a clear depiction of the tenet of a safe place. The use of this internal site for **Polo** was clearly an effective method for him to combat the sense of loneliness and isolation that he experienced at different times during his academic journey.

Micro-aggressions

This final tenant of CRT is characterized as a form of subtle abuse aimed at minorities that takes many forms (Solorazno, Ceja & Yoss, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, Yosso, 2006). In this study, four of the five participants acknowledged these often overlooked acts of racial discrimination. The only participant not to report an incident of microaggression, **Coach**, simply failed to address this tenet. Perhaps, it was not witnessed or maybe the participant inadvertently omitted discussing it.

Each participant that did report experiencing microaggression attributed it to the politics present in university settings. Encounters with official procedures that resulted in delays, setbacks and feelings of discouragement among participants served only to strengthen the resolve of participants. Yet, the occurrence did bequeath to these men the realization that the allocation and distribution of resources, whether human, material or financial, is not always carried out in an impartial manner.

Earl asserted, “you can’t get away from politics: you just have to learn not to take things personal.” Likewise, responses from other participants indicate that the denial of these resources brought to mind the struggle of African Americans who had gone before them and that this strengthened their individual resolve to succeed and complete the degree. The participants refused to allow society, the university or negative experiences to stop or define them; instead, they embraced the struggle in order to progress.

CONCLUSIONS

While other research makes it abundantly clear that African American males are not earning terminal degrees at a rate comparable to some other racial and ethnic groups, this study identifies some of the unique challenges that these students face, while at the same time providing examples of those who have successfully negotiated the hurdles.

The African American males in this study lived a variety of experiences during the pursuit of their terminal degrees. The acquisition of the PhD is testimony of the tenacity with which each individual ran the educational race. This competition was not against another individual, but against the institutional and societal agents who made judgments regarding the character, work ethics and abilities of the African American males interviewed.

The outward expression of success was the conferring of the doctoral degree. However, for most of these participants, the true significance presented itself in their ability to withstand the process. The individuals who participated in this study demonstrated scholarly ambition accompanied by the determination that regardless of the cost, the degree would be obtained and failure was to be avoided. The possibility of being that man who is viewed by family, friends, peers, colleagues and other individuals of African American descent as one who ‘finished what he started,’ ‘accomplished the seemingly impossible feat,’ ‘made it in the White Man’s world,’ or ‘first one in the family to do something like this,’ holds the most significance for participants.

By recognizing the factors associated with success, current students, prospective students, faculty and administrators can benefit in a number of ways. One such way would be for educational institutions to create policies to increase the rate of success of African American male graduate students. Another way this study benefits the practice of higher education is by providing faculty and administrators with a resource that highlights the factors that enhance terminal degree attainment for African American males.

- The African American male must be allowed to tell his own story.
- Cultural sensitivity must be learned and implemented by all university personnel.
- Facilitation of mentoring programs, especially teaching faculty, how to become mentors.
- Reduction, if not elimination, of negative stereotypes associated with African American males.

The investigators acknowledge that this study’s findings are not conclusive. It is recommended that future studies explore other advance degrees (e.g., EdD, J.D., M.D., Th.D.).Also, a study that investigates the factors of success of White males that attend HBCUs would be an interesting contrast to the present study.

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