A COUNTER TO THE PROPOSED CRISIS:
EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF SUCCESSFUL AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

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A Counter to the Proposed Crisis: Exploring the Experiences of Successful African American Males

Dissertation directed by Dorothy F. Garrison-Wade, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological research and study is to comprehend the experiences of African American males that identify as successful. Through understanding their lived experiences we can learn more about what conditions are optimal or more likely to foster success for African American males in general. The state of African American males continues to be a topic of interest for many researchers but the majority of research regarding African American males focuses on “doom and gloom” versus solutions and opportunities. In most cases the research neglects to honor the voices of African American males themselves; the research cannot be as valid without the voices of the experts.

The participants in this study are college educated men ranging from educators to attorneys. They are associated with Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., a historically African American fraternal organization founded in 1911 on the principles of success and achievement. The voices of the participants are captured using interviews and focus groups. Personal narrative stories are used to present an authentic image of the participants’ experiences. From the study, five themes emerged: 1) The power of positive relationships, 2) In face of adversity: still I rise, 3) Family, 4) A tale of two cities: liberation and inequity in education, 5) and Viewed through a funhouse mirror and the effects it has on us all. Three additional statements (Faith, School Structure, and Learning from Failure) of meaning emerged from the data. The study’s rich data
resulted in recommendations to educational leaders, parents of African American males, and
African American males themselves.

Learning from African American males in this capacity has the potential to change the
African American experience in our society as we have come to know it. Using the experiences
of successful African American males to develop a rich understanding of their motivators,
choices, challenges, opportunities and triumphs can lead to innovation in education reform,
increased success for African American males, and ensure the appropriate conversations are
being discussed in regards to an equitable experience for African American males in our society.

The form and content of this of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Dorothy F. Garrison-Wade, Ph.D
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DEDICATION

Father God, all glory and honor to you. Thank you for the gift of resilience, your grace, and awesome power. Without you none of this is possible...You are therefore I am.

This work is dedicated to my Gavin Morrison Ross…My son and greatest accomplishment! Gavin, thank you for providing me with a renewed energy and zeal towards life; you give me purpose, passion, and strength. Many times throughout this process when I felt discouraged or alone, it was your youthful energy and the “Daddy I love you” songs that got me through. Although you are only 3 years old right now you are smart beyond your years as you have realized the importance of this journey for your dear old Dad. You are my greatest joy. Thank you for being my source of strength.

Champ, remember that a man always keeps his word, you can do anything you put your mind to, and that your destiny is yours to fulfill. In life, it is not how you start but how you chose to finish. My dear sweet son, thank you for the strength and inspiration you grant me daily. Each night before my eyes close I ask myself if my actions were ones you could be proud of; I know that you are watching me and developing from my very actions. I pray that I am the role model, protector, mentor, support system, and friend needed to ensure you have the foundation to emerge as the man you want to be.

Gavin never let anyone tell you that you are anything less than excellent, that you are capable of anything less than the impossible, or that you do not belong in the environment you chose. You are a remarkable young man and I absolutely love who you are. I simply cannot wait until the world benefits from your many talents and strengths. You are definitely going to leave an imprint larger than me and I am excited to know you will take our family to another level of success.
I will never forget the three year old Gavin that crawled up in my lap countless times over the last several months and said, “Daddy can I push a button… I want to work on my dissertation too!” Well son you too will be here one day and I will be here for you as you have been here for me!

Gavin Morrison Ross…I dedicate this work to you!

Love, Dad
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Background/Overview

"I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man." Thomas Jefferson

Education has been called the great equalizer in some fashion by great leaders for over 250 years. As far back as the early 1800s notable community figures have revealed the value of an equitable, intentional, and quality education. For example, in 1832, during his first political announcement to the people of Sangamo County in New Salem, Illinois, Abraham Lincoln said:

Upon the subject of education, not presuming to dictate any plan or system respecting it, I can only say that I view it as the most important subject, which we as a people can be engaged in. That every man may receive at least, a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions, appears to be an object of vital importance, even on this account alone, to say nothing of the advantages and satisfaction to be derived from all being able to read the scriptures and other works, both of a religious and moral nature, for themselves. For my part, I desire to see the time when education, and by its means, morality, sobriety, enterprise and industry, shall become much more general than at present, and should be gratified to have it in my power to contribute something to the advancement of any measure which might have a tendency to accelerate the happy period. (Lincoln, 1953; I, Pg. 8)

Frederick Douglass, in his 1845 book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself*, shares that when his reading lessons were forbidden he immediately
understood that he had to keep learning; that his education would be the key to his freedom. He shares a quote of Mr. Auld, his Master who helped shape his realization:

If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. (p.44)

W. E. B Dubois, the first African American to receive a PhD from Harvard University, expressed in his book *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 -1890*, that Southern slave owners were against educating laborers because it made it difficult to exploit them. Furthermore, they gave credence to the notion that once a laborer was sufficiently educated, the enslaved individual would escape their oppressive condition by their own volition. Dubois further shared that although the attitude towards education for laborers was negative, African Americans during this era connected knowledge with power; they believed that education was the foundation to wealth and respect, and that wealth, without education, was crippled.

Leaders from the latter half of the twentieth century continued to place extreme value on the importance of education. John F. Kennedy, America’s 35th President, shared that we should
understand that education is a vehicle which develops our greatest abilities and all people have hopes and dreams within them that, when fulfilled, can translate to benefitting the entire country (Brainy Quote, 2011). President Lyndon B. Johnson at Howard University’s commencement address in 1965 said:

> Education is the key to opportunity in our society, and the equality of educational opportunity must be the birthright of every citizen...Every child must be encouraged to get as much education as he has the ability to take. We want this not only for his sake -- but for the future of our nation's sake. Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not our military preparedness -- for armed might is worthless if we lack the brainpower to build world peace; not our productive economy -- for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government -- for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant. (http://www.lbjlibrary.org/)

Many African Americans believe that education is a passport to our future. Marian Wright Edelman states, “Education is a precondition to survival in America today” (African American Quotes, 2011). Malcolm X remarks, “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.” Oprah Winfrey adds, “Education was my pass to personal freedom. I learned to read at age three, and soon discovered there was a whole world to conquer that went beyond our farm in Mississippi” (African American Quotes, 2011).

Perhaps one of the most notable leaders of the twentieth century was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King, in his article *The Purpose of Education*, offered:

> It seems to me that education has a two-fold function to perform in the life of man and in society: the one is utility and the other is culture. Education must enable a man to become
more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of his life (King, 1948).

Rounding out over 250 years of agreement on the value of education is Commander in Chief, the 44th President of the United States, Barrack Obama. In his state of the union address on January 27, 2010, President Obama told the country, “In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity; it is a prerequisite” (Obama, 2009).

Considering the support in favor of the value of education, it is reasonable to assume that our contemporary society would be one that intentionally ensures all individuals have access to an equitable and quality education. However, the abundance of reports that indicate the systematic and rapid rate at which African Americans, especially males, are filtered into lower educational tracks suggests that the dominant culture within U.S. society has a different definition of effective than these notables (Saddler, 2005). It was mandated legislation (not the blatant urging of over two centuries of leaders), which supported the idea of an equitable educational opportunity for all in the United States. On May 17, 1954 the Supreme Court of the United States of America handed down a monumental decision that overturned an 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision of “separate but equal” railroad cars which provided equal protection as ordered by the 14th amendment (Golub, 2005). This decision was used to separate all public facilities. However, in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, where Linda Brown was denied acceptance into her local elementary school based on the color of her skin, the ruling of 1896 was overturned as the white school was far superior to the black alternative and the white school was miles closer to her home (Ethridge, 1979; History, 2010).
This decision required that schools provide an equal educational opportunity for all students, regardless of race (Ethridge, 1979).

In attempt to bolster support and access to education this legislation has been supported and augmented by a variety of federal legislation since the 1950’s. President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society domestic agenda led to the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, which was signed into law November 8th of that year at Texas State University San Marcos (HEA, 1965). In his January 1965 education message, President Johnson articulated the need for more higher education opportunities for lower and middle income families, program assistance for small and less developed colleges, additional and improved library resources at higher education institutions, and utilization of college and university resources to help deal with national problems like poverty and community development. The Higher Education Act of 1965 was the legislative response, a document designed to strengthen the educational resources of our colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance for students in postsecondary and higher education. This act resulted in the first major investment in direct student services, led to the rise
of loan and scholarship programs, and the development of the TRIO programs. The TRIO programs are federal outreach and student services programs, which are designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. They are administered, funded, and implemented by the United States Department of Education. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post-baccalaureate programs. TRIO also includes a training program for directors and staff of TRIO projects (HEA, 1965; US Dept. of Education).

Other major components of the HEA of 1965 are Title III and Title IV programming. Title III aims to improve education through grant programming that provides support to strengthen various aspects of schools and provides grant funds to accredited, legally authorized Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Title IV addresses all aspects of the federal financial aid programs (HEA, 1965).

In 1998 the HEA was reauthorized and the amendment for the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) was created. This discretionary grant is in addition to the TRIO programs and was designed to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education. GEAR UP provides six-year grants to states and partnerships to provide services at high-poverty middle and high schools. GEAR UP grantees serve an entire cohort of students beginning no later than the seventh grade and follow the cohort through high school. GEAR UP funds are also used to provide college scholarships to low-income students (US Dept. of Education, 2009).

The Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) Act was also passed by President Johnson. This act was passed during his “War on Poverty” campaign and is the most far-
reaching federal legislation affecting education ever passed by Congress. The act is an extensive statute that funds primary and secondary education, while explicitly forbidding the establishment of a national curriculum. It also emphasizes equal access to education and establishes high standards and accountability. In addition, the bill aims to shorten the achievement gaps between students by providing each child with fair and equal opportunities to achieve an exceptional education (ESEA, 1965).

The ESEA act has been reauthorized many times, although in 1994, during the Clinton administration, it was reauthorized as the Improving Americas Schools Act (IASA, 1994). This was President Clinton’s major education reform and included the Title 1 program which provides extra help to disadvantaged students and created accountability measures for schools to ensure these students achieved at equal level with their counterparts. The IASA also addressed reform through the creation or provisions around charter schools, safe and drug free school programming, professional development for teachers, increased funding for bilingual and immigrant education, impact aid, and investment in educational technology (IASA, 1994).

Contemporary legislation not found in the original HEA or reauthorized amendments, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement (IDEA) of 2004, continue honoring the principles of the Brown decision and seek to promote access and equity within education. NCLB established a high-stakes accountability system that holds schools responsible for students’ learning as well as improving the performance of historically low-achieving students, including low-income, limited English proficient, special education students, and students of color (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002, §1111 (b)(2)(C)(v)(II)(aa-dd); Zion, 2007). The NCLB Act of 2001 was the reform effort of the Bush Administration, it was also a reauthorization of ESEA and, similar to Clinton
Administration, the reauthorization donned a new name (NCLB, 2001). The reauthorization IDEA, (2004) ensures a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities and makes intentional requirements about eliminating the disproportionate representation of students of color in specific special education disability categories and settings.

Based on the legislation and samples of educational and social success (Harper, 2009; Mahiri, 1998; Save America Ministries, 2007) within the African American community, one would assume that equitable educational experiences are happening and the additional support provided in recent law and policy ensures the academic success and achievement of African Americans. The information compiled by Save America Ministries: A Portrait of the Black Family (2007) supports that African Americans are experiencing some success by reporting 70% of African Americans live above the poverty line, 61% of middle class African Americans own stocks, 40% of African Americans live in suburban neighborhoods, African American families earning over 100K per year has increased tenfold since the 1960s, and several African Americans are named as the wealthiest individuals in the nation.

While pockets of African Americans have experienced success and the written law and policy promote a culture of equity (Ethridge, 1979; ESEA, 1965; HEA, 1965, 1998; IASA, 1994; IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2001), the fact is equitable educational experiences are not the norm and drastic disparities in educational achievement exist between African Americans and their majority counterparts (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Holzman, 2010; Saddler, 2005). Even more alarming, African American males are experiencing deficits in every major area of life, including education employment, and parenting, amongst others, while also experiencing higher rates of incarceration. (Harper, 2009; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Lewis, 2009; Ogbu, 1997; Saddler, 2005; Sanders, 1998). Dr. Julian Hare (2003), Director of the San Francisco Black Think shares, “Due
to the underachievement and performance of African Americans the Black family has crumbled more in the last 30 years than it did in the entire 14 decades since slavery” (p.193). A recent report by the Center on Education shares the historic, absolute, and relative decline of the earning power in individuals that failed to matriculate high school (Holzman, 2010). The dismal graduation rates of African Americans ensure a lifetime of sub average earnings. For example, in 2007 21% of African Americans dropped out of high school compared to 12% of their white counterparts (CNN, 2009). In 2006, the graduation rate for African American males as a whole was 47% (NAACP Fact Sheet, 2009; US Dept of Education, 2009). The projections of these trends forecasts a future of increasing educational disparities, which has an adverse effect on the American economy and enforces a continued life of underachievement and educational inequities for African American male students (Holzman, 2010). The projections are both dismal and unnerving because any employment success, security, or earning potential in the United States is rooted in the possession of a quality education. Research demonstrates that there is a direct correlation between formal educational levels and annual wages. The following graph illustrates this very clearly:
The current educational environment is not conducive to the success of African American boys, in fact, it is the opposite (Holzman, 2010; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Saddler, 2005). The overwhelming majority of school districts and states are not making intentional efforts to provide the resources necessary for African Americans to experience success. Holzman, (2010) suggests that when an African American male graduates from high school it speaks more for that young man’s resilience and determination than it does for the resources and support he received from the system. In the United States there are only eight states with graduation rates over 70% for African Americans, 35 states with rates at 59% or less, and seven states between 60% and 69%. This is a dismal picture that supports tremendous educational shortcomings in the African American community.
Graduation Rates for African American Males

Figure 1.3. The 2010 Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and African Americans

Based on the experiences of African American boys in classrooms the graduation outcomes across the states are not surprising. These young men are not receiving equal or equitable opportunities to participate in rigorous or enriched educational classes. Despite the College Board’s request to open Advanced Placement to all capable students, African American boys are only present in token numbers (College Board, 2011; Holzman, 2010). On average, more than twice as many white male students have access to extra resources, such as gifted and talented programs in their schools, compared to African American male students (College Board, 2011; Holzman, 2010). They are disciplined more severely for the same rule violations as their white counterparts, and, frequently, African American boys are misdiagnosed as special needs based on special education policies and are unduly removed from the general education classroom (Ferguson, 2003; T. Hardrick, personal communication, February 9, 2010; Holzman, 2010).
2010; Lee, 2010; & Ogbu, 1984). NCES (2005), reports that boys are twice as likely than girls to receive a “special” label and that even though African American students account for less than 20% of the overall public school population they are grossly disproportionately represented in all special education categories, accounting for 33% of students classified as mentally retarded (MR), 27% of students classified as emotionally disturbed (ED), and 18% of students classified as students labeled disabled (SLD).

**Students “Labeled” Disabled**

![Chart showing special education percentages of ethnic groups labeled special needs.]

Figure 1.4. Special Education percentages of ethnic groups Labeled Special Needs

Not only are African American students identified at rates much higher than white students, but once they are labeled, they are much more likely to spend their school time in self-contained, segregated classrooms (NCES, 2005). Perhaps most concerning is the fact that the national data trends suggest the percentage of African American male students enrolled at each stage of schooling takes a sharp decline from middle school (grade 6) through graduate degree programs (Harper, 2004; Holzman, 2010; Zion, 2007).

The reality is simple the overall educational experiences of African Americans across the country are not equitable to their white counterparts (Holzman, 2010; Saddler, 2005; Woodson, 1933; Zion, 2007). The only equity in these experiences seems to be the lack of opportunity for
academic success and sustainability. Regardless of how society views these young men, there are economic, moral, and life threatening reasons why these young men need to be helped (Holzman, 2010; Nasir, McLaughlin, & Jones, 2009; Moore, 2003; National Urban League, 2007). The data support a pipeline to prison rather than college, an entire generation of African American males lost, a family dynamic forever damaged, and one of the lowest percentages of educational attainment for males when compared to all other males from different ethnic backgrounds (Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Saddler, 2005). Seventeen percent of African American males, or roughly two million, have had experience with a state or federal prison. This number is even more alarming when compared to their Hispanic and white counterparts who have prison involvement rates of 7.7 percent and 2.6 percent, respectively (Save America, 2007). The 17 percent, although alarming, is also disheartening when compared to the 8 percent of African American males that graduate from college (US Census Bureau, 2005). Understanding this dynamic is important but actively addressing this concern is paramount.

Educational Attainment of Men Age 18-29, by Race/Ethnicity, 2005

![Educational Attainment Graph](image)

Figure 1.5. SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. current population survey table creator [online]. (2005).
Statement of the Research Problem

Although landmark legislation such as Brown v. Board of Education has been created and augmented, strides have been made in educational policy, individual efforts have taken place in local districts to provide an educational experience that yields positives results for African American males (Canada, 2010; Holzman, 2010; Sanders, 2011), young men are still victims of poor education and failing in record numbers. Mandates and educational legislation alone will not provide the solutions African American males need. There has been a persistent legal struggle for the educational liberation of African Americans since the emancipation era (Saddler, 2005) so alternate measures should be explored. Data do support that there is a significant journey to embark on for educational equity for African Americans, but the silver lining is that not all African Americans are failing nor do all African Americans have a relationship with the criminal justice system. The African American community has produced educationally sound African Americans that are college bound, career oriented, value family, and are productive pro-social citizens. Using the momentum and lessons from educational policy and reform efforts to inform where we have been, there is an additional opportunity to address the dilemma faced by African American males by leveraging the talent, experiences, and resources of the African American males that have accomplished success. It is time that their voices are added to the discussion on the educational achievement and success for African American males.

In an effort to provide successful African Americans with a voice regarding educational achievement and societal success, this study explores: the stories of successful African American males in relationship to their lived experiences; attributes of success; and their perceptions of differences between themselves and their African American peers. In providing a voice to these men the researcher is seeking an increased understanding of the African American male
experience and an opportunity to reveal workable solutions in addressing the dilemmas confronting African American males.

Purpose of this Study

Increased attention has been given to the educational plight of African American males across the entire educational pipeline, from elementary to postsecondary (Jackson & Moore, 2008). This increased interest has emerged in both popular and scholarly periodicals readily available to scholars and society at large (Fashola, 2005; Flowers, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Moore, 2006; Moore, Flowers, Guion, Zhang, & Staten, 2004; Patterson, 2006; Williams & Williams, 2006). While research regarding the educational experiences of African American males increased in focus, it has primarily been on their educational failures, shortcomings, and on a negative social existence, such as the criminal justice system or unemployment (Gordan, 2005; Jackson & Moore, 2008).

The research simply has focused more on documenting the educational shortcomings of African American males rather than exploration of solutions (McGuire, 2005) or providing examples of the successes experienced by African American males (hooks, 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2006). No matter the income, education level, or personal success, many African American males are classified as unintelligible, uneducable, and dangerous (hooks, 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2006). This disappointing phenomenon occurs because African American males are first viewed as a group rather than individuals (Bailey & Moore, 2004).

Although interests in African American males is now at the forefront, the problem has been in existence for hundreds of years and many notable African American leaders have attempted to bring awareness to it (Dubois, 1903; Saddler, 2005; Woodson, 1933). The problem of educating African American children in America is as old as the presence of African
Americans within this country. This complex issue has been the topic of discussion by scholars such as Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Dr. Janice Hale, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a host of others have all asserted that an effective education is of fundamental importance in the progress of African Americans. However, the abundance of reports that indicate the systematic and rapid rate at which African Americans are filtered into lower educational tracks or viewed in such a dismal light suggests that the dominant culture within U.S. society has a different definition of effective, equitable, and just than these notables (DuBois, 1903; Hale, 1986; Saddler, 2005; Sanders, 2010; Woodson, 1933). So what is left is solely the dilemma facing African American males (Lewis & Erskine, 2008).

The negative image of African American males is perpetuated by dismal data uncovered by researchers and the images and information reinforced by media (Jackson & Moore, 2008). From very young ages African American males are exposed to these negative characteristics, which are readily available through mass media, but the alternate data, focusing on academic success or their (African Americans) value to society is rarely illustrated (hooks, 2004; Jackson & Moore, 2008). With the research being focused so heavily in one direction, African American males have become victimized by these images and society has developed a skewed and negative perception of these men (Bailey & Moore, 2004; Madison-Colmore & Moore, 2002; Moore, 2000).

Read any popular or scholarly publication and it frequently conveys that African American males constitute a population at risk (Jackson & Moore, 2006). If I was not African American myself and did not have personal ties to successful African American men, I would have assumed all African American males were endangered. Within research engines, such as Google, Google Scholar, and ERIC, the terms African American males and success resulted in
hundreds of articles that focused on the dilemmas in the African American community versus very few that reported on documented successes. hooks (2004) expresses, “the real truth, which is taboo to speak, is that this [American society] is a culture that does not love African American” (p. xi). To tell one side of any story, especially the negative, is cruel and intentionally damaging. Focusing on the limitations without exploring the successes is a clear sign that there is a plot to destroy and devalue. This practice has been society’s approach to the discussion of African American men since emancipation (Harper & Tuckman, 2006; hooks, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Kunjufu, 2005; Saddler, 2005).

“IT IS PAST TIME” and long overdue to shine a different light on African American males. The dilemmas, challenges, and limitations associated with African American males are documented in abundance. Academicians have to be unreasonable about their intent to explore the successes and accomplishments of African American males. Truly understanding the African American male experience has to be the focus of research in this terrain and it is of paramount importance that the desired outcomes of the research yield possible solutions.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study is designed to explore the experiences of successful African American males. The study will be exploring perceptions of their peers, attributes of success, and educational experiences. In order to address these inquiries the following research question was developed: Are there certain factors that contribute to the social and educational success of some African American males? The study aims to address a complex phenomenon which has not had much attention based on preliminary searches for related literature. However, the target demographic shares a common theme of success and the phenomenological design is best suited to depict and thoroughly explore success. Furthermore,
this research question will be most appropriately addressed through the use of several qualitative methods: focus groups, interviewing, and memoing.

The following set of sub questions were developed to augment the information sought by the guiding research question:

1. What effect does the societal impression of African American males have on you?
2. Compared to your unsuccessful peers what did you do differently?
3. What characteristics do successful and unsuccessful African American males share?
4. Can your success be duplicated? How?

Researcher Rationale for the Study

Prior to committing to this study, I had an opportunity to conduct a small pilot study. My intentions were to gage my interest in the topic, decide the most appropriate approach in exploring African American male experiences, and to put into practice learned interview methods. I interviewed a group of five African American males ranging in age from high school to retirement for nearly two hours. That experience solidified my decision to research this topic and the interview method worked well generating a wealth of great information. The information recorded was simply used to gage my interest in the subject and will not be included or influence the data collected within this study.

The results of the pilot study reinforced my belief that it was time to take the questions to African American males concerning success. Individuals living out successful experiences can definitely inform others on their steps, experiences, values, and lessons. These types of conversations can yield solutions or the increased understanding to create solutions in relation to the dilemmas facing African American males. The following reflection of former Denver, Colorado Mayor Wellington Webb has been one with which I strongly identify: “I have been
asked to solve or give advice on many topics but never on how or why I made it as an African American male. It should be a no brainer as it is the topic I know most about. When all the titles are gone all that I am is an African American male” (W.E. Webb, Personal Communication, March, 14, 2008).

For the purposes of this study, initially success for the researcher will be viewed as African American men that do not settle for mediocrity and are committed to dispelling all the negative stereotypes associated with African American males. This working definition will assist in recruiting participants that are not typical in the societal view of African American males. Through the use of phenomenology a true authentic definition of success will be created by the participants based on their lived experience.

**Limitations of the Study**

Limitations, as with any study, are present in this research. The most obvious research limitation comes from using qualitative methods. Creswell (2008) explains that qualitative research can have limitations based on the experience and individual skill set of the researcher. In this study the researcher is a novice despite having an intimate knowledge of being an African American male. Other limitations associated with qualitative research are found within the amount of time associated analysis and interpretation can take, based on the volume of data collected. Limitations also arise because of the issues involved in maintaining anonymity and confidentiality when presenting findings (Creswell, 2008).

The last major limitation comes from the researcher’s choice to use convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher (Creswell, 2008). The individuals selected for his study do represent African Americans from different socio-economic statuses, as well as different personal, professional, and educational experiences,
however, the individuals are not representative of all successful African American males. These participants all have affiliations with or are members of Historically Black Fraternities, which have fundamental purposes founded in achievement, service to the community, and success. While all these participants fit the criteria, it does not mean that African American men that are not in a fraternity or associated with one do not fit the criteria. This group of men was selected based on connections I have and based on the fact that the geographical locations, time commitment necessary, and the resources needed to include all successful African American men simply is not feasible for this study.

*Significance of the Study*

The achievement gap between African American males and their counterparts has emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing schools (Rothstein, 2004). This country boasts a meritocracy and a belief that the best way to create opportunity is to ensure that all students leave school with the skills necessary to compete fairly and competently in our nation’s democratic governance and occupational structure (Harper, 2004, Ogbu, Rothstein 2004, Sanders, 2011). This belief is flawed because equal does not equate to equitable across the board and policy changes alone do not work (Bell, 2004; Zion, 2007).

Conservative and liberal organizations, such as the Heritage Foundation and the Educational Trust, along with many policy makers and statisticians argue that things such as higher standards, better teachers, more accountability, and better discipline are factors that will close the achievement gap (Rothstein, 2004). If school reform and policy changes alone were the answers to the achievement gap then the historical Brown v the Board of Education would have addressed this issue directly and No Child Left Behind would have filled in any gaps (Saddler, 2005). However, since the achievement gap dilemma faced by African American
males still exists and continues to grow, new solutions or ideas to address this phenomenon have to be implemented.

This study has an important role in identifying new solutions to address the negative educational experiences and lack of success that is plaguing African American males. Their voice in this capacity will be instrumental in providing insight into meaningful solutions to the various obstacles faced by African Americans. Simply put, it is time to bring the players to the table because they have not all fouled out!

Researcher’s Perspective

As an adult, I work with many young men in the community who have the same outlook on life as I once did. A handful of my childhood friends are dead, addicted to narcotics, living mediocre lives at best, or incarcerated. The society at large proclaims that there is a state of emergency for African American males, and I ask myself why? Why is the outlook for success as it relates to African American males so narrow? Why, even when searching for positive accounts of the African American male, does the negative glaring data outweigh the positive? Where are the solutions?

This problem is of extreme importance to me as an African American male and as an educator of low-income, first-generation students (individuals who are the first to attend college in their families). This study is also intensely personal as I have witnessed countless African American males not achieve academic, social, or professional success. I do not believe they are 100% at fault for their shortcomings in relation to their success. A variety of factors are responsible and a new approach to solving this dilemma is necessary, not the same business of documenting failures. Helping African American males reach self-actualization is critical. Ignoring or not coming to reconciliation with this fact not only has an adverse effect on key
stakeholders, but further damages any semblance of a foundation upon which we are now witnessing the loss of generations. I know this as an educator, community servant, and, most importantly, as an African American male.

I grew up in East Denver in the Alcorn Projects where I was educated in urban public schools until I was afforded an opportunity to attend J. K. Mullen College Prep High, a private Catholic school. The Alcorn Projects, commonly referred to as the AP’s, is a low-income housing development that provides reduced rent and public assistance to the community that resides there. Initially, as a youth, I had aspirations of becoming a doctor. I really liked the lolly pops I received when I went in for check-ups and my hero was “Heathcliff ‘Cliff’ Huxtable, M.D.” on the television sitcom, The Cosby Show; he was the best dad ever!

However, this admiration of Dr. Huxtable and my dreams of becoming a doctor soon turned into feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness. I discovered that Dr. Huxtable was fictional—a father and doctor only in the role of an actor. My view of reality depicted older siblings that were gang related, an abusive stepfather that was addicted to crack cocaine, and a mother that was underemployed, completing any work possible. My best friend who lived next door had a very similar reality; in fact, many of my friends could trade stories on poverty, abuse, or poor role modeling on any given day. I truly began to believe that the only way I would ever have money was if I sold drugs, because those were the only guys that ever had money or material representations of wealth in my neighborhood. It was a drug dealer who brought me my first pair of football cleats and another one that paid for me to play. Although I knew their activities were wrong, they looked out for me and in return I looked up to them. As early as the fourth grade I remember telling myself I was going to be a drug dealer. At that time in my life there was one thing I was sure about, and that was that there was no such thing an African
American doctor. There were African American athletes, rappers, actors, and, most accessible, drug dealers. That was my perception of the truth and in 1989 I believed entertainment, but more realistically, drug dealing, was my only option.

My reality was clear so my path was easy. I played sports, listened to rap and wrote lyrics, and hung out with the older drug dealers/gang members on my block. As an adult, I cringe at the things I saw and am saddened at how fast and flawed I grew up. By the seventh grade I knew how to secure a weapon, make drugs, and what to do in the event of a drive by. I often wonder what other kids my age from the suburbs were doing… maybe playing video games? For some of my friends our plan was simple: become athletes and get drafted. If that did not work, plan B was to sell enough drugs to pay for studio time and make it in the rap game.

What is truly unnerving is that I was an honor roll student. With exposure to school I never even thought about a life outside my neighborhood. In school I remember being praised and encouraged around athletics, but never my studies. I even remember a teacher that told me the trick to my success is to never get hurt because if I did my neighborhood would be my world! So the whole school thing was a joke to me, I did have two African American women teachers in middle school but by the time I met them I think the damage was done. I learned a lot from them but I no longer believed the education “hype.”

As an athlete I was pretty successful and my abilities, matched with some intensive but unexpected mentoring, afforded me an opportunity to catch the attention of a Catholic private school known for its strong academic reputation. What was most important to me at the time was its other reputation, as a nationally ranked football powerhouse. I had done it. My plan was coming together and I was going to the NFL!
Mullen quickly made me realize a few things; first, I was not a real honor roll student. The 3.8 grade-point average I had secured in public school equated to being three grade levels behind my new white counterparts. My entrance exam scores earned me a spot in a special program, for students that needed extra academic attention. While it was not a traditional special education program, I was still removed from the majority of the students for several periods a day. My peers and I in that class were ridiculed when we participated in the mainstream courses, and once again I found myself looking for happiness on the football field. Although I was not super concerned with education before Mullen I at least believed I was smart; however, after being accepted there, everything I believed was confirmed. I was not as smart as white students and my future options were very limited to my neighborhood!

At Mullen there were very few African American students, in fact I would often tell my mother that I felt like a raisin in a bowl of milk. I was surrounded by things I could not understand. My Caucasian schoolmates drove luxury vehicles; I had a two-hour bus ride. My school mates seemed highly educated and used extensive vocabulary; I had no clue what they were saying. I still remember the first day of my English class. The teacher asked us to talk about our summer break. The first student stood up and said he had a “nonchalant vacation” and nothing more to report. The second student mentioned attending a “regatta.” I was in the twilight zone, I thought nonchalant was a different language and a regatta sounded like some sort of pasta. I was too intimidated to ask for clarification. I was already the only African American kid in the class, I was in a special program, and I surely did not want to look stupid in the first ten minutes of the first day of my only mainstream class. This was yet another message that reaffirmed my commitment to sports. I knew I was supposed to be a football player as the field was the only place I had control, the only place that made sense to me at Mullen, the only place
where I outperformed others. I thought to myself, “I am definitely here for sports because I have no clue about the academic aspect of the school.” I proceeded through eighth grade just as my peers had, but they were easily two times more advanced. Maybe they were just supposed to be smarter, and I was supposed to be better athletically because that is the way I perceived it to be.

My thought process took a sudden shift near the end of my freshmen year after meeting an African American Mullen alumnus; it hit me that I could be successful without football. He was the first African American male I had ever seen that was legitimately rich. This gentleman was a lawyer and former college athlete. He spent time with the African American students at Mullen and helped me realize that I was good at what I focused on most. I began to understand that I played sports well because I focused at it, watched it on television, thought about it, and, most importantly, I practiced it daily. It was an “ah-ha” moment when he said, “Why not approach studying the same way?” I began to realize how my decisions led to my educational shortcomings but importantly how my future decisions could correct that. I will never forget that gentleman and how his brief mentorship over that year dispelled everything I previously thought. African American men were not all negative. I did have the ability to do more than the status quo. I no longer believed it was the hood or the field. For the first time in my life I truly believed I had options. I realized that I was the master of my fate and mediocrity was not my destiny.

Although this topic is very important to me, it is equally important not to insert my personal biases as a researcher. Mehra, (2002) argues that we cannot be unbiased and states:

Qualitative research paradigm believes that researcher is an important part of the process. The researcher is not able separate himself or herself from the topic/people he or
she is studying, it is in the interaction between the researcher and researched that the knowledge is created. So the researcher bias enters into the picture even if the researcher tries to stay out of it. (p.6)

While this is the thought of Mehra, I believe there are several steps that I can follow in order to limit researcher bias in this study. The first is including a neutral colleague, another student in my doctoral program, to lead the focus groups so my passion or expressions are not revealed; the second is keeping my personal story to me until all questions have been answered. Lastly, I believe my bias will be limited because it is not my experience that is being discussed, it will be the individual experiences of other African American men and they will be in control of sharing their story. At the conclusion of their stories, all aspects of their experiences will be verified to ensure the appropriate understanding was attained.

Chapter Summary

The history regarding African American males is clear; there is an extreme problem and a dilemma exists. To put it plainly, African American men are failing in every competitive category in regards to educational achievement, career success, and financial stability. This study intends to produce workable solutions and suggestions rather than to highlight the issues facing African American males yet again. Using the collective stories of successful African American males to truly understand their experiences will result in innovative approaches that delve deeper than the surface to address some very complex concerns. This study is a contemporary approach to an age old problem; innovation in educational research is necessary to progress pass the status quo and adding the voices of African American males to the conversation is long overdue.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

African American Males According to the Research

According to the National Urban League (2007), one of the most vigorously debated educational issues since the mid 1980s is the declining educational, social, and economic status of young African American males (Garibaldi, 1992). The research tells us that one of the most consistent findings in educational research is the underachievement of African American males at all levels in life, especially in the educational pipeline from elementary to postsecondary (Fan, 2001; Noguera, 2003; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). There is a serious achievement gap between African American and white students in a variety of educational settings (Lewis & Moore, 2004; Obiakor & Beachum, 2006). The enormous attention to this achievement gap has helped little because educational underachievement for African American continues to be a perennial education issue (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). Basically, research findings consistently show that there is convincing evidence that students from disadvantaged minority groups, especially African American males, achieve poorer outcomes at every level, even given equal preparation, than do their white and Asian peers, creating a substantial achievement gap (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Lewis & Moore, 2004; Moore, 2003; Obiakor & Beachum, 2006; Steele, 1997).

As infants, African Americans have the highest probability of dying in the first year of life (Auerbach, Krimgold, & Lefkowitz, 2000). And equally disheartening, as they mature into adulthood African Americans are the only group in the United States to experience a decline in life expectancy (See table 1 below) (National Urban League, 2001; Spivak, Prothrow-Smith, & Hausman, 1988).
Table 2.1 Death Rates for African American Males per 100,000 People

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Death Rates per 100,000 People</th>
<th>African American Males</th>
<th>White Males</th>
<th>African American Females</th>
<th>White Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ages 5 – 14</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 15 – 24</td>
<td>176.5</td>
<td>105.9</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 25 – 34</td>
<td>266.6</td>
<td>129.9</td>
<td>118.0</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 35 – 44</td>
<td>440.0</td>
<td>243.8</td>
<td>278.4</td>
<td>138.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 45 – 54</td>
<td>1012.8</td>
<td>513.2</td>
<td>595.7</td>
<td>293.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ages 55 – 64</td>
<td>2,047.7</td>
<td>1,110.5</td>
<td>1,201.6</td>
<td>705.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The literature on the failure of African American males, their underachievement, and lack of success is thorough, substantial, and well documented (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Education Trust, 2003; Lewis & Erskine, 2008). Lewis (2009) reports that society at large fully supports the negative connotations associated with African American males as he reports the common characteristics associated with African Americans are dysfunctional, drug dealers, pimps, and much worse (see table 2.2 below).

Table 2.2 Common Characteristics Associated with African Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dysfunctional</th>
<th>Drug Dealers</th>
<th>Pimps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rappers</td>
<td>Murderers</td>
<td>Hyper-sexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic but not Intelligent</td>
<td>Savages</td>
<td>Absentee Fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead Beat Dads</td>
<td>Prisoners</td>
<td>Substance Abusers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Welfare Dependent</td>
<td>Unemployable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underemployed</td>
<td>Detriment to Society</td>
<td>Failures to African American Women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Lewis (2008)
All of the most important quality of life indicators suggest that African American males are in a serious and most unfortunate dilemma (Noguera, 2003). Lewis (2008) describes the dilemma as the measures African American males have to take in order to navigate what it means to be an African American male in a country that in many ways does not even value the existence of African American men. Although there are examples of African American males that have achieved despite experiencing obstacles (Colin Powell, President Obama, Tony Dungee, etc.) the dilemma remains constant for African American males. The negative characteristics accepted by society and examples of notable African American males associated with making poor choices (Kwame Kilpatrick, Michael Vick, and Pastor Eddie Long) cause the average African American male to face this dilemma of deciding what path his life will take in this country (Lewis & Erskine, 2008). Lewis and Erskine (2008) explain that given the dilemmas that African American males face the following questions are posed:

1. Will the lives of African American males be filled with the prosperity that is promised to every citizen of the United States?
2. Will the lives of African American males take a path where they will never be fully embraced no matter what type of accomplishments they will make?
3. Does this society have a glass ceiling on what the African American male will be able to do based on the structure of this society?

The questions clearly demonstrate that the plight experienced by African Americans is indeed realistic but the barrier to addressing it is the fact that many seem not to care. Unfortunately, consistently the media, no matter whether it is local, regional, or national, highlights the commonly accepted experiences of African American males. An African American male is experiencing a high level of underachievement or has lost his life from gangs, drugs, retaliation,
a female he was dating, and even mistaken identity (Lewis & Erskine, 2008). With a dilemma this critical one has to wonder, how do we address this problem? How do we get society to care? Can we find support to truly address this issue when so many formalized institutions (the prison industry, private corporate companies such as Visa and American Express) have benefited financially from the experiences of African American males (Lewis and Erskine, 2008)?

The negative performance outcomes that describe a substantial share of African American males’ depressing condition can be found in unemployment statistics, homicide rates (as both victims and perpetrators), their overwhelmingly disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system (Jenkins, 2006), as well as their last-place ranking on many measures of educational performance and assessment (Arizona State University, 2004; Jenkins, 2006). As professionals, African American males are more than twice as likely to be unemployed than white males, and African Americans who work in comparable jobs earn only 75 percent of what white men earn (Jenkins, 2006; National Urban League, 2003). On average white men earn drastically more than African American men with comparable education at every level and this trend has not changed in the past 18 years (NCES, 2010). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2010), in the year 2008 the median annual salary for white males with a bachelor’s degree was $47,000, compared to $40,000 for African American with bachelor level credentials (see table 3 below).
Table 2.3 Median annual earnings and percentage of full-time, full-year wage and salary workers ages 25–34, by educational attainment and race/ethnicity: Selected years, 1980–2008, NCES (2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational attainment, and race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Median earnings [In constant 2008 dollars]</th>
<th>Percentage of full-time, full-year wage and salary workers in 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/ethnicity and educational attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>White</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>40,800</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>32,900</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>37,500</td>
<td>36,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's degree</td>
<td>41,400</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>47,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>31,400</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>23,300</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>31,400</td>
<td>28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's degree</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>39,200</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Hispanic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>31,400</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>23,300</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>31,400</td>
<td>28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate's degree</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>39,200</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other race/ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>31,400</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>23,300</td>
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<td>Associate's degree</td>
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<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>39,200</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's degree or higher</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‡ Not applicable.
Harper (2009) reports that the recent report on the American workforce indicates that 49 percent of white men served in professional and leadership roles, compared with 37.3 percent of African American men (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001). Directly contrasting that statistic is the fact that 62.7 percent of African American men worked labor intensive and service jobs, compared to 51 percent of white male employees (Harper, 2009). These findings support the argument of Gordon, Gordon, and Nembhard’s (1994) that, “Black male professionals continue to be excluded from positions of authority, are often deemed incapable of management or technical work, and continue to earn less than their White male counterparts” (p. 518). The numbers presented are not surprising as they are trends. Perry and Locke (1985) nearly twenty five years ago contribute an identical assertion that African American has consistently lower median incomes, higher unemployment, and employment in far less prestigious occupations than white men.

In 2004, half of the African American men in America were jobless, a percentage up from 46 percent since the year 2000 (National Urban League, 2003). With the release of the monthly unemployment rate, African American are reminded of their professional underachievement because consistently the unemployment rate for African Americans is higher, usually double, the rate of their white male counterparts. One in five African American men are impoverished compared to one in twelve Caucasian males, and African American men hold an employment rate that, on average, is 2.3 times higher than white men (Arizona State University, 2004). In June 2004, for example, the white unemployment rate was five percent, but the African American unemployment rate was 10.1 percent (Malveaux, 2004). This trend has not changed in favor of African Americans because according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics
(2010), the August 2010 unemployment rate for whites was 8.7 percent compared to 16.3 percent for African Americans.

The level of unemployment experienced by African American males has had severe implications on youth. Rather than following career aspirations expressed in childhood, African American male students are dropping out, and/or entering the correctional system at an alarming rate (Fan, 2001; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; National Urban League, 2007; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). The majority of African American males that are graduating are often not interested in the benefits of education (Kunjufu, 1983, 2005). Rather they are gravitating towards the fast paced life of performers and athletes, accepting mediocre jobs, or feeling that there is no future outside of their immediate environment (Kunjufu, 1983, 2005). This reality also directly affects future African American males because it limits the amount of accessible professional role models that young African American males have to look up to (C. Lewis, personal Communication, May 6, 2009).

Although there have been examples of success for African American males in athletics, it is still a problem when a majority of a culture feels that their physical abilities are the only option to attain achievement, financial stability, and career opportunities. Additionally, the statistics show that a young man has a greater chance of becoming an accountant or doctor than they do a professional football star. According to National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), (www.ncaa.org, 2006) only 250 of the 61,252 student athletes that play football are drafted into the National Football League (NFL) each year and basketball opportunities are even scarcer as only 44 players out of 16,571 are drafted. Martin (2009) converts these numbers to percentages and reports that only 1.8 percent of college football players are drafted into the NFL, and 1.2 percent of collegiate men’s basketball players are drafted into the National Basketball
Association (NBA). These odds definitely leave little room for the many African American male athletes who hope to be successful in professional sports. This is a major concern because of the rate at which African American males are courted for athletics grossly outnumbers how many successfully finish college with a degree (Harper, 2006). African Americans are definitely counted out of academic success opportunities at the collegiate level, even in scenarios such as athletics where for once they make up the majority. Even with majority status in collegiate athletics the benefits still place them in the minority compared to their counterparts (Harper, 2009). For example, in 2004 when only 10.4 percent of undergraduate males enrolled in higher education were African American males, African American males represented 30.5 percent of all male student athletes in Division Institutions. In the greatest revenue generating sports (football and basketball) African American males had an even greater presence, accounting for 54.6 percent of all football teams and 60.8 percent of all basketball players. Unfortunately, the heavily saturated population of African American males in sports and the revenue the institutions generated based on their participation rendered no equitable representation of African American males within the graduating class percentages (Harper, 2006).

Harper (2006) says, “Perhaps nowhere in higher education is the disenfranchisement of Black male students more insidious than in college athletics at major universities” (p. 6). In a report authored for the Joint Center for Political and Economic studies in Washington, D.C., Harper (2004) offered the following data points:

1. Across four cohorts of college student-athletes, 47% of African American men graduated within six years, compared to 60% of White males and 62% of student-athletes overall.
2. The averages across four cohorts of basketball players were 39% and 52% for African American men and White men, respectively.

3. Forty-seven percent of African American male football players graduated within six years, compared to 63% of their White teammates (Harper, 2006, p. vii).

According to the African American Men of Arizona State University (AAMASU) data, African American men are 14 times more likely to die of murder than white men (Arizona State University, 2004). Additionally, the rate of homicide among African American men ages 15 to 24 is the highest for any group within the U.S. population. To make matters worse, African American males have the fastest growing suicide rate (Jenkins, 2006) and they have been contracting HIV and AIDS at a faster rate than any other segment of the population (Aurbach, Krimgold, & Lefkowitz, 2000; Center for Disease and Control, 2003). The reality that African American male youth have a 50 percent greater chance of dying by age 20 is overwhelming and it augments the need to create a sense of urgency to better prepare African American males for college and extend their probability to live past the college going age (Blake & Darling, 1994).

The incarceration, conviction, and arrest rates of African American males have been at the top of the charts in most states since the 1980s (Skolnick & Currie, 1994). In fact, there are 39.85 more African American men in prison than there are in any form of postsecondary education (Arizona State University, 2004; Justice Policy Institute, 2002; National Urban League, 2007). Nationally the incarceration rate has increased by nearly 500 percent to 2.2 million Americans. Of the 2.2 million individuals incarcerated in America 900,000 are African American (Mauer & King, 2007). Since 2001, one in six African American men have been incarcerated and, if the trend continues, one in three African American males born today can expect to spend time in prison during their lifetime (Mauer & King, 2007). These statistics
suggest that there is no real “future generation” of African American males to be had in this country. This disproportionate number of African American males is also an example of the dilemma facing African American males because the data show that in multiple situations African American males are not treated fairly in sentencing compared to their white counterparts (see table 4 below) (Lewis & Erskine, 2008; National Urban League, 2007).

Table 2.4 Average Prison Sentence for African American Males, National Urban League (2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense</th>
<th>Average Months Sentenced – African American Males</th>
<th>Average Months Sentenced – White Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Assault</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robbery</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggravated Assault</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burglary</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Possession</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug Trafficking</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapon Offenses</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data displayed in the table reveal a clear disparity in the prison sentences between African American males and white males. The “justice for all” section in the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States seems to be distributed in an inequitable manner causing family disruption and weakening informal social controls in many African American communities (Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Mauer & King, 2007).
In the classroom the research is just as dismal. In 1996, the graduation rate, 35 percent for African American males at over 300 of the nation’s largest colleges, dropped to 33 percent (Arizona State University, 2004). The last time African American males showed a significant and increasing enrollment rate in higher education was between the years of 1973 and 1977, since that time there has been a steep and steady decrease (Carnoy, 1994; National Research Council, 1989). Recent data conducted by Holzman (2010) reveals that there has been an increase in the graduation rate but the percentage is still dismal at 47 percent. The high school dropout rate for African American males is extremely high as well with nearly 30 percent of African American male youth leaving prior to graduation, resulting in 44 percent of all African American men being functionally illiterate (Noguera, 1997). Even when national trends show that academic performance is improving as a whole, it still reflects that the achievement gap experienced by African American males is increasing (Gewertz, 2003). The increase is blatantly evident in the eighth grade National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test, where the black/white achievement gap increased from 33 points in 1990 to 39 points in 2000 (Strutchens et al., 2004).

Within the walls of elementary and secondary institutions, African American males are more likely to be classified as mentally disabled, in need of special education, and more likely to be absent from advanced placement and honors courses than their educational counterparts (Lewis, 2009; Milofsky, 1974; Noguera, 2006; Oakes, 1985; Pollard, 1993). African American students, especially males, arrive to kindergarten with fewer reading skills than white students, even when their parents have had equal years of schooling (Ferguson, 2003). When compared to their male counterparts that excel in the areas of science and math related subjects, African American males seem to be the exception (Pollard, 1993).
Using data from the NAEP, the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) found six school districts from across the United States (Atlanta, Chicago, Cleveland, District of Columbia, Los Angeles, and San Diego) have at least 40 percent of their students in the below basic category in mathematics at grade four. Nationally, in 2005, only 12 percent of African American students are “At Proficient” in mathematics in grade four (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Holzman, 2010), and the number gets much smaller when considering only African American males.

While unfortunate, it would be a relief to say that mathematics was the only subject matter where African Americans struggled. However, the NAEP data from the TUDA, reports equally alarming records in reading. In the fourth grade 88 percent of all African Americans tested below the “At Proficient” level and in the 8th grade, 89 percent of all African American students tested below “At Proficient” (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008).

In the eighth grade the data did not improve as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), or “the Nation’s Report Card,” measures student achievement at various grade levels in a variety of subject and skill areas. Table 5 below shows the results of the 2009 NAEP for Grade 8 Reading, numbers, which should set off alarm bells indicating a national crisis. The “best” score is a dramatically low 15 percent, and several states average only in the single digits (Holzman, 2010). From this data it can be concluded that many students did not improve from the time they were in the fourth grade, in fact, it seems many stayed at a level below proficiency.

Table 2.5 Grade 8 Reading Percentages at or above Proficient: Sorted by State

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Black Male</th>
<th>White Male</th>
<th>Gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alaska</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idaho</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montana</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebraska</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Dakota</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utah</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>‡</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Furthermore, in school, African American males are more likely to be labeled as behavioral problems and less intelligent as early as grade school (Hilliard, 1991; Holzman, 2010). In fact, in many school districts throughout the United States, African American males are more likely to be expelled or suspended from school (Holzman, 2010; Noguera, 2003; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). More specifically, Holzman (2010) reports that a little more than twice as many African American male students as white male students receive out of school suspensions and three times as many African American male students as white male students are expelled. Out of school suspensions often lead to students ending their school careers before graduation. These school discipline disparities may account for a significant portion of the African American male students who do not graduate with their cohort.

In Garibaldi’s (1992) study of the of the New Orleans public school system, he found that although African American males represented only 43 percent of the educational community they accounted for 58 percent of non-promotions, 65 percent of the suspensions, 80 percent of the expulsions, and 45 percent of the dropouts. In instances of trouble African American males are more likely to be punished with severity, even in the cases of minor infractions, for violating a rule of the school (J. Hamilton, personal communication, September 23, 2006; Noguera, 2003; Sandler, Wilcox, & Evenson, 1985) and often times without concern for their well being. Although Girabaldi’s study was conducted in the early nineties it is relevant currently because

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.5 (CON’T)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 2009
the dilemmas and barriers for African American males that were experienced by the students in New Orleans are still being experienced by many students today (Holzman, 2010).

Are African American males responsible for these statistics? Research suggests that African American males have learned to not value education or opportunity as it has never been offered to them in the appropriate manner. “Misses what for me learn to read? Me have no respect!” (Schneider & Schneider, 2001, p. 22). This quote, while representative of slavery, is still reflected in our current society as education is not equitable for African American males. For example, in the U.S. Census of 1900, 57 percent of African American males were illiterate. One hundred years later, the literacy rate among African American males persists at an all time high level of 44 percent (Jenkins, 2006). hooks (2004) explains that the failure starts much before African American males are lost to the streets, “Even before African American boys encounter a genocidal street culture, they have been assaulted by the cultural genocide taking place in early childhood institutions where they are simply not taught” (p. 39). The New Orleans study, conducted by Garibaldi (1992), supports hook’s statement as 40 percent of the African American male students felt that their teachers did not set high enough goals for them, and 60 percent yearned for their teacher to provide more rigor in their studies.

The statistics have become so commonplace that it has caused society at large to view the majority of these young men’s futures as hopeless and impossible to salvage (Garibaldi, 1992; Noguera, 2003). Clearly it is evident the African American males are failing in education, the very foundation upon which success is derived. The academic research is mirrored by popular mediums and is being reported through mainstream mediums as well. Phillip Jackson, (2006) wrote the following:
There is no longer a need for dire predictions, hand writing or apprehension about losing a generation of African American boys. It is too late. In education, employment, economics, incarceration, health, housing and parenting, we have lost a generation of young African American men. The question that remains is will we lose the next two or three generations, or possibly every generation of African American boys hereafter to the streets, negative media, gangs, drugs, poor education, unemployment, father absence, crime, violence and death. (http://blackstarproject.org/action)

Frank Brown and George Curry of The New York Amsterdam News (2001) add to Jackson’s remarks in their article revealing that Black America is in a state of emergency. They report that the most pressing issue in the African American community is the educational underachievement of young African American males and they are fearful these educational shortcomings could cause a permanent African American underclass. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the organization responsible for issuing the nation's report card, two out of three African American fourth grade students read below basic literacy levels, lack the comprehension of most words, and the African American literacy levels are the lowest of all major ethnic groups in the nation (Dexter & Curry, 2001). The Associated Press, (2004) captures the concerns of actor, comedian, and doctor of education, Bill Cosby. At Jesse Jackson’s 2004 PUSH Coalition, Cosby states,

They're standing on the corner and they can't speak English. I can't even talk the way these people talk: 'Why you ain't,' 'Where you is' ... And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. And then I heard the father talk. ... Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. ... You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth!
Later in his remarks when discussing incarceration Cosby added the following,

These are not political criminals; these are people going around stealing Coca-Cola.

People getting shot in the back of the head over a piece of pound cake and then we run out and we are outraged, [saying] 'The cops shouldn't have shot him.' What the hell was he doing with the pound cake in his hand? (cite)

In Denver, Colorado the concern is equally urgent as Dr. Eric Lee (2009), President and CEO of the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce said, “Today’s African American males do not have anything to fight for and if they do not fight and access education their fate will be more than sad; their fate will be becoming the walking forgotten. They will be obsolete from education, employment, African American women, economics, and success altogether.” The Colorado Department of Education’s (CDE) 2009 report on graduation by ethnicity and gender reports that African American males have a graduation rate of 47 percent, a drop from the 58.9 percent of 2007. While it is consistent with the current national averages for African American males it is still dismal and supports that an achievement gap is still prevalent as the CDE also reported the graduation rates of all other males to be greater than 70 percent. Clearly, in Colorado as well as the rest of the country, African American males are being left behind.

The Achievement Gap

The achievement gap has become one of the most common terms in the education field, (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In fact, when I researched it on Google, the term resulted in more than 11 million citations. Contrary to popular belief, the achievement gap is not found in the areas of literacy, high school completion, or elementary school attendance; rather, it is the outcome. The dismal data in these areas are outcomes that affect African Americans because of the achievement gap (Anderson, 2007; Lewis, 2009). Research supports that the achievement gap
existing between African American and white students is one of the most pressing challenges for urban education in the United States today (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Norman, Ault, Bentz, & Meslimen, 2001; Rothstein, 2004). The achievement gap has been defined as the disparities in standardized test scores between black and white, Latina/o and white, and recent immigrant and white students (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Holzman (2010) defines the achievement gap as disparities in enriched educational opportunities between African Americans and whites. The National Governors Association describes the achievement gap as a matter of race and class (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The definitions all demonstrate that African Americans are simply not doing as well as their white counterparts.

Braun et al. (2006) completed an exhaustive study over ten states that serve more than 40 percent of the America’s African American students. Their results suggest that across and within the test states and in every socioeconomic class, the African American and white eighth grade math achievement gap is “pervasive, profound, and persistent” (Braun et al., 2006, p. 2). According to NCES (2000) there is a four year performance and knowledge gap in mathematics and reading comparing the white and African American students. The report went further to share information from the National Assessment of Education Progress that revealed by the end of 12th grade, African American students demonstrated mastery of reading and mathematics concepts similar to that of a white eighth grade student. Quite simply put, African Americans are failing (Holzman, 2010; Lewis, 2009).

The research supports that African American male students are failing while simultaneously not receiving the same opportunities to participate in rigorous educational classes (Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Holzman, 2010). They are misclassified causing unnecessary removal from general education classes and are increasingly being placed in special education courses
Researchers further explain that African American males are punished more severely for the same infractions as their white counterparts and, on average, receive less than half the resources and gifted and talented opportunities that white students receive (Holzman, 2010; Lewis and Erskine, 2008; Rothstein, 2004). The disparities continue to remain evident in advanced placement courses and college preparatory programs because virtually no African American students can be found in these classrooms, even though organizations such as The College Board are urging schools to open these classes and programs to all students (Holzman, 2010).

**Contributors to the Failure of African American Males**

Research data provide such detailed accounts of the shortcomings and failures of African American males, the obvious question is why? Osborne (1999) reports that there are a variety of theories that are attributed to overall failure of African American males; however, additional research is needed to capture theories that are more conclusive. Some of the major theories associated with the plight of African American males over time include differences in cognitive and communication styles (Kochman, 1981; Shade, 1982), aversion to intellectual competition (Howard & Hammond, 1985), genetic differences (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), low achievement motivation, anxiety, feelings of inadequacy and helplessness (Epps, 1970), and disparities in social psychological environments (Katz, Epps, & Alexson, 1964; Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Steele, 1997). Additionally, there are researchers that argue African American boys are failing because of a variety of other reasons. The reasons include lack of teacher preparation, engagement, deficit thinking towards African American boys, (Harper, 2005; Hilliard, 1991; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Weiner, 2000, 2003), lack of cultural relevance in the classroom, the misunderstanding of identity (Bank, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2000; Ogbu,
1991), low levels of parental involvement (Wallis, 1995), no linear relationship between racial/ethnic background and academics (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Harper & Tuckman, 2006), and, finally, researchers that say African American boys have been set up for failure from the beginning and attempts to address the issue have failed tragically or have been initiated without proper follow through (Bell, 1996, 2004; Days, 2001; Green, 2004; Guinier, 2004; Harper, 2008).

Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones (2009) attribute the various conflicts in assigning a single symptom of failure for African American males to a verified use in definitions and measures of racial/ethnic identity and, depending on the study, a wide variety of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that have been used to characterize African American identity. Furthermore, they assert differences to the possibility that it may be difficult to capture racial/ethnic identity solely from survey methods and that a much broader approach should be taken (Nasir et al., 2009).

*Social Structural Inequality*

Social Structural Inequality argues that African Americans have no choice but to be disadvantaged. The educational system lacks resource equity and it has been this way since its inception, when it was founded, maintained, and reproduced from racist philosophies, policies, and practices within education (Feagin & Feagin, 2003; Lewis et al., 2008). Social-structural inequality scholars also hold representatives of the American schooling system responsible for the Black-White Achievement gap. This includes teachers, administrators, institutions, and all other societal institutions (i.e. legal, family, economic, religious, media, and government) (Feagin, 2006; Lewis et al., 2008). These scholars further argue that the abundance of deficit models and schools’ inability to mend cultural disconnects is happening because the American school system is not neutral, but rather one that operates in the context of political, cultural, and
social inequalities and plays a part in allowing and excusing those inequalities (Rushing, 2001). In other words, the American education system works in favor of students who are members of privileged social groups at the expense of less privileged students (Feagin, 2006; Lewis et al., 2008).

*African American Males and Identity in Relation to Academics*

Academic failure in African American males has also been attributed to lack of identification with academics (Ogbu, 1986; Osborne, 1999). Researchers Lewis (2008), Finn (1989), and Newmann (1981) argue that identification with academics is an absolute priority for learning. Identification to academics is founded in the symbolic interactionist perspective on self-esteem (Osborne, 1999). This self-esteem perspective states that people receive feedback from their environment and that this feedback, if attended to, is perceived. If the perceptions are received as true then they are incorporated into the self-concept which directly effects self-esteem (James, 1890/1963). Identified students are intrinsically rewarded by good performance and punished by poor performance; disidentified students experience lower motivation to excel academically because there is no correlation between academic outcomes and self-esteem, thus making them high risk for academic problems, poor grades, and dropping out (Osborne, 1999; Osborne & Rausch, 2001). Identification with academics has emerged to become an important indicator of academic outcomes, including honor roll placement, receiving academic probation, behavioral referrals, and absenteeism (Osborne, 1997; Osborne & Rausch, 2001).

African American males are largely disidentified with academics (Ogbu, 1997; Osborne, 1999; Steele, 1992; Steele, 1997). One cause of the disidentification is the stereotype threat. Steele’s (1992, 1997), theory of stereotype identifies negative stereotypes as a contributing factor in academic performance in students of color. Furthermore, Steele (1992, 1997) argues that
African American males and students of color experience normal anxiety associated with school but this basic level of anxiety is heightened due to the negative stereotypes associated with their race. For example, misspelling a word or an incorrect math problem is personally damaging but also confirms the negative group stereotype. This stereotype-induced anxiety creates an immediate disidentification with academics (Osborne, 1999).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) support that the disidentification with academics is detrimental to academic success, however, they say that African American males are involuntary minorities because they are a part of a race brought to America against their will. This fact automatically creates disidentification because, for African Americans, the education system is controlled by the group that subjugated and oppressed them as well as their ancestors. African Americans are encouraged to value whatever is in opposition to the European American values, a phenomenon called cultural inversion (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Cultural inversion, Ogbu (1986) explains, was created to cope and maintain a sense of identity while under subordination. It still is affecting African American males because the group still feels subjugated and oppressed (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Conversely, for minorities that strategically chose to migrate to the United States, most Latinos and Asian Americans, for example, an education is the path through which a better future is created, so adapting and assimilating is welcomed (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). African American males continue to fail because the adaptation is not welcomed. While there are examples of educated African American males, they are not fully accepted or rewarded like their white counterparts and still face the peer and cultural pressure of not “acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). These types of experiences reinforce a culture of opposition and a collective
identity opposing academic success for African Americans which results in disidentification with academics and continued failure for African American males (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Majors and Billson (1992) have a similar belief to that of Ogbu and Steel. The researchers argue African American males adopt a “cool pose,” a ritualized approach to masculinity that creates a vehicle for them to cope and survive in an atmosphere filled with social oppression and racism, both in and out of school (Osborne, 1999). Majors and Billson (1992) contribute that from an early age African American males project a façade of emotionless, fearlessness, and aloofness to battle the anguish caused by damaged pride, low levels of self-esteem, and fragile social competence that is a direct result of being a member of a subjugated group.

In the classroom the “cool pose” is dangerous because it leads to pretentious and nonconformist behaviors that welcome punishment in school settings. Furthermore, the “cool pose” is in direct contrast to the idea of a good student; a hard driving, disciplined, and highly motivated individual closely identified with schooling (Osborne, 1999). With this in mind, African American males adopted a coping mechanism to handle the pressures of being a part of a stigmatized group that is oppositional to identification with academics (Majors & Billson, 1992; Osborne, 1999).

The research of Ogbu (1991), Fordham (1988, 1996), Steele (1992, 1997), and Majors and Billson (1992) suggests that African American males fail to achieve their full academic capabilities due to social, psychological, and cultural hurdles. The young men are discouraged or prevented from increasing their educational capital because there are psychological mechanisms battling anxiety, fear of losing cultural identity through assimilation, fear of being labeled as acting white, peer group resistance to European American values, and ritualized
approaches to manhood (Majors & Billson, 1992). Although there are many different beliefs in the root of the issue plaguing African American males, the common thread between the researchers mentioned above is they agree that when African American males have deep connections to their African American identity, their academic achievement and belief in the importance of academics suffers. The very acceptance of their African American identity causes the devaluing of academics and education (Fordham, 1988, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003; Osborne, 1997).

**Historic Legislation’s Effect on the African American Male Experience**

Derek Bell (2004) believes that African American males are struggling and are associated with bleak data points but credits this to the failure of implementing and fully integrating the historical transformational change components of Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka. The achievement gap and negative experiences that have become common reality for African American should actually not be in existence. The Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka case was intended to outlaw racial segregation, eradicate the educational and societal inequalities that directly contributed to the disadvantages faced by African Americans, provide access and equitable opportunities inside and outside the classroom, and yield social and economic advancement for African American people (Brown, 1954; Finn, 2004; Harper, 2008). While full of great intentions, nearly 57 years later it seems as if the historic case may not have even existed. Bell (2004) notes that most African American students still attend racially homogeneous and economically distressed public schools with limited resources, boast facilities that are barely conducive to learning, are plagued with disheartening dropout rates, and are performing below average on state issued assessments. Data provided by school districts also supports that much hast not changed since 1954. For example, Holzman (2004) found that the public schools of
Chicago and New York enroll nearly ten percent of the nation’s African American males collectively, and failed to graduate more than 70 percent of these students within four years. Across the country, as mentioned earlier, that data mirror these results (Department of Education, 2006). These trends demonstrate that the intentions of Brown are yet to be fulfilled and African American students are still counted out, experience inequity, and are at a disadvantage (Bell, 1996, 2004; Days, 2001; Green, 2004; Guinier, 2004; Lemons-Smith, 2008). Lemons-Smith (2008) offers that although it is illegal to segregate schools based on race, African American and white students continue to receive unequal educational experiences. This situation arguably exists because the nation lacks the will and fortitude to equalize the educational experiences of all students regardless of race, culture, socioeconomic status, and other characteristics. Guinier (2004) sums the trends up with the following critique of Brown:

The fact is that fifty years later, many of the social, political, and economic problems that the legally trained social engineers thought that the Court had addressed through Brown are still deeply embedded in our society. African Americans lag behind Whites in multiple measure of educational achievement, and within the Black community, boys are falling further behind than girls. (p.92)

Hilliard and Sizemore (1984) are in agreement with their colleagues and believe that Brown did not do anything to increase the educational achievement or the disadvantages of African Americans; it simply achieved physical reassignment. They argued,

Inherent in racial balance remedies that give priority to the placement of African American students in a perpetual minority relationship with European Americans are the false assumptions that African American Children inevitably suffer intellectually when their education occurs mainly in African American schools and that the motivation and
achievement of African American children necessarily improves when they are enrolled in majority white-schools. The racial composition of a school, when considered alone, does not necessarily have a substantial positive effect on academic performance of African American children. Significant evidence does not exist to support any claim that racial mixing alone has contributed to the excellence in the academic growth of the masses of African American students. It is not simply the addition of African Americans to a previously all-white school that makes a positive difference; it is the elimination of many of the negative factors within the school and the teaching and learning process, African American or European American that enhances growth and development. (p.25)

*Educators’ Perceptions and Deficit Thinking*

Committed to educational excellence, Hilliard (2000) believed that academic achievement for African American students had to come from a reevaluation of the educational process in terms of conceptualizing effective teaching, engagement of African American students, cultural and ethnic diversity, and teachers knowing that all students are capable. For true transformational change to occur within education, schools and school districts must shed traditional paradigms that emphasize varying levels of expectations based on students’ racial, ethnic, or cultural identities. Hilliard further suggests basing expectations on these factors alone creates deficit thinking. Holding such low expectations can prove limiting and detrimental to African American children.

*Educators’ Perceptions*

In the classroom many teachers are operating from the frame of reference that African American males are incapable of rigor and treat them as such (Hilliard, 2000; Hilliard & Sizemore, 1984; Noguera, 1997; Weiner, 2000). Due to an internalized belief based on societal
influence and stereotypes, both black and white teachers of African American males view these young men as villains, hesitate to engage in a nurturing way, and often fail to offer superior educational service (Ferguson, 2003; Noguera, 1997). Ferguson (2003), shares that no matter the materials, curriculum, or activities students are exposed too, they spend every day interacting with their teachers and they immerse themselves in schooling, so it is the perceptions and expectations of the teachers that have the greatest effect on their goals of achievement. If the perceptions and expectations for African American students are low, then the opportunity for success diminishes greatly. For example, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (1978) wrote,

Teachers, like all of us, use the dimensions of class, race, sex, and ethnicity to bring order to their perception of the classroom environment. Rather than teachers gaining more in-depth and holistic understanding of the child, with the passage of time teachers’ perceptions become increasingly stereotyped and children become hardened caricatures of an initially discriminatory vision. (pp. 85-86)

In 1985, these views were supported by Baron, Tom, and Cooper, who wrote,

The race of a particular student may cue the teacher to apply the generalized expectations, therefore making it difficult for the teacher to develop specific expectations tailored to individual students. In this manner, the race or class distinction among students is perpetuated. The familiar operation of stereotypes takes place in that it becomes difficult for minority or disadvantaged students to distinguish themselves from the generalized expectation. (p. 251)

Baron et al. (1985) substantiates what they have written by conducting a meta-analysis of teacher expectations, 16 of which addressed race. Their results reported that in 9 of 16 studies teachers had higher expectations for white students and only one study where they had higher
expectations for African American students. The rest of the studies were statistically insignificant and did not report which group was favored.

When the students cannot connect with their teachers or understand the treatment they are receiving, they begin to pull back, become distant, and respond differently to their teachers (Casteel, 1997; Ferguson, 2003). The difference comes because students begin to experience stereotype threat, an anxiety typically found with individuals that are members of a stigmatized group (Ferguson, 2003). Steel and Aronson (1998) explain that stereotype threat occurs when individuals from the stigmatized group feel as if their actions or performance in a certain area may corroborate a stereotype associated with their group. They fear that the stereotype will become the foundation of others pejorative judgment, as well as their own self-perceptions (Ferguson, 2003; Steel and Aronson, 1998).

Deficit thinking

The negative perceptions and expectations too often associated with African Americans are more commonly referred to as deficit thinking on the part of the teacher (Weiner, 2000). Deficit thinking occurs in classrooms where teachers and/or schools place the blame on the students themselves for their academic and achievement shortcomings (Weiner, 2000, 2003). Deficit thinking is a huge issue for minority students and not nearly as adverse for their white counterparts because the two groups have different priorities in terms of who they want to please. Casteel (1997) asked students whom they wanted to please in the classroom. Teachers were the answer for 81 percent of African American females, 62 percent of African American males, 28 percent of white females and 32 percent of white males. African American boys are reaching out for a help and it seems that the requests are being made to deaf ears (Hilliard, 1991).
Deficit thinking, in addition to affecting the teachers in the classroom, is also the culture in the entire building. Weiner (2000) informs us that in urban schools, where a majority of African American boys attend, an impersonal bureaucratic school culture exists which undercuts many teaching attitudes and behaviors that draw on students’ strength. The culture fosters an assumption that when students misbehave or struggle academically, something is wrong with the student. Consequently, the student needs to be “fixed” because the problem lies within the student or the home environment, not in the social ecology of the school, the attitudes of the educators, grade, classroom, or lack of knowing the school going process (Lemons-Smith, 2008; Weiner, 2000; Wren, 1999). Deficit thinking and lack of engagement in the classroom, as well as the building culture, are immediate and consistent contributors to the failure of African American males in the school setting, which then influences and contributes to failure and lack of confidence in many other aspects the young men’s lives. This thought process causes damage to students with unlimited potential as it is imperative to know that, in reality, African American students merely require the same high quality instruction typically afforded to their white counterparts (Hilliard, 1995, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

*Influence of Parental Involvement on African American Males*

Since slavery, African American families have worked together and fought for educational equality, and as a culture really understood the value of a quality education. However, in recent years the African American family has stopped working together and has fallen into a cycle of educational underachievement (Hare, 2003; Hilliard, 1984; Portrait, 2004). According to Solórzano (1992), even with increased high school completion rates over the past several decades, accessing postsecondary education and achieving lofty academic goals represents a critical challenge for many African Americans. In elementary and secondary
schools African American children are failing at record rates and one of the contributing variables to this problem is the low rate of parental involvement (Wallis, 1995).

Parental involvement has been defined in a variety of ways. It has been defined as a partnership between home, school, and community members to support a child’s education process (Wallis, 1995). Middleton and Loughead (1993) define parental involvement as parents that attend parent–teacher conferences, can be reached by phone, attend PTA meetings and school programs. These parents are highly motivated, interested in the value of a good education, provide supervision for their children after school, possess school supplies at home, and are described by the term “high parental involvement.” Parents feel that parental involvement includes any mixture of serving as a teacher’s aide, tutoring, fundraising, attending field trips, providing a place to study, assisting with homework, setting a curfew, and monitoring activities, such as watching television or hanging out with friends (Finders & Lewis 1994). Although many variations of parental involvement seem to exist they all have a common theme which is that parents who actively participate in any function of their child’s educational development have a positive correlation with academic success (Hollifield, 1995).

The common trend that research has shown over the years is that parental involvement yields educational success (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Hollifield, 1995). Children are educated constantly from birth because parents serve as the first teachers in a child’s life, they are considered to be the primary educators of their child so parents play a critical role in the educational process (Sanders, 1998). Other researchers have documented that not only is there value in family involvement in the academic success of students, but also from pre-kindergarten through the higher education experience, family involvement has profound effects on student learning (Lafreniere, Ledgerwood, & Docherty, 1997; Sanders, 1998).
Additionally, researchers have conducted studies that show how parents can support students’ academic development and how that support reflects a positive correlation with academic success of African American students (Wallis, 1995). Middleton and Loughead (1993) concluded that parents can be involved in the academic lives of their students at three levels: positive involvement, noninvolvement, and negative involvement. A positively involved parent is very active in the student’s development and has a vested interest in the student’s personal and educational interests and goals. This type of parent engages in conversation around the student’s future, asks effective questions, and augments the student’s developmental process (Middleton & Loughead, 1993). Noninvolved parents are apathetic concerning their students’ education and are extremely hands off regarding their students’ academic careers (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Wallis, 1995). Students with noninvolved parents often report that their parents have no interest in their future and do not even realize when they are seeking help (Middleton & Loughead, 1993). Negatively involved parents are involved in their students’ academic development, but are only interested in the aspirations of the parent and not the student. For example, a parent may only support a student if the student studies the field that satisfies the wishes of the parent (Middleton & Loughead, 1993).

Similarly, Smith and Hausf完善(1998) investigated the dynamics of family and academic achievement within ethnic minority students. Specifically, they studied how family involvement affects performance in math and science amongst seventh graders and found that parental involvement is linked to students’ academic performance (Smith & Hausf完善, 1998).

In other literature concerning parental and family involvement, research continues to reflect that parental involvement fosters academic success and development in African American students. In 1980, Phi Delta Kaplan released a report that concluded parental involvement
served as a significant factor in attaining positive outcomes in urban schools. This is important because school districts are struggling to meet the needs of economically disadvantaged urban students, especially those identified as minority and special needs (Gardener & Talbert-Johnson, 2000). Researchers (Cotton, 1991; Olson & Jerald, 1998) have reported that 43 percent of the minority population is educated in urban school settings. If this is the case, then the needs of almost half of the minority students in the United States are currently not being met. Parental involvement is a way to address this issue. Children who have parental involvement in their schooling can significantly increase academic achievement and cognitive development (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997), and also positively impact the parent-child relationship due to the parent taking an active role in the student’s life and activities (Hollifield, 1995).

The Success of African American Males Despite the Shadow of an Achievement Gap

After spending extensive time researching information on the state of African American males using the Ebsco host, Google Scholar, and the Auraria library, the results provided in-depth literature on the disparities associated with African American males but little was found on the success experienced by African American males and almost none focused on the success at the secondary level. Hilliard (1995) supports my experience by offering the following,

Rarely do we hear of success in producing achievement for African American, Native American, and Hispanic students. When we do hear of such achievement, it is trumpeted as a miracle, as the exception that proves the rule, as the exception that proves the rule, as the work that can only be done by teachers who have a special charisma, as outliers that have to be regarded as statistical errors or mere accidents. (p. 102)

Harper (2009) has done extensive research on African American males and achievement but his works, like many other researchers focused on African American males, focuses on the African
American males that are already at the collegiate level (Allen, 2005; Bonner, 2001; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998, 2002, 2004; Harper, 2004, 2008, 2009). The results are consistent; the achievement gap is still prevalent at the collegiate level and African American males are at a disadvantage from the birth to adulthood (Holzman, 2010). There have been some studies focusing on success of students at the high school level; while limited studies are available, important insights have developed from the completed research (Tucker, Herman, & Pedersen, 2000). The few studies that have directly solicited school participant views regarding specific academic problems and solutions suggest that all school participants can impart meaningful ideas to the discussion. Baker (1999) is a great example as interviews with 61 fifth graders provided useful information about how caring and supportive relationships with teachers can promote their school satisfaction.

Tucker et al. (2000) completed a study focusing on solutions to enhance academic achievement in African American youth. They assert school participants have the ability to offer a unique look into the education of African American students, however, too often their opinions are overlooked (Tucker et al., 2000). In their study Tucker and colleagues ask questions of African American elementary and high school students around several domains, including problem behaviors in the school setting, factors contributing to problems for African Americans at school, and the promotion of academic success.

The results showed that the students definitely understood the questions and provided great insight on what would be helpful for the success of African American students. The high school students reported that studying, asking the teacher questions, class participation, and listening are important factors when trying to engage in the pursuit of academic achievement. Additionally, the report showed that students were concerned and requested assistance regarding
peer pressure, identified a need for self-management strategies, and discussed the importance of setting goals and being active participants in positive activities. Finally, the students revealed one of the most important factors that can influence student success is praise and encouragement from parents and teachers (Tucker et al., 2000). While it is important to note that this is a preliminary qualitative investigation of the views of African American students concerning solutions to enhance the academic success of African American students it is equally important to see the value in giving students a voice. The findings suggest that African American students recognize their needs and continued efforts to listen to African American students to understand their perspective and incorporate their responses into the educational curriculum can empower them and lead to some real solutions (Tucker et al., 2000). After all students are people too and, just like adults in the workplace, students will perform better and engage if they feel valued and have an opportunity to be heard so they buy in to the goals and objectives completely (Collins, 2006; Lewis & Moore, 2004).

Chapter Summary

While a great deal of attention has been paid to the experiences of African American males over the past few decades, the information mostly focuses on the negatives aspects of these experiences. There is an extreme achievement gap between African Americans and whites. African American males are struggling to achieve at an equal rate with many demographics, including African American women, whites, Asians, and others. Within society the results of the experiences have led to a deficit thinking in general when it pertains to African Americans. African American men are viewed as criminals, deadbeats, and much worse. To make matters worse, black males are at the bottom of the totem pole in every major societal category. Economically, within education, employment, family engagement, serving as role models, and
graduation are all areas that African American males seem to be falling behind in based on the research.

There are many theories attached to the question of why African American males are struggling. The theories place responsibility in a variety of areas: society, African Americans themselves, racism, environment, and a variety of other factors. Solutions have neither been discussed widely nor have African American males that have experienced success been engaged in conversation about their paths to success and/or academic achievement.

Engaging African American males is appropriate as the researchers that have attempted to have found some solutions or have had a positive experience (Harper, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2009; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Tucker et al., 2000). In order to build on the solutions and positive experiences reported by some researchers, African American males must have a voice (Holzman, 2010). This review captures the data presented on African American males. It demonstrates challenges, dilemmas, and the plight African Americans are facing. Within the data provided there were not large contributions that focus on success. This is what makes this study so important and it clearly demonstrates that an additional lens is needed in understanding the African American male experience. A new lens has the opportunity to change the conversation from dilemmas to solutions (Lewis & Erskine, 2008).
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework, the phenomenological design, and methods of the study. The research questions, study design, data collection, and analysis are discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion on factors used to ensure the study’s validity and reliability.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory is a common framework used in addressing matters of social justice and inequality (Bell 1987, 1992, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002). Within the frame of CRT is a tool referred to as counter storytelling. It is a tool specifically used to engage marginalized groups, such as African American males, with the intent of offering a platform to address the master narrative that has informed and led the thought of general society for so long (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT has the advantage of retrospect in addressing the critiques of other theories and is intentional in its purpose to focus on race and racism, to challenge the dominant ideology, to work toward social justice, to validate the experiences of people of color, and to utilize transdisciplinary approaches.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in the in the mid-1970s as a response to the failure of Critical Legal Studies to address race and racism in United States jurisprudence (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). CRT is a very solid framework to use in conducting research, unlike some approaches, Critical Race Theory is not a fad, latest trend, buzz word, or latest research phenomenon, as it was born from a variety of disciplines, epistemologies, and research approaches (Scheurich & Young, 1997). For example, disciplines such as women and ethnic
studies, cultural nationalism, critical legal studies, internal colonial models, and Marxist/Neo Marxist frameworks are the foundations of Critical Race Theory. In fact, some researchers would argue that CRT’s roots reach back as far as the classic work, *The Souls of Black Folks*, written by W. E. B. DuBois’s in 1903 (Solarzano & Yosso, 2001).

Tierney (1993) has defined critical theory as “an attempt to understand the oppressive aspects of society in order to generate societal and individual transformation” (p. 4). Matsuda (1991) views critical race theory as “…the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that work toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination” (p. 1331). Although directly credited from developing from the legal realm and Critical Legal Studies in particular, CRT has moved into a variety of other fields (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solarzano & Yosso, 2001). In education, for example, there has been continuous use of CRT since the 1994 release of Tate’s autobiographical article, *From inner city to ivory tower: Does my voice matter in the academy*, and his joint work entitled, *Toward a critical race theory of education* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1994; Solarzano & Yosso, 2001).

Ladson-Billings (1998), Tate (1997), and Solarzano (1997) furthered the understanding of CRT in the field of education, give a thorough overview of CRT, and make direct connections between Critical Race Theory and education which highlights its relevance. Ladson-Billings (1998) discusses the different education legislation throughout the history of education and determined the theme that surfaced was educational opportunity. She furthered explored curriculum, instruction, school funding, and desegregation as examples of the relationships that can exist between Critical Race Theory and education.
Solórzano and Yosso (2002) elaborated and expanded upon Critical Race Theory to include counter-storytelling using Critical Race Methodology. They define critical race methodology as a theoretically grounded approach to research that (1) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. Additionally, it challenges the separate discourses on race, gender, and class by showing how these three elements intersect to affect the experiences of students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); (2) challenges the traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color by the dominant ideology (Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); (3) offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, and class subordination (Matsuda, 1991; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); (4) focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color. Furthermore, it views these experiences as sources of strength (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1993; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); and (5) uses the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, history, humanities, and the law to better understand the experiences of students of color (Delgado, 1984, 1992; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002).

The counter-storytelling has become a very useful approach in educational research. It is a method to express the stories of people often overlooked in the literature and a vehicle to examine, critique, and counter master (majoritarian) stories composed about people of color (Harper, 2009). Master narratives are dominant accounts that are often generally accepted as universal truths about particular groups (i.e. African American boys are hopeless and helpless) (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) note that many of the theoretical models and research that aim to explain inequity in education, support the majoritarian viewpoints through the constant magnification of deficiency among students of color. To directly address this, a counter-story “exposes deficit informed research that silences and distorts
epistemologies of people of color. Although social scientists tell stories under the guise of ‘objective’ research, these stories actually uphold deficit, racialized notions about people of color” (p. 23).

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identify three different types of counter narratives: personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. For the purpose of exploring achievement and success within African American boys, composite counter narratives will be the most beneficial because it relies on data collected from multiple persons of color who have experienced a particular context or similar phenomena. Furthermore, composite stories are useful for representing the often disregarded experiences of a larger group through a smaller subset of “characters” that represent the group. Personal stories will also be used due to the researcher being an African American male that has experienced success and is both theoretically sensitive (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and has “cultural intuition” (Bernal, 1998) regarding the subject. The concept of theoretical sensitivity offered by Strauss and Corbin (1990) refers to a personal quality of the researcher and indicates a consciousness of the subtleties of meaning of data. More specifically, Strauss and Corbin (1990) say, “Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn’t” (p. 41). Delgado Bernal’s (1998) explanation of “cultural intuition” is slightly dissimilar from theoretical sensitivity in that it also “extends one’s personal experience to include collective experience and community memory and points to the importance of participants’ engaging in the analysis of data” (pp. 563-564). Additionally she explains:

A Chicana researcher’s cultural intuition is achieved and can be nurtured through our personal experiences (which are influenced by ancestral wisdom, community memory,
and intuition), the literature on and about Chicanas, our professional experiences, and the analytical process we engage in when we are in a central position of our research and our analysis. Thus, cultural intuition is a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic. (pp. 567-568)

Although this research is regarding African American males versus Chicanos, the principle will be applied as it lends strength and direction to the research. Therefore, utilizing theoretical sensitivity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), Delgado Bernal’s (1998) notion of “cultural intuition,” and drawing upon the tenets of Critical Race Theory, the counter-stories of African American males success that challenge the deficit research of the majority can be developed from at least four sources: (1) the data gathered from the research process itself; (2) the existing literature on the African American males; (3) the professional experience of African American males; and (4) the personal experience of African American males (Harper, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002).

The use of Critical Race Theory provides the researcher a historical perspective on the attempts to support the success of African American males through policy and legislation. Understanding that inequity in educational experiences still exists for African American males, it is important that successful African American men are allowed to tell a different story that challenges popular societal viewpoints and research on African American males, and offer a deeper understanding of the African American male experience through listening to and reading about them in a transdisciplinary fashion (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Using counter story telling (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002) to implement CRT as a research framework for the experiences of African American males is most appropriate because storytelling not only allows a different story to be heard but also serves at least four theoretical, methodological, and
pedagogical functions. Counter stories can: (a) build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (b) challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (c) open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (d) teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (Delgado, 1989). Storytelling has a rich and continuing tradition in African-American communities (Bell, 1987, 1992, 1996) and, as Delgado (1989) has stated, “Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (p. 2436).

**Research Design and Rationale**

This is a phenomenological study using qualitative methods to explore and understand the lived experiences of African American males as it relates to their educational accomplishments and their societal success. Although the origins of phenomenology can be traced back to Kant and Hegel, Vandenberg (1997,) regards Husserl as “the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century” (p. 11). Following the First World War, there was much confusion, disconnect, and the usual framework for existing was in turmoil. German philosopher Edmund Husserl set out to find clarity in the midst of extreme disarray. Eagleton (1983) captures the scenario best:

The social order of European capitalism had been shaken to its roots by the carnage of the war and its turbulent aftermath. The ideologies on which that order had customarily depended; the cultural values by which it ruled were also in deep turmoil.
Science seemed to have dwindled to a sterile positivism, a myopic obsession with the
categorizing of facts; philosophy appeared torn between such positivism on the one hand,
and an indefensible subjectivism on the other; forms of relativism and irrationalism were
rampant, and art reflected this bewildering loss of bearings. Due to the context of this
ideological crisis, the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl “sought to develop a new
philosophical method which would lend absolute certainty to a disintegrating
civilization.” (p. 54)

Husserl rejected the belief that objects in the external world exist independently and that the
information about objects is reliable. He contended that people can be certain about how
things appear in, or present themselves to, their consciousness (Eagleton, 1983; Fouche, 1993).
To arrive at certainty, anything outside immediate experience must be ignored, and in this way
the external world is reduced to the contents of personal consciousness. Realities are thus treated
as pure “phenomena” and the only absolute data from where to begin (Groenewald, 2004).
Husserl named his philosophical method “phenomenology,” the science of pure “phenomena”
(Eagleton, 1983, p. 55). The aim of phenomenology is the return to the concrete, captured by the
slogan, “Back to the things themselves!” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 56; Kruger, 1988, p. 28; Moustakas,

Holloway points out that the basis for phenomenology by Husserl was provided by Franz
Brentano, Husserl’s teacher. Brentano first stressed the intentional nature of consciousness or the
internal experience of being conscious of something (Holloway, 1997, p. 117). A student of
Husserl, Martin Heidegger, introduced the concept of “Dasein” or “Being there” and the
dialogue between a person and their world. Heidegger and Husserl respectively explored the
“lived-world” in terms of an average existence in an ordinary world (Schwandt, 1997). A

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follower, Alfred Schultz, furthered the idea that “the human world comprises various provinces of meaning” (Vandenberg, 1997, p. 7). The existential phenomenology of Heidegger was carried forward by others, including Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The works of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty extensively expanded the influence of Husserl and Heidegger (Vandenberg, 1997) on phenomenology.

The operative word in phenomenological research is “describe.” The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts (Creswell, 1998). According to Welman and Kruger (1999) “the phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of people involved” (p. 189). Van Manen (1990) explains that phenomenology aims to acquire a deeper understanding of the nature, or meaning, of our daily lived experience without abstracting the subject of the investigation. Thus, it offers plausible insights that bring us closer to the lived world. Using “attentiveness and wonder” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 18), the researcher acts as a guardian and protector of the subject and has a goal to remain true to that object under investigation. Colaizzi (1978) shares the view of truth to the phenomenon and states, “Objectivity is fidelity to the phenomenon. It is a refusal to tell the phenomenon what it is but a respectful listening to what the phenomenon speaks of itself” (p. 52).

A researcher applying phenomenology is concerned with the lived experiences of the people involved, or who were involved, with the issue that is being researched (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Krueger, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001). The words of Van den Berg, translated by Van Manen (1997), profoundly capture what is stated in this paragraph:

Phenomena have something to say to us — this is common knowledge among
poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologist. Or rather, we are all born phenomenologist; the poets and painters among us, however, understand very well their task of sharing, by means of word and image, Their insights with others — an artfulness that is also laboriously practiced by the professional phenomenologist. (p. 41)

The major objective for this study is to explore the experiences of successful African American males. In order to delve beyond the surface level, the research must produce the necessary material, “to do phenomenological research is to craft text” (van Manen, 1990, p. 78). The phenomenological methodology requires obtaining material to construct text; the researcher must first individually and intensely interview participants. The researcher will share and discuss interview transcripts with the participants to secure the desired deep understanding of the phenomenon and its meaning.

Phenomenological research is good at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard. It is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, accounting for disregarded assumptions and usual ways of perceiving (Fouche, 1993; Groenewald, 2004). Epistemologically, phenomenological research is based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasizes the importance of personal perspective and interpretation.

Babbie (2007) explains that qualitative research methods, which are used in phenomenology, are non-numerical examinations and interpretation of observations, with the sole purpose of discovering meaning in-depth of complex phenomenon and not the use of basic standardized questions. Furthermore, qualitative research is completed using methods such as focus groups, interviews, and the use of open ended questions (Babbie, 2007).
**Phenomenology Design**

This phenomenological design uses a cross-sectional, non-experimental approach. The non-experimental design is appropriate in this situation because it provides the extremely descriptive data required in understanding the success of African American males. Capturing the real life aspects of these men is critical, often a weakness in experimental design (Babbie, 2007).

Phenomenological research refers to the practice of illustrating the meaning for individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology focuses on depicting what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas (1995) tells us, “Phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge” (p. 26). Colaizzi (1978) differentiates between natural and human science when he explains in the natural sciences the experimenter looks for causal explanation. “The phenomenologist, on the other hand, wishes to identify the investigated topic. The phenomenologist seeks to understand the phenomenon by staying with it and thinking meditatively about its meaning” (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 68).

**Research Paradigm**

A good research project starts with the selection of the topic, problem or area of interest, as well as the paradigm (Creswell, 1994). Stanage (1987) traced “paradigm” back to its Greek (paradeigma) and Latin origins (paradigma) meaning pattern, model, or example. Simply stated, a paradigm is an action of submitting to a view (Stanage, 1987). This view is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) who define a research paradigm as “a basic set of beliefs that guide action,” (p. 157) dealing with first principles, or the researcher’s worldviews.

A researcher’s epistemology, according to Holloway (1997) and Creswell (1994),
is literally their theory of knowledge, which serves to decide how the social phenomena will be studied. My epistemological position regarding this study can be formulated as follows: (a) data are contained within the perspectives of African American men that have directly experienced academic and societal success; and (b) because of this I engaged with these participants to collect the data.

Data Collection

Study Sample

According to Hycner, (1999) “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the type of participants” (p. 156). I chose to use a convenience sample (Brown, Cozby, Kee, & Worden, 1999). Convenience samples are not as rigorous as other methods of sampling but are valuable in exploratory research, such as when the goal is to get an available sample of a variety of participants to uncover general ideas about the issue at hand. In the convenience sampling approach, participants are selected both on the basis of their availability and on the researcher’s judgment that they are representative in some way of the larger group. Because not all possible members of a given population (in this case, all African American males) are included, one cannot be sure of the representative nature of the population studied, and thus cannot generalize findings conclusively (Kalton, 1983).

I selected the sample based on my judgment, participant availability, and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997), looking for those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1988, p. 150). The Kappa Alpha Psi Denver Alumni Chapter was selected. The Denver Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi is a part of an international organization of college educated African American men.
The fraternity’s fundamental purpose is, “Achievement in every field of human endeavor.”

Furthermore, the organization has five core objectives which are:

1. To unite college men of culture, patriotism and honor in a bond of Fraternity;
2. To encourage honorable achievement in every field of human endeavor;
3. To promote the spiritual, social, intellectual and moral welfare of its members;
4. To assist the aims and purposes of colleges and universities;
5. To inspire service in the public's interest (Denver Kappa, 2011).

Kappa Alpha is a historically African American, all male organization that has embodied its purpose and objectives for over 100 years. It was founded January 5, 1911, and its membership ranks include successful African American men from every industry (Denver Kappa, 2011). The Middle Western Province President Clifford Franklin states,

Our organization is the antithesis of every negative societal thought portrayed in regard to African American. We are employed, educated, god fearing family men that inspire service in the public’s interest and settle for nothing less than success and achievement in all we do. Our organization has waged war on mediocrity and is committed to dispelling all the negative stereotypes associated with African American. (C. C. Franklin, personal communication, April 15, 2010)

In order to access additional participants, I used snowball sampling. Snowballing is a method of expanding the sample by asking one informant or participant to recommend others for interviewing (Babbie, 1995; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). Bailey (1996), Holloway (1997), and Greig and Taylor (1999) call those through whom entry is gained gatekeepers and those persons who volunteer assistance key actors or key insiders. Neuman (2000) qualifies a gatekeeper as “someone with the formal or informal authority to control access to a site” (p. 352), a person
from whom permission is required. Key insiders often adopt the researcher and Bailey (1996) cautions that such adoption may isolate the researcher from some potential informants or subjects.

I requested three executive board members of Denver Kappa Alpha Psi, who are part of the purposive sampling interview core, to provide the names and contact information for other African American males that participate in their alumni chapter activities. Preliminary conversations around this request was positive and names were forwarded. The men in the Kappa organization are typically considered some of the most successful African American men in Colorado’s African American community. Each year this is demonstrated as countless members of the organization are promoted and receive prestigious recognition from the civic, social, and professional community. The researcher has ensured that the participants will be available and that they are the appropriate participants to address the phenomenon being addressed by this study.

In order to ensure ethical research, this study uses informed consent (Holloway, 1997; Kvale, 1996). Bailey (1996) cautions deception may be counter-productive. However, not asking the leading (Kvale, 1996) main research question is not regarded as deception. Based on Bailey’s (1996) recommended items, a specific informed consent agreement has been developed, in order to gain the informed consent from participants, namely:

1. That they are participating in research
2. The purpose of the research
3. The procedures of the research
4. The risks and benefits of research
5. The voluntary nature of research participation
6. The participants right to stop the research at any time

7. The procedures used to protect confidentiality (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000; Kvale, 1996, Street, 1998).

Bailey (1996) further observes that deception might prevent insights, whereas honesty coupled with confidentiality minimizes apprehension and encourages authentic responses. The informed consent agreement form will be explained to participants at the beginning of each interview. All participants that signed had the flexibility to discontinue their participation at any time and those that did not sign the agreement were not pressured to participate in the study. All that agreed were required to sign prior to beginning the study.

Research contributed by Boyd (2001) regards two to ten participants or research subjects as sufficient to reach saturation and Creswell (1998) recommends “long interviews with up to 10 people” (pp. 65 & 113) for a phenomenological study. Following this guidance, a sample size goal of ten successful African American males was selected to participate in a focus group and potential individual follow up interviews or phone calls. In addition to the focus group, some candidates, based on their involvement, also participated in additional in-depth individual interviews in order to seek further understanding.

The purpose of collecting data in three different capacities is a form of triangulation, data triangulation, to contrast the data and validate the data if similar findings are identified (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bloor, 1997; Holloway, 1997). Data-collection interviews will continue until the topic is exhausted or saturated, meaning the participants have introduced no additional perspectives on the topic.

In order to initiate the data collection process I will conduct a focus group interview with the participants, conduct brief follow up individual interviews, and complete the collection
process with in-depth interviews of several specific participants. The individual interview participants will be selected based on insights and involvement in the focus group. Each selected participant will be scheduled for one interview with the option of one follow up phone interview if any additional clarification is necessary.

The participants involved will all be engaged in conversation based on the developed questions found in Appendix E. At the completion of the focus group and first individual interview conversations, the participants will be finished but have an understanding that each could be called for any follow up or clarifying questions.

As researcher, I will also take advantage of memoing, which is more widely known as researcher field notes. At each point in the data collection process I will be making specific notes about anything, including reactions, feelings, or experiences observed while the participants are interviewing or participating in a focus group.

Capturing Phenomenological Data

Kvale (1996) remarks with regard to capturing data during the qualitative interview that it “is literally an interview, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest,” where the researcher attempts to “understand the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold meaning of peoples' experiences” (pp. 1-2). At the root of phenomenology, “the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms; to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person herself” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96) and allowing the essence to emerge (Cameron, Schaffer & Hyeoun, 2001). The maxim of Edmund Husserl was “back to things themselves!” (Kruger, 1988, p. 28). Bentz and Shapiro (1998) and Kensit (2000) caution that the researcher must allow the data to emerge; Doing phenomenology means capturing rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings.
In order to capture the appropriate data and allow it to emerge this study uses three forms of qualitative data collection: (a) Individual Interview, (b) Focus Group, and (c) Memoing. The questions for the focus groups and individual interviews were inspired from a previous pilot study conducted by the researcher. These questions were then refined after conducting a literature review and ensuring the research question addressed the topic of interest appropriately. However, additional questions in the focus group as well as the interviews may arise during the data collection process if follow up questions are needed to delve deeper or attain increased understanding regarding the topic. For the purpose of initiating the interviews and focus group, a specific group of questions that can be found in Appendix E were asked.

*Interviews*

The integration of qualitative research into clinical research in the 1970s and 1980s introduced many distinct formats of qualitative interviews that greatly expanded the process of data collection and the depth of information being gathered (Fontana & Frey 1998). The in-depth interview is meant to be a personal and intimate encounter in which open, direct, verbal questions are used to elicit detailed narratives and stories. Interviews, while typically semi-unstructured can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (Gubrium & Holstein 2002; Krawthol, 2008). In qualitative research, interviewing provides the most direct focused interface between researcher and participant (Kvale 1996; Stroh 2000; Rubin & Rubin 2005). More specifically, semi-structured and unstructured interviews allow participants to share their experiences and allow researchers the ability to explore the meaning participants create for ideas and terms (Misheler, 1986; Murray & Sixsmith, 1998).

Interviews are often the sole data source for a qualitative research project and are usually scheduled in advance at a designated time and location outside of everyday events (Creswell,
They are generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions emerging from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee/s. Semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research and can occur either with an individual or in groups. Most commonly they are only conducted once for an individual or group and take between 30 minutes to several hours to complete (Creswell, 2007; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Krathol, 2008; Murray & Sixsmith, 1998;).

Interviews need structure otherwise there is an excess of information to read, understand, and analyze. As van Manen (1990) warns, interviews can go nowhere and everywhere, additionally he reminds researchers to stay focused on the research questions. Colaizzi (1978) reminds researchers that the “success of all phenomenological research questions depends on the extent that they tap the subjects experiences of the phenomena as distinct from their theoretical knowledge of it” (p. 58).

Focus Groups

Focus groups as a research method originated at Columbia University in the 1940s, however, not until the late 1980s did focus groups become more commonly used by sociologists and other social scientists (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Morgan 1996). Some researchers assert that the extensive, and evidently successful, use of focus groups for marketing research by the private sector contributed to the adoption of focus groups as a research and evaluation method in the social sciences (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Morgan, 1997).

There are many definitions of a focus groups in the literature, but features like organized discussion (Kitzinger, 1994), collective activity (Powell et al., 1996), social events (Goss & Leinbach, 1996) and interaction (Kitzinger, 1995) identify the contribution that focus groups
make to social research. Powell & Single (1996) define a focus group as, “A group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (p. 499). Kruger (1998) explains that a focus group is a cautious and intentional planned dialogue designed to secure thoughts, attitudes, and ideas on a specific area of interest.

Focus groups are much more than a researcher asking questions and awaiting answers from participants. Rather they are an interaction where the researcher depends on participant interaction and discussion, based on questions posed by the researcher who often takes the role of a moderator (Morgan, 1997). Although a form of interviewing, it is important to distinguish between the two, as group interviewing consists of interviewing a number of people at the same time with the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups however rely on an interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher (Morgan, 1997).

**Memoing**

Memoing (Miles & Huberman, 1984) is another important data source in qualitative research that will be used in this study. It is the researcher’s field notes recording what the researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the process. Researchers are easily absorbed in the data collection process and may fail to reflect on what is happening. However, it is important that the researcher maintain a balance between descriptive notes and reflective notes, such as hunches, impressions, feelings, and so on. Miles and Huberman (1984) emphasize that memos (or field notes) must be dated so that the researcher can later correlate them with the data.
In the actual act of the research my questions will be “directed to the participant’s experiences, feelings, beliefs and convictions about the theme in question” (Welman & Kruger, 1999, p. 196). According to Bentz and Shapiro (1998), Husserl called it bracketing when the inquiry is performed from the perspective of the researcher. Bracketing (Caelli, 2001; Davidson, 2000; King, 1994; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996) in this study entails asking the participants to set aside their experiences about societal impressions of African American males and to share their reflection on its value. Data will be collected about how the participants “think and feel in the most direct ways” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). The focus will be on “what’s happening within” the participant and ask the participant to “describe the lived experience in a language as free from the constructs of the society as possible” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). This is one form of bracketing. There is also a second form of bracketing, which, according to Miller and Crabtree (1992) the researcher, “must bracket her/his own preconceptions and enter into the individual’s life world and use the self as an experiencing interpreter” (p. 24). Moustakas (1994) points out that “Husserl called the freedom from suppositions the epoche, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain” (p. 85). According to Bailey (1996) the “informal interview is a conscious attempt by the researcher to find out more information about the setting of the person” (p. 72). The interview is reciprocal: both researcher and research subject are engaged in the dialogue. This creates an assumption that the duration of interviews and the number of questions will vary from one participant to the other.

Each participant will have to complete an intake form to ensure they are eligible to participate. The information obtained from the intake form will be used to confirm the eligibility of each participant. The following information must be confirmed to ensure eligibility.

1. The participant must identify as an African American male.
2. The participant must report exposure to negative factors associated with African American males.

3. High school participants must be college ready and accepted to a college, trade, vocational school or demonstrate a sound entrepreneurial plan.

4. Adult participants must be self-sustaining.

5. All participants must possess no major legal implications.

This sample represents a specific target audience of African American males. The demographics collected and required ensure a homogenous group of African Americans in relation to their experiences. The group, while sharing many similarities, also captures a wide range of experiences that will help in comparing these experiences over time. Once again, please note this sample is not intended to be generalized to other settings, but rather to be a starting point for uncovering the experiences and perceptions of African American males.

*Data Storing Methods*

With the permission of interviewees, all interviews will be audio recorded (Arkley & Knight, 1999; Bailey, 1996). Each interview will be assigned a code, for example “Participant, 11 January 2012.” In scenarios where more than one interview takes place on a specific date, the different interviews will be identified by an alphabet character, (Participant-B, 11 January 2012). Recording of each interview will be saved in its own file on a password protected computer dedicated to this research and then backed up on a fingerprint protected thumb drive. Each file will be labeled with the assigned interview code. As soon as possible after the conclusion of each interview the recordings will be reviewed and notes will be taken. Key words, phrases, and statements will be transcribed in order to allow the voices of research participants to be captured.
Ensuring the technology is working properly is of great importance. Easton, McComish and Greenberg (2000) warn that equipment failure and environmental conditions might seriously threaten the research undertaken. They advise that the researcher must at all times ensure that recording equipment functions well and spare batteries, chargers, tapes, and so on, are available. The interview setting must further be as free as possible from background noise and interruptions.

Field notes are a secondary data storage method used in qualitative research. In qualitative research, field notes by the researcher are crucial to retain data gathered because the human mind is imperfect and capable of forgetting (Lofland & Lofland, 1999). This indicates that the researcher needs to be disciplined to record notes following each interview, as thoroughly as possible, but without judgmental evaluation, for example: “What happened and what was involved? Who was involved? Where did the activities occur? Why did an incident take place and how did it actually happen?” Furthermore, Lofland and Lofland (1999) emphasize that field notes “should be written no later than the morning after” (p. 5). Besides discipline, field notes also involve “luck, feelings, timing, whimsy and art” (Bailey, 1996, p. xiii). The method utilized in this study is based on a model developed by Leonard Schatzman, Anselm Strauss and is supplemented by Robert Burgess.

Four types of field notes will be made:

1. Observational notes (ON) — observations of what occurred, instances deemed important enough to the researcher to make note of. Bailey (1996) emphasizes the use of all the senses in making observations.

2. Theoretical notes (TN) — an attempt to derive meaning as the researcher thinks or reflects on experiences.
3. Methodological notes (MN) — reminders, instructions, or critique to oneself on the process.

4. Analytical memos (AM) — end of a field day summary or progress reviews.

Data storage includes audio recordings, field notes, and the filing of any hard copy documentation. The interview transcriptions and field notes have been stored electronically on multiple hard drives.

Explication of the Data

The common heading for this section is data analysis; however, it is intentionally avoided here because Hycner, (1999) warns that analysis has dangerous connotations for phenomenology. The “term [analysis] usually means a ‘breaking into parts’ and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon… (whereas explication implies an)...investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole” (Hycner, 1999, p. 161).

Ensuring that the data are interpreted, this study used Hycner’s (1999) explication process. The process consists of five steps which are:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.

2. Delineating units of meaning.

3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.

4. Summarizing each interview, focus group, and memo. Looking for similar themes, validating them, and where necessary modifying.

5) Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.

Bracketing and phenomenological reduction was coined by Husserl. Phenomenological reduction “to pure subjectivity” is a deliberate and purposeful opening by the researcher to the
phenomenon “in its own right with its own meaning” (Fouche, 1993; Hycner, 1999; Lauer, 1958). It further points to a suspension or bracketing out (or epoche), “in a sense that in its regard no position is taken either for or against” (Lauer, 1958, p. 49), the researcher’s own presuppositions and not allowing the researcher’s meanings and interpretations or theoretical concepts to enter the unique world of the participant (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Sadala & Adorno, 2001). This is a different conception of the term bracketing used when interviewing to bracket the phenomenon researched for the interviewee. Here it refers to the bracketing of the researcher’s personal views or preconceptions (Miller & Crabtree, 1992).

Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999) recommend that the researcher listens repeatedly to the audio recording of each interview to become familiar with the words of the interviewee in order to develop a holistic sense, the “gestalt.” Zinker (1978) explains that the term phenomenological implies a process, which emphasizes the unique own experiences of research participants. The here and now dimensions of those personal experiences gives phenomena existential immediacy.

Delineating units of meaning is a critical phase of explicating the data, in that those statements that are seen to illuminate the researched phenomenon are extracted or isolated (Creswell, 1998; Holloway, 1997; Hycner, 1999). The researcher is required to make a substantial amount of judgment calls while consciously bracketing her/his own presuppositions in order to avoid inappropriate subjective judgments.

The list of units of relevant meaning extracted from each interview is carefully scrutinized and the clearly redundant units eliminated (Moustakas, 1994). To do this the researcher considers the literal content, the number of times a meaning was mentioned, and also
how it was stated. The actual meaning of two seemingly similar units of meaning might be different in terms of weight or chronology of events (Hycner, 1999).

The third phase again is clustering of units of meaning to form themes. With the list of non-redundant units of meaning in hand, the researcher must again bracket presuppositions in order to remain true to the phenomenon. By rigorously examining the list of units of meaning the researcher tries to elicit the essence of meaning of units within the holistic context. Hycner (1999), remarks that this calls for even more judgment and skill on the part of the researcher. Colaizzi makes the following remark about the researcher’s “artistic” judgment here: “Particularly in this step is the phenomenological researcher engaged in something which cannot be precisely delineated, for here he is involved in that ineffable thing known as creative insight” (as cited in Hycner, 1999, pp. 150-151).

Clusters of themes are typically formed by grouping units of meaning together (Creswell, 1998; King, 1994; Moustakas, 1994) and the researcher identifies significant topics, also called units of significance (Sadala & Adorno, 2001). Both Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999) emphasize the importance of the researcher going back and forth to the recorded interview and to the list of non-redundant units of meaning to derive clusters of appropriate meaning. Often there is overlap in the clusters, which can be expected, considering the nature of human phenomena. By interrogating the meaning of the various clusters, central themes are determined, “which expresses the essence of these clusters” (Hycner, 1999, p. 153).

The fourth step in this process is to summarize each interview, validate, and make any needed modifications. A summary that incorporates all the themes elicited from the data give a holistic context. Ellenberger captures it as follows:

Whatever the method used for a phenomenological analysis the aim of the
investigator is the reconstruction of the inner world of experience of the subject. Each individual has his own way of experiencing temporality, spatiality, materiality, but each of these coordinates must be understood in relation to the others and to the total inner ‘world’ (as cited in Hycner, 1999, pp. 153-154). At this point the researcher conducts a ‘validity check’ by returning to the informant to determine if the essence of the interview has been correctly ‘captured’ (Hycner, 1999). Any modification necessary is done as result of this “validity check.”

After steps one through four are completed the researcher moves to the final phase, which identifies general and unique themes across all the interviews and composes a summary. The researcher looks “for the themes common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations” (Hycner, 1999, p. 154). Care must be taken not to cluster common themes if significant differences exist. The unique or minority voices are important counterpoints to bring out regarding the phenomenon researched.

Explication is concluded by writing a composite summary, which must reflect the context or “horizon” from which the themes emerged (Hycner, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). According to Sadala and Adorno (2001) the researcher at this point, “transforms participants’ everyday expressions into expressions appropriate to the scientific discourse supporting the research” (p. 289). However, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) emphasize that “good research is not generated by rigorous data alone … [but] ‘going beyond’ the data to develop ideas” (p. 139). Initial theorizing, however small, is derived from the qualitative data.

Research Procedures

A detailed description of important elements within phenomenology has been presented. In this section I review the actual procedure that was followed to complete this study.
Manen outlines a methodological structure to conduct phenomenological research. Although he provides a list of “steps,” van Manen believes the “method of phenomenology is that there is no method” (van Manen, 1990, p. 30). The following table is a visual representation of the methodological structure, created by van Manen, which this study follows. A brief explanation of each element of the structure follows table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Visual representation of the phenomenology methodological structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turning to the Nature of the Lived Investigation</th>
<th>Experience Existential</th>
<th>Phenomenological Reflection</th>
<th>Phenomenological Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.Explicating assumptions and pre-understandings</td>
<td>c. Obtaining experiential descriptions from subjects</td>
<td>b. Isolating thematic statements</td>
<td>10.Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Locating experiential descriptions in literature, art, etc.</td>
<td>c. Composing linguistic transformations</td>
<td>11.Rewriting: (A) to (D) etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Consulting phenomenological Literature</td>
<td>d. Gleaning thematic descriptions from artistic sources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7.Determining essential themes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience

Lived experience is an experience that occurs in a person’s lifeworld before they have reflected on, or named the experience (van Manen, 1990). To understand and find meaning in the experience requires the experience be reflected on and interpreted.

Orienting to the Phenomenon

The researcher must identify an interest in understanding the experience of the phenomenon being explored. My orientation to African American males is that I am a successful African American male. I detailed my experiences with the phenomenon using a memo.

Formulating the Phenomenological Question

The researcher develops the phenomenological question as a process of “living” and “becoming” the question (van Manen, 1990). The questions asked of our participants must be connected to our lives and experiences. My interest in the lived experiences of successful African American males developed with my personal experiences seeking success, professional experience working with urban males, my personal relationship with many successful African American males, being an African American male, and my concerns about the manner African American males are viewed within society. The following research question: Are there certain factors that contribute to the social and educational success of some African American males?, emerged as the phenomenological question.

Explicating Assumptions and Pre-Understandings

Quantitative research dictates the researcher leave his/her relationship with the investigation behind. van Manen (1990), however, states the researcher should “make explicit understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories [not to forget them], but rather to turn this knowledge against itself…exposing its shallow or concealing character” (p.
46). This position reasons that a researcher is not able to completely bracket pre-conceptions because they invariably re-enter reflective thought. Again, all presuppositions were detailed in a memo.

**Existential Investigation**

*Exploring the phenomenon: Gathering data*

“All recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, descriptions of experiences, taped interviews about experiences, or transcribed conversations about experiences are already transformations of those experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 54). van Manen offers four paths for accessing minimally adulterated experiences.

1. Using Personal Experience as a Starting Point

   As my experiences become your experiences the researcher may find clues to orient oneself to the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). Because experiences may be shared as potential human experiences, “…phenomenological descriptions have a universal (intersubjective) character” (van Manen, 1990, p. 58). My professional and personal experience as an African American male gives me insight into understanding the African American experience while my role as an educator inspires me to learn about the experience of other African American males in greater depth.

2. Obtaining Experiential Descriptions from Subjects

   “We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (van Manen, 1990, p. 62). The crux of phenomenology is that the researcher and the participants become partners in the process of understanding the lived experience. van Manen offers several ideas on how to collect experiential descriptions from
participants: interviewing, protocol writing, observing, lay literature, art, and phenomenological literature. This study will utilize interviews as the primary method for data collection.

The interview is aimed at (a) gathering and exploring narrative material to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest, (b) developing a conversational relationship with the interviewee to understand the meaning of the experience. It is important to remember, in the phenomenological interview, the interviewer (researcher) and the interviewee (participant) are partners in the process of discovery. Thus, formulating good questions before the interview is essential to ensure clarity throughout the interview (van Manen, 1990). The interview is a delicate balance between asking appropriate open-ended questions and allowing silences to help the participant proceed with their story.

Consulting phenomenological literature

The researcher searched Google Scholar, Academic Search Elite, and PsychNet databases for phenomenological studies. The phrase “African American males and success” was used initially. When limited articles were found, the researcher used the phrases “experiences of African American males” and “voices of successful African American males.”

Phenomenological Reflection

Conducting thematic analysis

At this point in the process the researcher will begin to identify the themes that emerged from the study, uncovering thematic aspects in lifeworld descriptions. Theme provides focus, meaning, and a point to lived experience. “Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explores such universes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 90).

Isolating thematic statements
There are three approaches that can be used in uncovering thematic aspects in lifeworld descriptions: holistic, selective and detailed (van Manen, 1990). This study will use the selective approach. The researcher will listen to the interviews, focus groups, and read transcripts and search for statements that are essential in revealing participants' experience.

*Composing linguistic transformations*

“Composing linguistic transformations is not a mechanical procedure. Rather, it is a creative, hermeneutic process” (van Manen, 1990, p. 96). The researcher will develop creative expressions for articulating themes. Themes will be named from interpretation or derived from the actual phrases of the participants.

*Gleaning thematic descriptions from artistic sources*

The researcher will study sources of art that may reflect thematic elements of this study. Art renders a unique perspective because “the artist recreates experiences by transcending them” (van Manen, 1990, p. 97).

*Determining essential themes*

Essential themes are those that speak to the shared experience of the phenomenon and without them the phenomenon would be altered. These questions must be asked, “Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon? Does the phenomenon without this theme lose its fundamental meaning?” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107).

*Phenomenological Writing*

*Attending to the speaking of language*

A dual axes approach to interpretation allows the researcher to stay true to the nature of the participants’ intent. The axes are the grammatical axis and the psychological axis (Moran,
2000; Chan, 2001). The first axis pertains to language, the interpretation must stay true to the linguistic style of the participants. The second axis pertains to the author’s frame of reference, his/her historical, social and cultural experiences that create the lived experience (Chan, 2001; Moran, 2000).

Varying the examples

According to van Manen (1990, p. 122), “a phenomenological description is an example composed of examples”. In order to understand a lived experience and make it somehow tangible, the phenomenologist must use a variety of examples so that the reader can become immersed in the phenomenon. This makes aspects of the phenomenon accessible to the real world.

Writing

Cameron (2001, p. 4) states, “Writing brings clarity and passion to the act of living”. Writing is an act of understanding. As the phenomenologist translates the participants’ experiences into shared themes, the phenomenologist has a clearer understanding of the phenomenon.

Rewriting

van Manen 1990, defines rewriting as “[T]he process of writing and rewriting…is more reminiscent of the artistic activity of creating an art object that has to be approached again and again…going back and forth between the parts and the whole in order to arrive at a finely crafted piece that often reflects the personal signature of the author” (p. 132). The art of phenomenology is that it allows the researcher to craft scientifically rigorous research in a style that reflects the author’s orientation to the world.

Truthfulness
In considering reliability and validity, human science has a different approach which is referred to as the standard for the quality of conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The intent of phenomenology is interpretive descriptions that fully describe and illuminate the detail and explore the phenomenon. Moreover, phenomenological interpretation is just one interpretation. It does not start without context or a reason; the phenomenon, or lived experience, is always the starting place of phenomenology research. This focus is part of a real person’s life and not a manipulated or replicable test environment. However, issues with reference to validity and reliability are germane to all research studies.

Validity

Schurink, Schurink and Poggenpoel (1998) discuss the truth-value of qualitative research and list a number of means to achieve truth. In agreement are Miles and Huberman (1994), who share that the findings have to be authentic and the findings of the study need to make sense. In regards to internal validity the following questions have been formulated to measure it appropriately: (a) How context rich and thick are the descriptions? (b) Does the account ring true, or enable a vicarious presence for the reader. (c) Are the data linked to the categories of prior theory? (d) Are areas of uncertainty identified? (e) Were the conclusions considered accurate by the participants? (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 279). The final ingredient to internal validity is sharing transcripts and findings with participants to ensure the correct themes were captured and to receive increased depth in meaning and understanding (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1995; van Manen, 1990).

External validity refers to transferability. How far can these findings be applied? Are they comprehensive across all African American males? Miles and Huberman (1994) help address these questions with the following queries: (a) are the characteristics of the original
sample fully described enough to permit adequate comparison with other samples? (b) Does the report examine possible threats to generalization? (c) Does the researcher define the scope and boundaries of the study? (d) Do the findings include a thick description for readers to assess transferability or appropriateness for their own setting? Likewise, (e) do a range of readers report the findings to be consistent with their own experience? Finally, (f) is the study replicable to assess robustness? (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 279).

Reliability

In many cases reliability is considered synonymous with dependability and in qualitative research it is considered the consistent quality of care practiced by the researcher. The primary questions Miles and Huberman (1994) raise concern the integrity of the research design. Are the research questions clear and is the study’s design congruent with the questions? Another substantial issue is related to transparency regarding researcher bias or deceit. Peer review can help address this, is always an added value, and assists with the reliability of any study. This best practice will be used in this study to bolster the reliability and add additional value.

Chapter Summary

This research is a phenomenological study that takes advantage of qualitative methods in order to study the experiences of successful African American males. In an effort to shine a different light on African American males and change the discussion from dilemmas to success, from doom and gloom to hope, and from status quo to solutions, phenomenology was used to connect with the lived experiences of the people, (Greene, 1997; Holloway, 1997; Kruger, 1988; Kvale, 1996; Maypole & Davies, 2001), namely African American males, to address a complex and old phenomena.
Using convenience sampling a group of elite African American male achievers has been selected. These men, through the use of snowball sampling, also served as a vehicle to find college ready African American high school males that also exemplify achievement. Using a triangulation method, these African American males will have varied platforms to discuss their experiences, share their stories, and confirm the story is being captured correctly.

This chapter gives an explanation of phenomenology as a research paradigm, followed by an exposition of the research design in regards to a particular study. This includes information regarding the research participants, the data gathering and data storage method used, and explication of the data. This chapter finally reviews truthfulness, explaining how validity and reliability are met in a phenomenological study.

It is of paramount importance that innovative and new approaches are explored in order to address the challenges facing African American males. Exploring the success of African American males versus documenting one more way that we are educational, social, or professional underachievers, is a step in that direction. Multiple data collection stratagems are used to decrease researcher bias and ensure triangulation so research can be used to inform additional research and practice in this area. It is time for voices to be heard as equity for all African American males is everyone’s concern.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings in the phenomenological study, *A Counter to the Proposed Crisis: Exploring the Experiences of Successful African American Males*. The chapter provides the insights and experiences of successful African American males as it relates to their success. The results presented in this chapter are based on the voices of a total of ten males that offered feedback through participation in private in-depth personal interviews and/or intensive focus groups. The interviews and focus group data were collected from hours of interviews conducted over several months’ time. The data were used to answer the research question: Are there certain factors that contribute to the social and educational success of some African American males? The data collected also addressed the following sub research questions:

1. What effect does the societal impression of African American males have on you?
2. Compared to your unsuccessful peers what did you do differently?
3. What characteristics do successful and unsuccessful African American males share?
4. Can your success be duplicated? How?

Chapter four is composed of five sections, beginning with an initial introduction of the participants through a presentation of their demographics. Each participant’s demographic snapshot is displayed in Table 4.1., which is followed by the motivation for completing the demographic survey.

Section two deepens the demographic information provided through the narrative profile of the participants selected for the individual interviews. The participants profiled were selected as a result of their rich contributions and engagement within the focus groups. The summary narratives of the individual interview participants describe the frame of reference the men have
in regards to being African American and also serve as a very personal look into their daily existence as African American males, an aspect in agreement with the phenomenological method (Van Manen, 1990). Entering into the interviews, I was careful to check my biases, bracket my presuppositions, and like van Manen, (1990) engaged the men with “attentiveness and wonder!” (p. 18). In addition to being totally present for the interviews, I also ensured that I was empathetic, objective, and open to the possibility of the interviews revealing anything. Approaching research in this manner ensures that the researcher is true to phenomenology, meaning the research stays experimental and qualitative (Moustakas, 1994). “Research performed in this way is pre-empirical, pre-experimental, and pre-statistical; it is experimental and qualitative…it is objective centered rather than method centered” (p. 12). According to phenomenology, empathetic understanding is referred to as verstehen (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975). The summary stories were actualized because of my commitment to empathetic listening and objectivity to the participants’ inimitable experiences.

The profile narratives are followed by section three, a discussion of the five core themes that emerged from all of the data collected from the focus groups and individual interviews. The themes are derived from new statements of meaning, which are referred to as codes in other studies. Van Manen (1990) informs us that a theme is a simplification and aspect of the phenomenon; a tool that gives shape and deeper understanding which phenomenologist reflectively sense and interpret from their data. The themes that emerged are as follows:

   Theme 1: The Power of Positive Relationships
   Theme 2: In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise
   Theme 3: Family
   Theme 4: A Tale of Two Cities: Liberation and Inequity in Education
Theme 5: Viewed Through a Funhouse Mirror and the Effects it has on Us All

Staying true to the phenomenological tradition, numerous quotes from the participants are used to demonstrate the authenticity of each theme; these themes were present throughout the entire interview and focus group process. Each theme will be discussed with supporting narrative from the study participants. This allows for a lucid picture of the phenomenon of the experiences of successful African American males.

Section four discuss interesting new statements of meaning that did not emerge as themes but add value to the discussion regarding the experiences of successful African American males. Although these new statements did not materialize as themes they are important to the experiences of the participants and aid in the understanding of the phenomenon. The chapter ends with section five, revealing the findings to the posed research questions.

Section One: Demographics of Study Participants

Prior to beginning each interview or focus group session each participant completed a demographic survey. The survey, which is included as Appendix D, verifies the ethnicity of each participant, age classification, and unique aspects of the African American male experience. The questions focused on their experiences in relation to success, employment, education, and crime in order to gage if their experiences were comparable to the topics raised in the literature. This information is displayed in the tables below along with the students’ demographics. All of the names used are pseudonyms.

Table 4.1 provides the participant self-reported information. The participants reported their ethnicity, the type of environment they were raised in, their education status, and the areas of their lives in which they felt the most successful.
Table 4.1

Self Reported Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Identified Ethnicity</th>
<th>Neighborhood Type</th>
<th>Highest Degree Earned</th>
<th>Identified Areas of Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Inner City</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>*Education *Professionally *Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Professionally *Community *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *Professional Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwayne</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Suburb</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Professionally *Community *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *Professional Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Professionally *Community *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *Professional Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Inner city</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Professionally *Community *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *Professional Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heath</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Inner city</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Professionally *Community *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *Professional Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Inner City</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>*Family *Community *Personal Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Professionally *Community *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *Professional Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Inner City</td>
<td>JD</td>
<td>*Family *Education *Professionally *Community *Spirituality *Personal Relationships *Professional Relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2 allows participants to report on their familiarity with the societal conditions associated with African American males. These conditions center on employment, the legal system, education, and positive and/or negative peer influences.

Table 4.2

The Participant Reports Knowing or Exposure to African American Males Who Are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Under Employed Or Unemployed</th>
<th>Exposed to Incarceration</th>
<th>Exposed to Gangs or Illegal Activity</th>
<th>HS Drop Out</th>
<th>More Positive than Negative Male Role Models Growing Up</th>
<th>Exposure to Positive Role Models</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwayne</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heath</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the 2010 census, Colorado’s African American population is 11%, thus using men associated with a historically African American fraternity was a good choice because it ensured the study captured the target audience. Although all participants are African American, the survey provided very diverse information. For example, only ten percent or one participant had no personal knowledge or exposure to an African American male involved in gangs, the legal system, or that was underemployed. Other differences emerged in the areas of involvement with the legal system, educational experiences, and the communities that the participants grew up in. One hundred percent of the participants are college graduates but reported knowing African American males that have dropped out of high school and college.
Although working through a historically African American male organization ensured access to a pool of viable participants there were a few challenges. My initial communication was through email and there was no response. After several attempts with no response I reconvened with the president of the organization to touch base because my research was initially considered of interest. I learned that there was a problem with the organization’s distribution list so was allowed ten minutes on the agenda of their next formal meeting. After presenting at the meeting the study was embraced and immediately received volunteers.

The next challenge was scheduling. Due to the involvement of these men in the community, their work schedules, and personal commitments it was very difficult to get everyone together for the focus group. I created two groups of five participants and conducted two focus groups. Table 4.3 below displays the level of involvement the participant had with the study. For example, the table shows which focus group the participant was involved in, who was selected for the individual interview, the total amount of time interviewed, and if the participant received a follow up call for any clarification.

Table 4.3

The Participants Involvement in the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Kevin</th>
<th>Jackson</th>
<th>Dwayne</th>
<th>Ricky</th>
<th>Shawn</th>
<th>John</th>
<th>Heath</th>
<th>Alex</th>
<th>Lonnie</th>
<th>Nick</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Interview</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received Clarification call</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minutes interviewed</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The final challenge was my location. I had arranged for space on the college campus to conduct all interviews and focus groups. The campus has extreme parking challenges so all
interviews were moved to the African American Research Library. This was a positive move due to the ambiance created by the environment. The focus groups were conducted in a display area that focused on the civil rights movement and the individual interviews were conducted in a room donated by noted African American groups from the community. The environment helped create a great atmosphere to explore the experiences of the African American males.

Section two: Profile Narratives of Participants

Van Manen, (1990) informs that in phenomenology researchers must uncover layers of meaning rather than discovering a specific causation as seen in simulated test experiments. The methodology calls for the researcher to sense and reflect on the participants’ stories to infer and discover understanding of their experiences. Phenomenology is intensely personal so the meanings researchers draw from participant stories need to correlate and not lose sight of the individuals in the study.

Five of the ten participants (with the pseudonyms of Kevin, Heath, Shawn, Ricky, and John) were selected from the focus groups to participate in the individual interview portion of the study. In order to select these five men, throughout the focus groups I made copious notes and watched for participants’ that were the most overtly passionate, engaged, and gave comments that made me want to learn more. At the conclusion of each focus group participants were informed they would be contacted via phone for any clarification required and the individuals selected for individual interviews were asked to set up a new time for continued discourse. The goal of the individual interviews was to explore deeper depths of successful African American males and learn more about the highly passionate and more engaged participants.
The most powerful aspect of this study is the frankness and authenticity of the males’ voices as they express their stories and insight. The participants were eager to begin and were very engaged as they had never had the opportunity to officially share in this capacity.

Prior to the first focus group session several participants called to confirm and ensure the event was still taking place. One participant, Kevin, said, “Hello good sir just making sure this is a go I am really looking forward to this!” On another call a participant, John, joked, “This is important work you are doing. I had to check in with you to ensure them folks (White people) haven’t had you assassinated for doing such important work!” On each focus group day I was surprised to find that all of the participants were not only on time but at least thirty minutes early. I was surprised because with the busy schedules of these men I felt certain there would be conflicts or challenges but in both focus groups the start time was flawless. When I commented on my surprise and appreciation the participants all reassured me that this was exciting and important and not to be missed. Ricky told me directly, “Look man it is not every day you get to share about yourself as a Black man and have someone that cares and gets it there listening. Being late for this not a chance.”

It was surprising to have an interested body that wanted to hear their thoughts about their experience as African American men. Although successful African American men see each other daily, are involved in the varied communities in which they exist, and have many friends and loved ones, no one truly relates to what these men experience or provide an outlet for them to discuss it. The men were deeply committed from the beginning; this initial experience further increased my interest in hearing and presenting the stories of the participants.

The participants of this study were thrilled to participate. Several times throughout the interview process participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunity and several wished
forums like this were convened more often. Lonnie revealed that it was simply refreshing to be with like-minded brothers sharing and keeping it real. He expressed that he had been reenergized as a result of participating and suggested that these types of conversations keep going.

Throughout the entire interview process at no point in the dialogue were there moments of silence or pauses of uncertainty. The opportunity to offer their stories was appreciated and comments flowed freely. Personal stories, suggestions, thoughts on the state of African American males were offered in depth. The interviews could have lasted for hours if I as the researcher did not stay committed to the task and purpose of this study. At times this was difficult due to the intriguing dialog and candor provided. Each participant thanked me for the opportunity, describing the experience as needed, refreshing, and an opportunity to make a difference.

Each profile is introduced by the participant’s pseudonym and a phrase that summarizes their overall experience. This allows immediate connection to the participants and initial understanding or guiding thought to their unique experience. Please refer back to Table 4.1 for a review of participant demographical information.

*Heath: My Father, the Root to My Success*

Heath grew up in a predominantly African American community in the inner city. He spent a large portion of his life in that neighborhood and practically grew up in the local recreation center. What is interesting to know about Heath is his father is a very strong vocal man that commanded anyone’s attention. His father was a college football superstar that even had the opportunity to play in the pros for a short while. As a professional, Mr. Incredible, (Heath’s father) serves as a juvenile probation officer and is also very active in the community
coaching football, donating his time, and working with other community leaders to ensure the streets are safe.

Heath attended public schools all of his life. A very smart young man, school was always very easy for him. The academic challenge and rigorous lessons came from his father who demanded excellence in academics and athletics. Heath spent summers in sports camps, readings programs, and lots of time with tutors. With the rigor and demands of his home life Heath learned structure, responsibility, courage, independence, and how to advocate for himself. He was a natural leader at school and served as team captain of every football team he played on from the age of seven, including in college at the University of Wyoming.

His educational experience was described as lack luster, leaving a lot to be desired. The classroom was never rigorous and only certain teachers truly engaged the students. Without the home life Heath experienced he believes his ACT scores would have been comparable to those of his peers, none of which scored higher than a 20 compared to his 28. He was consistently on the honor roll and attributed this to his preparation outside the classroom. He reported that the academic accolades did not mean much because he intentionally ditched class to hang out with friends and usually just took tests and scored well. Within the school there was no expectation for him to be there or do well. Most of his friends graduated with C averages and did not even attend school for 75% of the day, with the exception of football season.

The distinct difference between Heath and his friends was his father. Within the walls of the classroom Heath always felt he could do what he wanted and no one would care, but he cannot thank his father enough for ensuring he received a quality education despite of that. In high school he was faced with lots of negative decisions and even though he intentionally missed class he avoided the gangs and drug scenes because he was raised better and knew that was not
for him. He also credits his father for ensuring a work out regiment that made him big, strong, and athletic. His athletic abilities and size made him popular at school and also made the bullies or individuals into peer pressure think twice before bothering him or his immediate crew of friends.

What Heath dislikes the most about his educational experience was that all of his classmates did not have the structure and support he did. He saw countless friends stray from the path he was on and end up dead, jailed, or simply lost to the streets. A very close friend was with the wrong crowd that committed a robbery / homicide, as an accomplice at age 17 his friend was sentenced to prison for over forty years. These things could have been avoided with an engaging school with dedicated teachers. The good teachers were teaching college prep or advanced classes. Everyone was forced to endure teachers that were physically present but clearly thinking about summer vacation because class was a joke and the assignments were simply busy work, truly disrespectful to the intelligence of everyone. He reported elementary level math being taught to 11th graders, it made more sense to ditch because you could learn more in the park during the day. The school counselors were stretched far too thin and had to worry about issues with students, so college counseling was next to none.

While he describes a true disdain for the public school system he grew up in there were enjoyable moments. There was an excellent African American studies teacher who also served as the counselor for the athletes and she worked with Heath’s father to ensure all the players that wanted to go to college did just that. She truly looked out for them and was very hard on students when she saw them ditching, fighting, or anything other than following the straight and narrow. Athletics were highly supported so even though books were scarce, uniforms and equipment were excellent! Hind sight being perfect, Heath is saddened at the priorities.
Being an African American male was not easy, Heath explained. The inner city schools did not always have books and the technology was often obsolete. In the 1990’s gangs were intense and people were getting murdered for clothing. Many parties and social functions had to be skipped because it simply was not worth the risk of attending. In addition, the community outside of school was just as bad. African Americans in Heath’s neighborhood were often stopped by the police for no other reason than being African Americans and people in the community were scared because crime, which usually involved African American, was steadily increasing in number and intensity.

When Heath was not actively participating in sports or in an academic opportunity mandated by his father, he was with his father doing community service. As a child, Heath remembers getting in trouble if he came home he could not answer how he had helped someone else that day. At the time Heath thought his father was an overbearing, insane, drill sergeant but now truly believes that his father, in addition to raising a good man, ultimately saved his life as well as many of his friends’ lives.

Heath believes that the principles his father taught him not only made him a great critical thinker, but also made him resilient. In high school he struggled with the fact that so many people got away with being poor to mediocre, especially African American. The hallways were full of young African American men but the classrooms were empty. Heath discussed this at home with his father and he came to understand that despite someone’s involvement, engagement, or concern level it was he that had to ensure his success. He could not choose to lose focus on a great education and excellence even if the school was intentionally sabotaging young men; he had to focus on not giving into the mediocrity and sabotaging himself.
In college Heath’s experience was in some ways different but also more of the same. It was different because he was now the only African American in many of his classes and one of the few on the football team. In his words, “It was like being a single piece of ground pepper in the middle of a jar of salt, smothered, ignored, and not relevant.” He had coaches that expressed he should not stress about his grades so much because as long as he was eligible he was okay; he did not have to be perfect academically because he had already achieved so much just getting to college. In the classroom his integrity was questioned based on his scores; professors on several occasions accused him of cheating and were surprised at the caliber of his work. Heath was surrounded by individuals that thought he was either incapable or simply believed he was not supposed to be great. Despite that Heath graduated with two degrees within five years and embraced what he referred to as the “essence of until.” Heath decided that his legacy would be a new thought process for the entire culture, meaning, “I thought African American males were this or that until Heath was here!”

As a professional, Heath’s experience has been fun and rewarding but also still full of similar challenges. He watched several individuals that started after him promote before him even though he had meritorious evaluations. Rather than complaining he just started working harder. He arrived early and stayed late, learning multiple functions and roles at the company. He said, “My father always said be better and that is what I set out to do.” Heath has now received several promotions and credits it to ensuring there was no room for critique. Rather than quitting, complaining, or self-sabotaging, he just made sure no one was more in tune with the company than he, and he also made sure all his work yielded both increased social capital and financial growth for the company.
Currently, Heath is keeping the drill sergeant mentality alive with his son. He is instilling the same sense of decorum and pride in his son that was given to him. Heath currently holds Bachelors and Masters degrees as well as several certifications. In addition to serving as an engineer for a local company, Heath is a football coach, philanthropist, community activist, and a great mentor to many young men in his community.

*John: I Will Do Me and You Do You*

John grew up in an inner city east side neighborhood, known for a strong presence of Crips, a street gang associated with the color blue. John is an only child raised by a single mom who had a live in boyfriend for large portions of his childhood. Although an only child, John has lots of cousins from three aunts and four uncles, his mother’s siblings. John’s mom worked a lot and because of that John was able to spend lots of time with his grandmother who lived in the same neighborhood and kept a good eye on John and made him come in the house well before dark.

John is the youngest in the family and often wanted to spend time with his older cousins but usually did not because they said he was too little to hang out with them. This worked in John’s advantage for two reasons: (a) he was enrolled in youth football and (b) his cousins were heavily involved in gang activity. John was very smart and athletic. He excelled in school but his grades suffered due to low homework participation. Jason informed that in his neighborhood being smart was not celebrated and kids that had on back packs usually got beat up. As a child John would intentionally sag his pants and never carried a book bag, looking the part saved a lot of grief.

John attended a magnet elementary and middle school within the public school system of his community. Although he refused to do homework his test scores and assessment placement
kept him in gifted and talented programs. John’s mother was okay with his view on homework because transporting homework was not worth the wrath of the neighborhood if she was not around. John’s mother eventually met with the teacher and secured a second set of books to keep at home and worked out a deal to turn in his assignments weekly. Actually John boasts it was because of him that weekly homework packets only due on Fridays were created. This began to work out great because in middle school on Fridays John carried his football uniform and equipment and would hide his homework there.

The two troubling aspects growing up for John were his cousin’s constant attempts to initiate him into the gang and the domestic violence he witnessed at home from his mother’s boyfriend. His cousins would tease him, calling him church mouse, school boy, and gay because football to them was “gay” as he was tackling other boys. John, although irritated by his family, was also appreciative because he knew they would never hurt him physically and everyone else in the neighborhood usually did not bother him for fear of his big cousins. As for his mother’s boyfriend, that was a different story. When he drank he took it out on whoever was closest, meaning John was sometimes a casualty attempting to defend his mom. At a young age John learned that being a good man meant living the opposite of his mother’s boyfriend and staying steadfast to his own interests despite what temptations or pressures are applied.

This attitude paid off for John sooner than he would realize. Due to his grades and athletic talents, John was offered an opportunity to leave his neighborhood and attend a small private college preparatory Catholic high school. The school was a two hour bus ride from his neighborhood, for John everyday was like going out of town. This was a tremendous opportunity because his neighborhood high school was the worst performing school in the district and a death trap for many of John’s cousins.
John learned that all that glimmers is not gold. Although a great opportunity, John experienced a lot of firsts at this school that were not positive. For the first time he was made aware that he was African American, he was poor and he was inadequate. The school was full of very rich White children; John was one of nine African American boys in the school. All of the boys quickly met each other because they all played football. For the first time in his life, John hated football. He believed he was a show and did not deal with the new environment very well. This school was John’s first experience with racism as well, before this school words such as coon, nigger, and monkey only happened once a year when he watched Roots with his mother.

John truly thanks the eight other African American males that he went to school with. They banded together and became brothers. They worked out together; car pooled, studied, and in several situations fought locker room fights together. During the first year when he wanted to leave, it was these friends that talked about the greater good, about this school being the ticket to any college in the country. The experience got better, the academics were excellent although in some classes he had to constantly demonstrate he was not cheating and in others he had to endure teachers talking to him as if he were an ESL student. Although there were clearly barriers obstructing John’s immediate success he decided that he would not give in to any negative stressors. He would simply focus on the task in front of him—graduating high school and attending college. He would use the opportunity as a stepping stone to more rewarding opportunities and use his peers as support and a shield against any future negative experiences. John graduated high school with honors, played college football at New Mexico State where he again graduated with honors, and is currently a project manager and system specialist in the oil and gas industry. John has a daughter and a fiancé, is active in the community, and has helped
several of his cousins go back to community college simply by doing him. Seeing his success has made some of his family members want some of their own.

*Ricky: Against All Odds*

“You are too small…you aren’t smart enough...Do you think that college will accept you...” Phrases like these are pretty common to Ricky who has been hearing them all his life. Currently, Ricky is in his early thirties, recently divorced, and an executive in the educational industry. Ricky stands five feet three inches tall but his presence is one of a giant.

Ricky grew up both in the inner city and in a suburban area. Most of his friends growing up, prior to high school, were African American and from the inner city. After moving to the suburbs he attended predominately White private schools, and attended the University of Colorado, a predominately White college. Throughout high school it was evident he was African American anytime he or his mother met the parents of his friends. With every introduction people seemed surprised, as if they were expecting someone else. People always asked whether he needed help, or if everything was alright at home, and intrusive questions, such as, do you know your father? In the beginning he thought was people genuinely were caring and nice but he realized he was the only friend being asked these questions, the only person being asked if he needed a doggie bag after a meal.

His mother always told him to laugh it off because it was ignorance and some people are so privileged that they feel everyone who is different is in some sort of need. It really surprised people when they found out he did know his father who had since passed away and left a large settlement to an already very successful entrepreneur mother who owned several daycare facilities. People were surprised when they realized his home was the largest one on the block and they continued to be surprised when his mother declined their business due to strict practices
of not working with neighbors and friends. Ricky was raised to be successful, to go to college, and to believe he was as good as anyone. The reality was he was an average student, great athlete, and had no idea what he wanted to do with himself outside of football.

There always seemed to be a recommendation for something that Ricky had no interest in. Ricky was discouraged from playing sports based on his size. He was encouraged to try community college first rather than a four year university because of his academic performance. Because he is an African American with a deceased father, Ricky was encouraged to seek counseling for problems that would develop later. Ricky decided that everyone was wrong and that the odds were faced in the wrong direction. Taking advantage of tutoring and with lots of hard work Ricky graduated with a 3.3 grade point average. Because of his hard work Ricky was offered a full scholarship to a university in the Rocky Mountain region where, despite his size, he became a starter on the football team and the attained All American status as a punt returner.

Ricky believes that his life is a movie and he is the writer, director, and executive producer. It is his choices that drive success or failure, and it is his faith that makes “difficult takes a day and impossible takes a week”, quoting his favorite rapper Jay Z. Although he has had challenges as an African American male, those challenges do not define him.

When discussing his educational experience he reports frustration with himself because he upheld so many stereotypes for so long. He sat in the back, he fell asleep, he was not always engaged but when he decided to do so he was great. He also expressed frustration with the way school was set up. There was no reason to engage. The teachers did not understand him, they all assumed he was a bad student, they assumed he did not comprehend the curriculum, and they did not do anything about it. While owning his laziness he questioned the commitment of the teachers to try to reach him, to demand he do better, or to call his mom and share their concerns.
It was the reflection here that made being African American difficult. He explained his friends were always receiving calls and home visits, which never happened for him once in middle or high school.

When he decided to get himself together is was with the help of tutors from the youth group at his church and he began working out with African American guys from other schools that were eager to push him to the limit. With his high school teammates everyone already thought he was good and did not provide an environment that challenged him to consistently improve. Not only did his high school peers lack the work ethic athletically he required, they also neglected to study and push themselves academically because it was easier to cheat. Ricky really felt his suburban peers were to entitled and felt like hard work was beneath them. Even to this day Ricky is most proud of his 3.3 grade-point average because he could have cheated in order to get a 4.0. Ricky described a distinct difference between his friends at his church, which was located in the inner city in a predominately African American community, and his friends from his school. He believes his White friends functioned as if no matter what everything would be okay, whether they prepared or not, while his African American friends from church functioned as if it would never be alright—always in the pursuit of success rather than letting it arrive at some expected time.

Ricky was confronted with this after graduation from college when several of his White friends from childhood, all of whom performed low academically during college, were offered jobs at one of their parent’s firms. Ricky was never asked or considered and he had spent the large majority of his life with these people. He concluded, “Being White may create some opportunities and there is definitely privilege but I’m good and will be good over the long haul because I prepared for it”. Ricky shared some of his buddies have already demonstrated their
worth to the company with inappropriate spending and behaviors which have led to several terminations and a harassment lawsuit for this company.

Kevin: The Neighborhood Did Not Win

Kevin grew up the oldest of four children raised by a single mother with support from a widowed grandfather. He grew up in an area in an inner city that bordered the projects and an affluent area. The neighborhood was unique because there were many diverse happenings in a very small area. For example, there was extreme poverty and immediately two blocks away luxurious living. In the same day you would see cars broken down and abandoned and Mercedes Benz, Jaguars, and Cadillac’s. The interesting thing to note is that while the neighborhood was very diverse the local school was not, it was predominately African American. Many of the White students that lived in the neighborhood commuted to private or suburban schools.

Kevin had an excellent mother that worked and provided for him but early in his childhood, she began battling with severe depression, which changed Kevin’s role in the family very quickly. It seemed overnight that Kevin went from big brother to head of the house and father figure for his siblings. Soon after his mother started experiencing depression Kevin lost the only father figure he ever knew; his grandfather passed away when he was in the sixth grade. It became difficult to deal with the stress of helping the family, wondering how bills would be paid because his mom stopped working, and daily seeing the dream life flaunted in front of you. Kevin’s stress and frustration quickly turned to anger and desperation and the fast money and power of the streets became overly seductive and he was drawn in.

Before high school Kevin morphed into an angry street kid. What started as rebellion against his mother’s depression, shoplifting, staying away for long hours, and fighting, progressed to gangs, drugs, firearms, and even robbery. While the intent was good, taking care
of his siblings, the fast money and lifestyle became a something that put the family he was grinding for in jeopardy. Kevin became a target for rival gangs which meant attempts on his life, drive-by shootings, and the death of many friends.

The major wake up call for Kevin happened when his baby sister, whom he came to view as a daughter, asked him who would take care of her and her other brothers when he got murdered. His life expectancy had become regular playground conversation in the projects they lived in. The next week he remembered attending a full day of school, something he had not done since starting high school. It was as if he had an outer body experience, for the first time in several years he remembered his old self and was terrified of what he had become. He watched his friends and realized that he would not be around long enough to answer his sister’s question if something did not change.

Although Kevin had become synonymous with trouble he was very smart and great with money. He had been saving money since seventh grade from his involvement in the streets and had amassed a small fortune. As a sophomore, Kevin made a decision that would change the life of him and his family forever. He convinced his mother to move ten miles east to the other side of town to a small apartment; he had saved enough money to pay rent for a little over two years!

Life got better but Kevin was still was still an angry kid. At his new school he was attending everyday but still had some struggles. He was embarrassed for kids to know he was smart and he was addicted to marijuana. At the new school he found himself nearly expelled because he assaulted a teacher for what he deemed was disrespect. Kevin is large in stature and people always asked him to play sports and it was no different at this school. He was approached by a group of young men on the football team, who basically said, “You can hit people without consequence, come join the team.”
Kevin was a natural and football became a place to release his anger. His new friends did not judge him, they asked him to study with them so they could all stay eligible, they asked him to hang out with them, they were positive, and for the first time Kevin had real friends. The football coach arranged for Kevin to meet regularly with the school counselor and helped his mom find employment that would work with her condition. His junior year he had an amazing blast from the past, he reconnected with a several friends from elementary school that transferred in to his high school, they all played football.

When senior year arrived, while not perfect, Kevin was a different person. He and his mother were getting along, he and his friends regularly discussed getting out of the neighborhood, and his siblings were prospering. Kevin had decent grades and was thinking about college. Although the college counseling process at his school left a lot to be desired it was okay because he, along with his friends, joined a local leadership program for males. The program helped with college access, leadership skills, and, most importantly, mentorship with tough conversations about choices and accountability. The program also appealed to Kevin and other young men because of the caliber of men in the program. This was Kevin’s first experience with this many African American males that held college degrees, had successful careers, and had nice things that they purchased, rather than bartering for, stealing, or manipulating someone less savvy.

Kevin enrolled in college as a student and no longer played football. His college experience was the polar opposite of his educational beginnings. Kevin served on student government, the Black Student Alliance, and was a regular in the math and English tutoring center. Currently Kevin is a father of two, a community servant, and an educator focusing on
issues effecting high school graduation rates for low income first generation students and male empowerment. Kevin possesses both Bachelor and Master degrees.

*Shawn: Success by Design*

Prior to learning about Shawn, it is equally important to know about his roots. Shawn’s great-great grandfather was born a slave on a plantation in Georgia and freed as a result of emancipation. After requiring freedom, he lived in a self-made hut for nearly ten years. It took that long to work and earn enough money and skills to open a garage and barber shop. During this time he taught himself to read, write, learned barbering, general business principals, and began to journal his experiences. The writings were passed to Shawn’s grandfather and father. One letter in particular is of vital importance; it lists several things all men in their family line must do in order to ensure the family name survives:

1. At all cost provide all children with the best education possible
2. Encourage entrepreneurship or careers of respect and good earning. Preferably law or medicine
3. Understand that White people are ignorant not evil but understand that ignorance is much more dangerous
4. Buy land at every opportunity
5. Understand that African American men need to be intentional about how talented we are and do everything possible to ensure you are the most talented. Lose sleep, study harder, and read more, whatever it takes. Being in demand is the priority.
6. Take no handouts from anyone, especially White folks, work hard for everything
7. Honor the women in the family and protect them at all cost.
8. Create goals and work for them, promising hard work and determination pay off.

Shawn’s grandfather often talks of growing up with the strong great grandfather. He was not extremely emotional, very hard, and demanded excellence. The tradition has continued and the family tells this story so everyone hears the words from the father of the family.

Shawn grew up in a moderately sized middle class African American community in the South. Shawn was raised by both his socialite mother and father. They were involved in fraternity and sorority organizations, auxiliary organizations, community organizations, politics, and attended Black tie events on a regular basis. At the age of seven Shawn remembers going to purchase his second tuxedo. Professionally, Shawn’s parents had excellent careers; his mother was a lawyer and his father was a fire fighter and owner of a real estate firm.

Similar to his parents Shawn was equally involved. He participated in Boy Scouts of America, youth athletics, the youth group at church, youth camps, and a variety of school activities. Involvement in a variety of activities was very helpful for Shawn. He was able to tap into a variety of peer groups, create an amazing rolodex of mentors and friends, and most importantly he was able to hear similar message from multiple sources. For Shawn, college was nothing to be excited about; it was simply the 13th grade. He recalls not even celebrating going to college instead he had a moving party.

Shawn attended private schools his entire life. His school and home life were both intentional about preparing him for success. His elementary school had college days where students did “show and tell” reports on colleges, in middle school college campus visits began, and in high school all students were expected to take college preparatory classes.

Shawn’s school experience was intense primarily because of involvement. There were many demands from multiple audiences and it made for long nights and countless conversations
about accountability from both his parents and teachers. There were many late evenings when school work had to be completed well after 9 p.m. because activities demanded large portions of the evening and weekends. Shawn was taught that this was normal because while he was completing school work his parents were also usually working, reinforcing that hard work and a busy schedule is a normal occurrence. He was often reminded of his great grandfather and the obstacles he faced.

Lessons such as work hard to play hardest (something Shawn’s father said often), that burning the midnight oil is imperative, arriving early and leaving late, and sharing your success with others are some of the many takeaways Shawn shared from his rearing. The purpose of the lessons was preparation for life. While Shawn was pretty sheltered from some of the more negative aspects of life, he never felt privileged or entitled because he was constantly reminded that he was being raised to impact his community, to serve as a role model, to honor the legacy of the African Americans that came prior, and to be prepared for any curve ball that life may throw.

Shawn attended a Historically Black University and graduated with honors. He is currently married and works in the finance industry as a junior executive. It is in his professional life where the countless training and preparation has finally seemed necessary. Coming in early, staying late, and taking on extra assignments are a part of Shawn’s make up and have been instrumental in him being noticed and promoted. Whether it has to be that way or not, Shawn is up for the challenge because the expectation was set years ago.

Heath, Ricky, John, Kevin, Shawn, and the other participants of the original focus group provided great insight and information regarding their lived experienced as African American males. Although the participants are very different men with varied experiences, ambitions,
goals, and dreams the discussions revealed consistent themes that seem to be unique to the African American male experience. The next section will introduce and describe five major themes that emerged from discussions with the participants, the major essence of the phenomena, and present findings to the research questions that frame this study.

Section Three: Themes

After reviewing my notes, reflections, and the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups it was apparent that there were similarities in the men’s experiences. In phenomenology when the similar detailed and specific descriptions of each participant’s experience are combined they form new statements of meaning (in other studies they are referred to as codes). The new statements of meaning were then clumped into groups in order to create major themes; each theme is considered a structural part of the entire phenomena. In other words, any statement used to develop a major theme is of paramount importance and they all share equal value.

The five themes that follow emerged from the transcripts and are supported by direct quotes from participants. The quotes ensure authenticity; it is the voice of the participants being heard and not mine as the researcher. Directly in line with the phenomenological tradition, the participants described their thoughts, feelings, and use examples, stories or metaphors to portray their experiences from their point of view (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Moustakas, 1994). Combined, the themes tell a story of the lived experiences of the African American male participants in this study. They may go like this.

In society historically African American males have largely been associated with negative factors, failure, and viewed by many as less than mediocre. However, that is one perception or one side of the story. The untold story is that despite obstacles, challenges, and negative perceptions; African American males are successful, committed, and competent. It is
not an anomaly that African American males are succeeding in the areas of family, education, careers, and within the community at large, it is the expectation. This success is founded in the involvement of role models and the support and lessons learned from family. It is earned through the pursuit of educational excellence, commitment to hard work, being the best in every field of endeavor, and possessing a spirit of resilience. Success for African American males is a right rather than a privilege. For successful African American males’ barriers, resistance, and hurdles are opportunities to demonstrate excellence and create a paradigm shift in the attitude and thoughts towards African American males commonly practiced and accepted by society.

The following five themes emerged and are ever present within the data. The themes that capture the experiences of successful African American are: (a) The Power of Positive Relationships; (b) In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise; (c) Family; (d) A Tale of Two Cities: Liberation and Inequity in Education; and (e) Viewed through a funhouse mirror and the effects it has on us all.

The titles associated with each theme were developed from the words spoken by participants as they offered their experiences and also pulled from the framework I used to capture what I heard.

Theme 1: The Power of Positive Relationships

The theme of power of positive relationships is comprised of new statements of meaning that focus on consistency, advocacy, support, role modeling, and tough love. The participants were very clear that their success was largely imparted to someone else. There was an external stakeholder that encouraged them in times of self-doubt, that guided them in the right direction during times of confusion, someone or people that accepted them for who they were and was never judgmental.
In many instances, it was an external stakeholder that actually provided a framework to understand success. Within the focus groups it was discussed that sometimes until you have a goal or vision of your own; just watching someone else achieve this gives you the courage and know how to find your own. For most participants the experience of connecting with someone that looked like them created confidence, motivation, and a sense healthy competition that propelled them forward in the pursuit of true success. John said, “Without people role modeling what was right I would have probably ended up all wrong.”

It was the involvement of these external people that often provided the extra push or motivation to move forward in the face of adversity. These external stakeholders were coaches, family friends, individuals from the participants’ peer group, community members, and significant others.

During the focus group Nick says that as a youth the majority of friends were into a variety of negative things from gangs and drugs to fighting and peer pressuring girls into sex. Since Nick was not into these behaviors he did not have lots of time to enjoy hanging with friends. The only time it seemed they would act decent is when they were playing sports, which was not often so Nick had lots of time alone. He continued to share that when he was twelve an older gentleman moved in next door and noticed Nick always in the yard alone reading comics or tossing the ball to himself. One day the gentleman asked Nick to take out his trash and he gave him fifty cents for doing it. That turned into a daily opportunity for money and then developed in to a fast friendship. Mr. Fitz, the older gentleman, begin to share stories with Nick about his military experiences, playing college sports, and many other things. With no father in his home, Mr. Fitz became a great support system, in fact Nick revealed it was Mr. Fitz who encouraged him to go to college and helped pay to get him there. Nick said,
Mr. Fitz saved my life. When I was at an crossroad thinking I was weird for not embracing my friends and feeling like the old saying if you cannot beat them join them; it was Mr. Fitz who told stories of great men and applauded me for not being caught up in the ghetto bull shit. When I scored a 17 on my ACT test, it was Mr. Fitz that gave my mom money to send me through a preparation course. Till this day I don’t know why he cared or inserted himself so deeply into my life but I am so thankful he did. He became the father I never knew and always wanted, the big brother that would get in my ass for doing something stupid.

Ricky, Shawn, John, and Jackson were the other participants present at this focus group session. They were all in agreement and had similar stories. The most powerful point in this session came immediately following Nick’s story. Ricky, a little emotional and teary eyed stated, “Man you had Mr. Fitz and I had coach J.” Ricky then told a story about his high school football coach, Coach J. Ricky is small in stature and indicated in high school he was even smaller but very fast. He was constantly ridiculed for his size in high school even though he was very talented. When other coaches and players counted him out, it was Coach J that stepped up and fought for him to have an opportunity. The advocacy was so sincere that Coach J threatened to quit the coaching staff if Ricky did not get a fair shot. Throughout high school Coach J pushed Ricky in the weight room and in the classroom. The weight room came easy but the classroom was difficult because Ricky was not a fan of school. Ricky shared, “Coach would show up at my house on Saturday mornings and make me go to the library with him. He was working on graduate school I was working on graduating!” Coach J inspired Ricky to work hard and never quit. He taught him the importance of discipline, pride, and integrity. “You have to look good to be good tuck in your jersey pull up them pants,” Coach J would always say. Ricky continued sharing there are so many things he learned from his coach but there are a few lessons that Ricky is thankful will be with him forever:
1. The one person you can always count on is yourself. So love yourself, talk great to yourself, and always listen to yourself. You heart will never lead you in the wrong way.

2. Be Strong for we are not here to dream, drift, or play. We are here to work, we are here to be the best there is, the best there was, what everyone else strives to be. Become a role model and you will never be counted out.

3. Difficult takes an hour, impossible takes a week, but since anything is possible what is taking you so long. Shape up or ship out. There are too many barriers out there already for you to become one for yourself.

Ricky at this point was very emotional and apologized, sharing that Coach J was the reason for his scholarship to play college football because he personally delivered tapes to the coaches and put his name on the line vouching that he played bigger than his stature. His advocacy secured an opportunity, but he never received an opportunity to see Ricky play on the next level because he died from cancer.

Having positive relationships has a powerful impact on anyone, especially African American males. In some situations the participants shared that a positive relationship with a role model or mentor not only provides strength and encouragement but direction as well. The relationship can help one strategize, think through difficult situations, and also help construct new thinking in the way situations are approached.

During a focus group session Dwayne talked about being bullied and how his mentor’s actions helped him recreate himself and people around him. Dwayne was overweight as a youth and teased constantly about it. He experienced fat jokes and even being kicked out of class because he was always the one caught retaliating after being provoked. Eventually, Dwayne was
paired with a big brother from a local organization. The two hung out, shared things, and his mentor even started teaching him about eating healthy and working out. Dwayne told his mentor that he was being picked on at school and he decided he was going to fight the bully the following week at school. Dwayne felt it was a matter of standing up for himself, despite the fact that he was not a fighter. The mentor abruptly hit the brakes and turned the car in the opposite direction. Thirty minutes later they pulled up to a prison. That afternoon Dwayne learned that his mentor used to be picked on as well and that is truly why the two of them were matched. He further learned that his mentor had a twin brother who was also bullied. The twin brother decided to take matters into his own hands and ended up hitting his bully with a pipe during a fight. What started as standing up for himself turned into murder and a twenty five year prison sentence in a southern penitentiary!

Dwayne learned a lot in that afternoon but most importantly, the appropriate way to handle conflict. His mentor who was also in karate helped Dwayne conduct a presentation on bullying and ended it with an orchestrated demonstration of Dwayne breaking a 2x4 with his hands. Several things happened that day: Dwayne denounced bullying and those associated with it, he promoted friendship and fairness, and made everyone believe he could break a 2x4 with his bare hand, needless to say the bullying stopped!

Another participant, Lonnie, could absolutely relate to Dwayne. Although he was not bullied in the same manner he was having difficulties in the work place. Lonnie shared it was difficult being African American in corporate America when he first entered the healthcare field. He worked hard and watched people around him be promoted, he worked harder and felt ignored, and finally he was ready to just demand that he be respected and appreciated. At this
point he reached out to an older fraternity brother in the same industry that had been around for a long time for advice on how to get his point across.

What Lonnie expected was information on human resources, class action lawsuits, and potentially finding a new job. What he received was vastly different. “I mean Jim asked me if I played golf, belonged to an athletic club, what was my social and political capital in the city?” Lonnie learned about corporate politics and navigating the terrain chartered by people very different and cautious of African Americans. The advice was more about playing the game in order to reach a level where he could change the rules of the game. In those conversations he learned about the importance of community service, a custom suit, creating a personal brand, being political, and leveraging information and relationships. “I learned I was going about things the wrong way…he (Jim) was beneficial in setting me on a path to help me move forward effectively.” The coaching provided helped Lonnie develop into an executive rather than a stagnant and disgruntled front office employee. Lamar said several times, “Jim’s mentorship was critical in me providing the right image. Without him I might have been the misunderstood intimidating Black guy at the job.”

In addition to having positive relationships with adults and mentor types, the participants also discussed the value and impact of having positive relationships within their peer groups. Heath offered a very simple but profound comment, “It’s simple you are who you hang around…period!” For African American males the peer group is of critical importance because of the amount of time spent with them, the access they have to you, and because most non family oriented activities take place within this group. John shared,

It was my friends and no one else that helped me adjust to life at a private predominately White high school. Through them I found courage, support, and received countless interventions when I was ready to blow a gasket. The conversations we shared were
ignoring some of the ignorance faced, about girls, college, the NFL, and what we planned to do with our lives.

More specifically, John told a story about going to school and there was another student there wearing a confederate belt buckle and making comments alluding to John not belonging in their class. The jeers were intense and escalated to the point of the use of the N word. John said, “I was pissed and wanted to beat the breaks of his ass!” John’s friends talked him into reporting the situation and not risk being kicked off the team or out of the school because the young man making the comments came from money and John was on a scholarship. John recalls thinking how much he really appreciated his friends because the guys from his neighborhood would have encouraged a fight, jumped in, and the actual issue would have been overlooked due to the outcome. His friend’s role modeled restraint, humility, and maturity, characteristics that he has taken on since that time.

Kevin, too, has extreme appreciation for his friends. Kevin had a problematic childhood at best and really had his peers to thank for holding him accountable and providing a timely ultimatum. He shares,

Truly my friends did what no adult could do; they held me accountable and give me a choice. It was either them and football or the streets. They decided that I was the weak link and the person detrimental to their success. If I couldn’t conform to the direction of the group then I was on my own; it began to matter if I let them down on or off the football field. We were invested in each other’s futures, studying together, sharing college application information, and most importantly staying out of trouble. My friends were my mentors and although we did not do everything perfect or to our parent’s expectations, we graduated, went to college, and did not let the temptations of the neighborhood win. Without them I would not be here in this moment.

Positive relationships with peer groups were also helpful in just providing a place where things seemed normal. It is not the case that all young men are in trouble with the law or that their environment is an obstacle. Sometimes, your peers are contributing to the success of others
simply by providing healthy competition, support, and/or a different perspective. Ricky discussed how growing up in a predominately White area and attending predominately White schools was challenging because his reality was different from his counterparts. They viewed life completely differently. For Ricky, college was a must and vital to his success while his White counterparts viewed the college years as time for exploration and enrichment. It was this reality which made Ricky truly appreciate his peers from church and from some of the inner city athletic teams he participated with. He stated,

I only witnessed hunger and determination when I was with people like me, everything wasn’t fun and games and drinking when my mom was out of town and this was important to my development. Without my peers I would have had a false sense of reality and been in a terrible situation.

Jackson referred to healthy competition with his peers. Without being negative they always pushed each other to do better. For example, at school if someone got a role in a play the other person would want the lead, if someone was in college preparatory classes then the next would want to be in an International Baccalaureate program. That type of friendly competition is what Jackson believes caused several friends to turn out as doctors, lawyers, and a professional golfer. They were committed to pushing each other and expected greatness; even if others did not.

The participants all offered that their immediate peer groups consisted of five to ten people that all wanted more and subscribed to achieving success. Shawn implied what he finds most beneficial in a positive peer group is the multiple layers and types of support available to each party in times of need or uncertainty, along with accountability in regards to making positive decisions. The participants further concluded other opportunities such as information
sharing, bolstering networks, and creating extended family were also extremely important takeaways from a positive peer group.

If there are critical factors for success than the participants definitely feel positive relationships are one of them. The participants demonstrated that having positive relationships, appropriate influences, and supporting casts in one’s life play a critical role in an individual’s success journey. Lonnie sums it best when he said, “Show me your network and I will show you your net worth!”

Theme 2: In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise

The theme, In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise truly refers the resilience of African American males. African American males have experienced hardship after hardship and endured unfair judgment and criticism from society at large but still have managed to sustain and achieve success in this society. During the focus group the participants were asked to complete a task that demonstrates how African Americans are viewed by society. Table 4.4 lists the characteristics all ten participants had in common; the consensus was that there is an unfair outlook on African American males.

Table 4.4

Participant Reported Characteristics of African American as Perceived by Society at Large

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rappers</th>
<th>Murderers</th>
<th>Pimps</th>
<th>Dysfunctional</th>
<th>Misguided</th>
<th>Leaders</th>
<th>Lazy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Athletic</td>
<td>Absentee Fathers</td>
<td>Dead Beat Dads</td>
<td>Detriment to society</td>
<td>Drug Dealers</td>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Underdog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners</td>
<td>Underemployed</td>
<td>Impatient</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Illiterate</td>
<td>Charisma</td>
<td>Meant to struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasted Potential</td>
<td>Unemployable</td>
<td>Arrogant</td>
<td>Intimidating</td>
<td>Substance Abusers</td>
<td>Materialistic</td>
<td>Flamboyant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easily influenced</td>
<td>Failures to African American women</td>
<td>Street Smart</td>
<td>Greedy</td>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>Violent</td>
<td>Lacking Pride</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to the participants, the characteristics displayed are unfair and often unwarranted. These characteristics are not representative of all African American males; but the participants express that these characteristics have been around for years and despite them, African American males continue to reach success at the highest levels. Alex states,

Perception is your reality so when all you see is negativity at every turn on television, the media, commercials, music, and unfortunately the witnessed actions of a few African American males, maybe a false reality is created. However, excuse my French but it is bullshit that this is the story accepted; why not judge us (African American males) on the accomplishments of Himotep, DuBois, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and the list goes on for every negative factor displayed there is an amazing story of African American triumph. We see adversity, face adversity, and overcome it time and time again.

The participants in this study are also living examples of overcoming adversity and demonstrating resilience. At this point in their lives they all are the antithesis of what society has considered the norm for African American males as portrayed in table 4.4 above. Despite seeing and experiencing inequities within education the participants are all college graduates. Instead of accepting the label of dead beat fathers and a failure to women, eight of the participants are married to their first wives and have children. The final two do not have children yet but Heath is newly married and John is engaged to his college sweetheart.

Lonnie discussed in the focus group the three most important days in life are directly connected to his success as an African American male. Receiving his master’s degree, getting married, and becoming a father are three things that remind him he has been triumphant in life. Although in his childhood he did not witness a very stable relationship, his parents never attended college, and many people never thought he would make it out of the small country town he grew up in, he persevered. Now people in his home town use him as an example; they say,
“You have got to make it out of here like Lonnie!” He shares, “Like Antwon Fisher baby, despite all the BS, I am still here and still strong!”

The participants report that resilience in African American males is a fundamental part of the DNA make up. It is something so special that in the research when you look for resilience it is almost exclusively attributed to African Americans. Ricky says, “Resilience is to African Americans as the idea of privilege is to White people. It’s so prevalent that sometime we don’t even realize it there!” Jackson augmented Ricky’s thought by stating,

I like to call resilience the X factor. I am very spiritual and believe in God. I believe that from the moment slave boats docked on the shores of Africa God gave African American males the gift of resilience. What other race of males have been intentionally robbed of education, physically beaten, lost their identity through the reassignment of name, enslaved, had their families taken by force, women rapped, freed but dislocated and still could hold their head high and find a way to make it. We were given a gift because we were chosen to lead, create, and innovate despite lack of appreciation and acceptance. Despite having everything taken away we bounced back and have become major contributors to the society that seems to shun us so.

Resilience is a key element in achieving and maintaining success. Without it one could easily become influenced and give in to negative stressors, or worse, become frustrated and believe that success for African Americans is a matter of privilege and not a right. Kevin shares, “Changing these negative perceptions and co-existing with them seems nearly impossible… it’s seems impossible because, the success stories aren’t heard, highlighted or appreciated.” Being knocked down can happen to anyone and will happen to everyone at some point in their life but resilience is what keeps individuals moving forward, it is the uncanny ability to see opportunity in the midst of challenge and blessings in a cycle of turmoil. Kevin continues,

Doing the impossible is what we (African American males) do. Changing the perceptions faced by African American males is remembering there is no shortage of successful African American fathers, educators, businessmen, community servants. We have all been knocked down and counted out but all knew it wasn’t being knocked down that mattered. What mattered is what happened after the knock down, it was the getting
up and still moving forward despite the blows. As African American men we keep coming, we keep fighting, we don’t stop, we don’t quit, and we go hard. That is how we win, uncover blessings, and attain success. That’s why the haters out there can think what they want, they don’t define us we do and we have to ensure all Black folks, especially African American boys know this!

Shawn definitely agrees with Kevin. His entire family has been successful because of the resilience of those that came before him. He indicated the very principles he lives by, the goals he has set, and the expectations he has from life are all rooted in the experiences of a former slave. In his narrative we learned his great-great grandfather was an uneducated emancipated slave that despite his circumstances role modeled a standard of excellence still affecting his family over 100 years later. Sterling stated, “I don’t give a damn what hurdles are put in front of me I am going right over them because after all they are made to be jumped!” Shawn said that is the attitude his family all have and it is important because African American males are attacked from the beginning of their educational journey, often with no support so resilience is their survival tool. He shared a story about an unfortunate experience of his nephew.

My nephew was directly attacked in middle school! His teacher (who we trusted to educate and inspire him) told a group of him and his friends, all minority students, that she did not have to focus on trying to teach them to read, write or do math because many of them were going to end up in jail anyway and in jail they will not need to know how to do these things, so stressing about it was not her priority. When this was reported by the students the teacher denied it and the principal without an investigation reported that he had to believe his teacher because students are not always truthful and without tangible evidence it is only hearsay and nothing can be done.

When I followed up with Shawn, who originally offered the story he said, “In that moment we reinforced that African American males have no voice and they did not matter.” These are the lessons that require resilience. He further states, “This was the moment for my nephew where he learned in life you are going to get hit hard but you have to keep coming back for more and your goal is achieved.” The participants stress without resilience these experiences make it easy for
African American males to opt out early in their journey and it is very difficult to get them back in once these experiences push them away. Resilience keeps African American males going, the barrier breaker for African American males in the pursuit of success.

Kevin shared an amazing story as well. The absence of resilience in him would have meant death. Kevin was heavily involved in gangs and drugs. Every day was a reminder of what he would not accomplish. His mother did not value school, he valued fast money, and the community had written him off as another youth lost to the streets. If Kevin would have embraced all of this and not believed he could do more and accomplish what seemed to be impossible he very well may have been a statistic; dead, strung out, or incarcerated. Although there were some elements of support in his life, he had been knocked down and had to pick himself up. It was Kevin’s attitude of resilience that provided him the courage to make radical changes in his decision making and approach to life. Kevin had to believe he was college material when told to work at the post office and questioned on thinking about college. Despite individuals telling him he waited too long to be serious and he would never escape the streets; he has a Master’s degree, a family, is committed to working with troubled young men, and is gainfully employed. Kevin stated, “You know support was important as it pointed me in the right direction but it was being resilient that cleared the path to find the support to keep moving on.”

There were so many examples of resilience it was inspiring. These men have come to accept and appreciate the challenges associated with being an African American male. Each barrier has been an opportunity to become stronger, motivation to achieve more, and most importantly, repeated opportunities to change the negative thinking associated with so many
people in society. Table 4.5 below highlights the many examples of resilience provided by the participants throughout the study.

Table 4.5

Participant Examples Where Resilience Played a Key Factor in Moving Forward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Story of Resilience One</th>
<th>Story of Resilience Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Being threatened when deciding to get of the world of gang life</td>
<td>Failing three of four classes the semester of college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Moving from farm to a city and seeing other African American for the first time</td>
<td>Being discriminated against in the workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwayne</td>
<td>Addressing weight issues in school as a youth</td>
<td>Being falsely accused of murder while home on college break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>Staying focused after losing his father</td>
<td>Being unnoticed during the first season of college football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>Losing first fiancé in a car accident</td>
<td>Current wife living with Sickle Cell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Abuse from step father as a child</td>
<td>Coming to grips with a career ending injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heath</td>
<td>Death of his mother during childhood</td>
<td>Losing first home to a fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Being falsely accused of rape during college</td>
<td>Helping NFL friend through an addiction and violence against women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie</td>
<td>Brother being shot multiple times while vacationing</td>
<td>Receiving death threats at a predominately White college while the only person of color living a particular dorm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Being assaulted by police as a teen</td>
<td>Wife’s diagnosis of breast cancer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants all believe in the power and purpose of resilience. It is extremely important because the reality for African American males is a tough one; in the majority of interactions the negative perceptions of society, listed in table 4.4, serve as the welcoming committee. Alan shares, “It feels as if you start at a deficit with every interaction and even more annoying is that you get overly celebrated for doing what’s average; like high school graduation.” Nick is in agreement and reveals the obstacles and negativity are simply to be expected when he states,
What I have learned and continue to realize is that being resilient is a beautiful gift from God. Whether it is because of your race, you socioeconomic status, or just because you are human everyone is going to have crisis. I have seen people crumble under pressure and let the storm be the catalyst for the demise in terms of achievement. It is the gift of resilience that allows someone to experience the storm, weather it, and learn not only what you are capable of but what you are made of. You discover strength and confidence know that you will overcome no matter what. Alan talked about walking directly into adversity and that got me thinking about a poem we all know well, Invictus! Sometimes reminding yourself you are resilient helps face the adversity when you see it coming, just helps you embrace for impact and get ready for whatever the fight ahead may be.

The participants all have committed to memory a poem that for them speaks to the essence of resilience. It was a pretty amazing moment. After Nick completed his thoughts everyone simultaneously and in sync started to recite Invictus written by William E. Henley. Invictus is as follows:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
for my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
my head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
and yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

The participants being associated with the same organization all use this poem as a source of strength and a reminder that resilience is an important factor in overcoming challenges and reaching desired levels of success. In the face of adversity still these men rise!
Theme 3: Family

The theme of family addresses the participant’s reliance on and care for the individuals that matter most. The family unit according to participants, while not always perfect, is the one place where unconditional love and acceptance exists. Family is the source of our beginning and initial development. Whether we are happy or sad, good or bad, prepared or unprepared, it is this environment that has the most influence, responsibility, and, for the participants, what they covet most. In many cases family is a motivator for success because individuals want to provide for family, protect family, are inspired by family, are looking for approval from family, or in some cases, attempting to save family members from themselves.

Each morning Lonnie starts his day by telling his daughter she is a leader and princess, prays over his wife, and asks God that on this day may he be a better man than he was yesterday. His purpose in life used to be making it and becoming successful; that has since shifted. Having a family actually means that he has made it and as long as he can provide for them he is successful. The drive to succeed is now fueled by ensuring the safety, emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual welfare of his family. He said, “They inspire me to be a better man... I want to be the best me I can for them.” He attributes his work ethic and tenacity to ensuring his child knows what hard work looks like. The quality of life he has secured is to ensure his wife lives in comfort because she deserves it. He further shares, “Families comprehend their worth and importance by how they are cared for I want my family to know the mean they world to me!”

Kevin agreed with Lonnie in wanting to ensure his family had the best. He wanted it so badly that initially he embraced negativity in order to help them. However, it was also members of his family that helped him realize his approach to support had to come in an honorable fashion.
versus the illegal tactics he was using, otherwise he was potentially placing in harm’s way those he yearned to protect. Kevin states,

I hated when my family and/or I did not have the things we needed or wanted and for a while it led me onto a path of destruction. I was lost without my grandfather, young, desperate, and operating within a scope I thought was my only outlet. Money gained from theft and drugs simply put a target on my back and to get back at me people were willing to harm my family. When I realized the risks associated with my actions, I knew I did not want my family (especially my sister) affected adversely based on my actions. It was my sister’s voice ringing in my head that I was no longer her brother I was becoming a bad man that really made me look at my actions. It was her involvement and tough love that gave me the strength to do what was right even if would take longer. When I actually started looking at what was going on, I realized I had work to do. I needed to get my mom from that environment, be a better example for my brothers, and ensure I hadn’t totally lost the respect of my sister. So my success journey truly began in that moment; I decided I wanted more for my family, myself and my family. I wanted them safe, proud, and eager to follow in my footsteps. All the success I have experienced since that moment I owe to my family for helping embrace my role in the family and start to do what was right.

Once he began thinking straight Kevin discussed dealing with his anger by remembering his grandfather and the type of man he was. He found internal renewal in remembering the lessons he learned. He remembered that his grandfather would give a person his last, he would tell Kevin in life it is not how you start but how you chose to finish, and that no matter what, it was a man’s responsibility to live righteously for his family. These were the buried internal thoughts that resurfaced Kevin’s thoughts and helped him focus on the future he is now living in. “My grandfather was the greatest man I’ve ever known and I hope that I can make him proud,” Kevin said.

Alex, without hesitation asserted that his life as he knows it is in large part to his grandfather. Alex recalls countless conversations in his youth between him and his grandfather. They discussed politics often because his grandfather was a notable politician in the community, the talked about giving back, life, women, and the mistakes that were made with Alex’s father. Alex shares,
The most powerful and meaningful conversation I had with my Grandfather was when he revealed that he made mistakes as a man and as a father when it came to my Dad. He explained that he did what was right but at the cost of their relationship. He shared that his inability to be flexible and emotional contributed to the obstacles Alex’s father faced and for that he has cost himself the ability to ever be truly happy because he failed my father attempting to control too much and dictate what should happen in his life rather than advise.

The conversation occurred when he was sixteen. In that conversation he learned why his father was not very emotional and why when it came to him, his grandfather was overly emotional. He learned about choice and sacrifice, he learned about humility. This larger than life man admitting to a child his imperfections, hoping for a better reality for him, in that moment Alex feels he made the transition to manhood.

Alex further describes watching his grandfather in action, the way people responded to him, the way he used his influence, how he always brought his grandmother flowers on Wednesdays and took her on a couples only trip once a year to a place of her choice. “It was like poetry in motion this guy,” Alex said, “Everyday I wished I could be just like my grandpa; little did I know I was already on the path.” Each conversation, interaction, and observation was a deposit into Alex’s success bucket.

Having this relationship was very important. These moments were instrumental in combating what Alex saw at home, in the neighborhood, and at school. Alex’s dad was not very attentive; he was more interested in women and alcohol than Alex’s activities. Alex’s entire neighborhood peer group was gang affiliated or just into “crazy stuff on the regular,” which included stealing, fighting, smoking weed, and doing a variety of other drugs. “Without my grandfather, I would probably be one of those guys from the old block that did not make it. I can never repay him for his investment!”

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Heath had a very similar opinion of his father. His father demanded excellence at all costs and refused to believe that he or his children could fail at anything. He constantly pushed Heath and reminded him that success comes for those prepared to live with it. Heath stated regarding his father,

He seriously is the best, most courageous and crazy man I know. I don’t know about other fathers but mine scared success into me. With my father the most important thing was to find out the “or else!” Don’t get me wrong he wasn’t abusive, in fact I have never been physically reprimanded, I actually think I would have much rather preferred that, it would have been over faster…lol. But anyhow, my father demanded excellence and accepted nothing else. It did not matter if it was how I brushed my teeth, prepared for school, or even watched television; I had to do it with pride, enthusiasm, and excellence. Although as a teen he drove me crazy and I thought that he was capable of killing me I really appreciated who he was. Many of my friends did not have my father and I think that is why they haven’t turned out so well. I know that until I was old enough to make the right choices it was my father’s voice that led me. It was my father’s voice that demanded I stand up when I fell down, it was his voice that reminded me it was okay to cry as long as it was around those I could trust otherwise hold it and never let people see you sweat. It was his voice that said sleep is an award of perfect homework, his voice that said if you ever fail it will be because you needed a lesson and not because you were ill prepared or unconfident. I can list countless other examples. I am who I am because he is who he is. I only wish all of my friends had that when we were in middle and high school because that is when I became a man and many of them embraced negativity.

In addition to demanding excellence Heath saw it role modeled. A man of his word, Heath’s father practiced what he preached. Heath attributes his work ethic to watching his father go to work early, get off late, and when he got off on time he watched him give back or serve the community in some capacity. Additionally, he credits his father for how he has come to select his friends. He watched his father include only individuals he considered family in his inner circle. These friends, although not biologically related, accepted each other as if they were and became surrogate uncles and big brothers; this is the same principle Heath uses in selecting his friends. The perceived fear and frustration Heath experienced as an adolescent from his father is now 100% respect, gratitude, and appreciation.
Shawn, too, speaks highly of his family in relation to his success. His family has played an active role in the success of its members for over 100 years. The catalyst or role model for the intentional attainment of success was his great-great grandfather who strongly suggested everyone in the family follow his pearls of wisdom. His great-great grandfather was also very intentional about specific instruction for the males of the family. He believed it was the responsibility of the males in the family to protect the family name, ensure that everyone within the family was educated, and that everyone had the necessary tools to become successful. That message has trickled down and directly impacted Shawn’s life. Shawn watched his parents sacrifice so he could attend the best schools, he was active in countless organizations and programs, and he also watched how they cared for each other. Shawn shares,

You know it is amazing how many ways my parents shaped my life through their mentorship. I learned the importance of parental involvement with children; I learned that marriage is a partnership, and that you should have an unselfish concern for the welfare of others. The most important takeaway from observing them was the importance of education. They were always improving themselves and looking for ways to make like increasingly comfortable. Hit a goal and then set a new one.

Shawn also reported that in addition to serving as great role models, his parents and other extended family members exposed him to countless other adults through family ties, community relationships, and established additional relationships in each activity he was involved in. Making good choices, being responsible, confident, and being held accountable became second nature as result of so many family members and extended familial ties having a personal interest in his success. These individuals were unapologetic and extremely vocal in setting high expectations and inserting coachable moments throughout his development. Shawn says, “It does indeed take a village, I am so thankful my family created the right one for me.”

Discipline from within the family unit was also critical. Some participants shared that their parent(s) did not have the tools to be successful and in many aspects they were not
successful themselves. However, that did not stop them from expecting that their children reach further and accomplish more than they did. Some participants, particularly Shawn and Dwayne, focused on fear of their parental figures. Shawn said, “I was scared to fail at anything. My dad wasn’t playing.” Heath states, “My father made it simple, failure equals consequences, I wanted no part!” For other participants the fear was the intangible feeling of not wanting to let their parents down. No matter how it was implemented, discipline, according to the participants was critical.

Nick revealed that even though there were outside influences helping shape him, it was his mother who demanded he read every day, who told him he was special and could do anything he put his mind to. Her subtle approach at coaching and discipline went a long way for Nick. He said, “My mom was a jewel, she only asked that I gave my all and committed to be more than I was the before.” Nick said that little phrase was crucial in helping him form relationships and make good choices. He states,

In many situations I found myself asking if I do this will I better than I was yesterday. If the answer was no then whatever it was, was not for me. While I did not know exactly what I was going to do, it was the gentle whispers of my mom that guided me to the path needed to get where I was going. That question was my temperature check for everything from new friends to life decisions, I still use it today.

Dwayne was in agreement with Nick saying that his mom had one rule that kept him out of trouble and ensured his success. She simply reminded him while growing up that although there were not very many teachers around there were plenty of experts in failing. Watch the failures and do the opposite. Dwayne says,

I can still hear her in my head… If the knuckle heads are out until midnight you should be in by 9pm, if they were hanging on the corner you should be on your own porch, if they ditched school you should pass the test perfectly, if they are hurting others you should be helping others!
John shared it was the lack of discipline of his family members that helped him. “It was like Dwayne’s mother was talking to me also,” he indicated. The cousins John grew up with were bad business. Although their street reputation kept John safe from certain things and he appreciated it, they still were up to no good. John shared,

My cousins were into everything illegal. They made up their own gang because they were so tough and feared. They were so out of control that the local Crips merged with them. The fought, sold drugs, stole cars, ditched school, disrespected the police, and so much more. It became very apparent that in order to make it out of my neighborhood I could not get caught up in their drama. I decided to love them as family but do the opposite of them. I became a decent student, got involved in sports, went to a different school where they couldn’t readily access me, and got a job. Slowly my actions went from criticism to support. Although they had chosen their path they respected mine and began to encourage me. Anything I needed to helped with, for example I needed football cleats my older bought me two pair: one for practice and the other for the games. They became my biggest fan and began calling me college boy. At first I felt like it was a “diss” but then realized they were speaking college into my future so I embraced it. My successes eventually became an example for them to follow. Currently I have five cousins in community college. They helped me start and now I get to return the favor.

The participants’ stories demonstrate that family involvement and influence, whether positive or negative, can have a profound impact on an individual’s success. For the participants family has inspired, shaped, supported, and, in some cases, required their success. The participants all believe that family is indeed a critical component in attaining true success.

*Theme 4: A Tale of Two Cities: Liberation and Inequity in Education*

The theme A Tale of Two Cities: Liberation and Inequity in Education, embodies the participant’s belief that education is the best of times and the worst of times. During the focus group Nick quoted Charles Dickens saying, “My educational experience has been the best of times and the worst of times, an experience that gave me wisdom and dealt out lots of foolishness!” In other words simultaneously, education is the vehicle to change one’s stars and an environment where African American males are constantly fighting to be accepted and treated
fairly. The participants are all relieved to have received an education; as a result, they have become leaders and majors contributors to their respective communities. Yet, the pursuit of this valuable education was not always easy and in some cases difficult at best describes the experiences of the participants. However, based on the return on investment from a quality education all participants agreed, one must face and overcome whatever challenges surface in order to attain one.

**The city of liberation.** An education, according to the participants is a critical element in achieving success. It is the key to knowledge which opens doors and can be leveraged for limitless opportunity. In addition to being a gate keeper to the executive levels of organizations and corporations and the greatest strength of an entrepreneur, education is also the gateway to skills and acumen required to be a competent contributor on any professional team. More importantly, once acquired, education is something that cannot be legitimately changed, taken, or altered, and it has the abilities to create paradigm shifts within people.

The participants report it was a formal education that helped them see beyond the borders of their neighborhood. Education became the lens that brightly displayed there were additional options outside of the limited ones presented in their immediate environment. As long as an individual has the ability to pursue an equitable formal education they can reach success and continuously be accepted into majoritarian society despite perception, race, or negative intentions of individuals in society at large. Jackson states,

I was in a Public School at a time when bussing was mandatory so I got to go to school with kids from a variety of races! They were bused in so that meant additional parental support and pressure on the school leadership. I benefited from this and saw and took advantage of many unique opportunities. I was in stock market, participated in mock trials. Honestly it was here that I figured out I could be a lawyer; I had no clue I could at that point I thought it was only for White people. In terms of the environment, elementary through high school great; we had a diverse make up of students and teachers.
Getting bused out of my neighborhood to this school opened my eyes and really made me focus on school because there were actually opportunities.

Lonnie also chimed in saying he had a favorable experience. He informed,

High school was a pretty positive experience, although a private school, there was just as many minorities as White students. I even had teachers that were African American and African American history was a part of the school’s extremely rigorous curriculum. I am very proud of this because I have come to learn my experience was not only good but unique compared to others I have met. In high school I knew that college was an option and that my opportunities were limitless!

Education is the cornerstone to success for African American males. It is the element within any individual that cannot be legally taken once it is acquired and almost always an education yields a return on investment. The participants stressed the importance of valuing education and making it the most important initiative in a young person’s life. Shawn states,

Education was their very tool that changed the course of history for my family. My great-great Grandfather was able to recognize its power based on it being denied to him. Through close study and observation of rich educated White people he learned how to use it, and most importantly he was able to pass that information along. Despite racism, obstacles, and at times financial challenges my family has persevered and always managed an excellent quality of life. The one constant was the commitment to education at the highest levels, when a door was shut to my parents I always watched another one open because of their intellect and uncanny ability to adapt. I soon learned that my education was my primary responsibility. My success, the success of my family is all based on a simple principle; get an education that is thorough and linked to a profession that matters, creates wealth, and makes a difference. My education has afforded me the opportunity to have an excellent career in the finance industry, my day to day work in my opinion doesn’t make a substantial difference but the salary I earn and the flexibility I have allow me to make a personal impact on a regular basis. Without my education this would likely be impossible.

Kevin too has a strong belief and appreciation for education. While initially as a youth he did not value education, he now feels an education is invaluable. He states,

I have such a great appreciation for education. What I lacked was hope and vision, the idea that opportunities happened for everyone. My education provided hope and vision as well as information I never knew existed. When I became serious about school I experienced a serious shift in my thought process and begin to realize what type a life I
could have if I merged what I learned in the streets in a positive way with what I was learning in school. Sure school was not perfect for me in many respects but it gave me a new lens to view things and I was able to honor the curiosities that I was once embarrassed to share. I found my passion and calling in life. Without these very different but crucial educational experiences, I may have become what many fear, another failed Black man...So and some folks laugh when I say it but seriously here is to education, I salute her! I came from barely reading to possessing an advanced degree, from having nothing to deciding what I want to purchase. I am a walking example of the power of education.

Education not only provides earning potential, knowledge, and a career path but it also provides access, political power, and community influence. Jackson shared that as a youth he worked at an upscale athletic club. He made minimum wage, served at the members’ every beck and call, provided day care services, and what he hated most was he had to enter through the back door. Twenty-five years later as a lawyer he is entering the front door and sitting on the board. He is the chair of the club relations committee that has passed new rules allowing employees to enter and exit the building through any door. Jackson credits his education for helping him secure the means to be a member and the knowledge and expertise which made him a viable board candidate.

Ricky told a similar story. His education created amazing relationships in addition to a degree and training. In college Ricky meet an individual that is now a very active and influential public official. Based on this relationship and knowledge of Ricky’s athletic background Ricky has received an appointment to the local parks and recreation board. He has used his influence and education to help propose legislation that will increase the hours of operations for recreation centers, libraries, add additional civil service employees, and lower property taxes for senior citizens. Ricky states,

Never in a million years did I see myself involved on this level. I barely seen myself passing my classes let alone graduating from college and using my skills to make impacts on the neighborhoods I grew up in. Education is powerful and it makes so many things
possible. My education is the very reason I am influential in the community, active in local and national elections, and am enjoying the quality of life that my father would have wanted and that my mother role modeled. Armed with an education an African American man is capable of anything.

In agreement with Ricky on the added benefits of an education, Dwayne shares that it was his collegiate education that taught him how to be a professional. He had internships where he learned how to dress for work, and classes on communication and work place navigation. He even joined a professional organization which expanded his network across the country and helped solidify his place in the world of work. The classes did increase Dwayne’s intellect but the overall benefits were so much more than academic. Dwayne offers,

The practice of going to school is not only important for knowledge, it is critical for relationship building and understanding the world of work. It is in the classroom that we learn about networking or making new friends, where we are exposed to structure in large quantities, where the concept of hierarchy is first introduced, and the idea of working or being in a particular environment with a particular mission. In addition, to the ABC’s, social etiquette, work structure, and politics are being taught. Education has to be taken seriously and engaged in because this is the environment to learn how to exist in the professional world that follows. Without my college experience I would have been unprepared and a serious non-factor.

Lonnie shares,

I am a hospital administrator responsible for hundreds of employees and initiatives that I would not be equipped to address had it not been for the formal education I have received. You don’t understand economics, ethics in business, accounting principles, and historical concepts without a quality education. You aren’t equipped to comprehend these concepts in college without a great high school foundation. I know this because I watched many students wash out of my college programming. These experiences were incredible learning opportunities that have helped me be one of the best at what I do. I am certain without my formalized education I would be a much less unsuccessful person before you today.

Like many resources, education improves the experience of the African American male.

“Without my education I would be nothing,” said Heath. “My educational attainment is what
fuels my professional and personal success,” shares Jackson. All of the participants are in agreement that having a formal education is necessary for everyone but of paramount importance for African American males.

It is important, however, to stress that for the participants’ education consists of both formalized training within the classroom as well as education engaged in through living life and exposure to different aspects while growing up. According to the participants, informal education is equally valuable in attaining success because it ensures one is present for the formal educational journey. Many of the participants share that although their formal education has been critical for success it was their informal education that is necessary for survival.

Lonnie shared that his formal education was a decent experience and it created a pathway to his success but there were other educational factors that played a significant role in his development. He said,

School while not perfect was the best thing that happened in regards to my educational development. Now with that being said there are some things that aren’t learned in the books. I learned how to be fiscally conservative from growing up in poverty, political navigation from managing the rules of the neighborhood, and relationship building from identifying individuals that were able to help me navigate the roads to where I am and am still going.

Kevin discussed being street smart in his neighborhood was important. There was so much going on he had to be alert. He needed to know if a drive by was going to happen, if a woman walking was a regular person, drug addict, or prostitute. It was important to know who to stay away from, who was capable of ripping you off, what time of day to bring home new purchases (never in broad daylight because that was asking to be robbed later), and which police actually cared. The neighborhood had a curriculum of its own and if one was not aware it could be dangerous. Kevin said,
Prior to committing to school and education in the traditional sense, I was on the streets where I learned a variety of things. I learned how to survive, read people for…well let’s call it authenticity; I learned to care for my family, and to advocate for myself. I also learned which gang members to be friends with. Knowing the right people was critical for information. For example, knowing the leaders in the Crips meant warnings if there was going to be shootings. They would come by and tell my grandfather to stay in after dark, hang in the basement or leave the neighborhood all together. I know it sounds crazy but it was that real. My street smarts kept me alive long enough to have the reality check I needed to get my life together.

Furthermore, Kevin indicated that his street smarts have been helpful his entire life. When he was in college and needed money he knew about giving blood, he taught himself to cut hair, he sold snacks out of his room, how to create full meals for less than three dollars, and a variety of other things. Kevin states, “One thing is for sure when you come from the streets you know how to hustle!”

Heath agreed and feels his informal education has had a tremendous impact on who he is. He stated,

A smart man knows that you cannot only learn in the classroom, that makes you one dimensional and honestly pretty boring. People need a nice balance and mixture of educational experiences. I believe I had a very balanced education between the classroom and life in general. Early on there were more lessons associated with life skills until I was mature enough to understand the importance of education in multiple capacities. Growing up it was never about attaining a formal education, it was not important – being the best person I could be was. I had a very stern father who always told me to do the best at whatever it was I was into and I believe that through him he was teaching me survival skills from the very beginning. I learned a lot from him about life he exposed me to a lot at an early age, which required that I grow up quick at a very early age. Sports were also a great informal educational teacher; in fact, I think sports to this day have taught me 90% of what I know now.

Each participant is very appreciative and supportive of attaining an education and emphasize that it must be attained at all costs. The emphasis on “at all costs” is not simply a message to African American males to engage in a process readily available to them. Rather it is a message that is stressing the importance of knowing that it will not be easy and although of
crucial importance, education is not always as accessible as an African American male would like. The pursuit of education often comes with personal sacrifice, challenges, and inequities that require resilience, a sense of resourcefulness, and advocating skills learned outside of the classroom.

**The city of inequity.** There is a saying, “everything that glitters is not gold,” and the participants believe this saying is true in regards to education. Alex states, “You would think something so vital to everyone would be given to everyone freely but with education that is not the case.” The overwhelming consensus among the participants was education is vital and crucial for success but it has been intentionally kept from African American males since its inception. Sterling offered,

Since slavery education we (African American males) we intentionally not educated and executed for attempting to learn to read. The United States had to create federal laws and constitutional amendments to give the rights and then we had to have Supreme Court rulings to enforce the laws. We were not meant to be educated and because society was forced to, it happened reluctantly and half heartedly. That is why damn near 150 years later we are all having a half ass educational experience, being hated on, and having to share bull shit stories about obstacles to something that should be freely distributed like heat from a fire.

Ricky was in agreement. He believed that the data demonstrate Black males are being targeted with barriers that are affecting education. When working on a student success project that took him to the east coast, Ricky discovered that English as a Second Language (ESL) students entering the educational system with no English skills were out performing African American males. The individuals working on this project determined that these types of results were trending nationally, but the question is why? Ricky states,

The consensus of the folks on the project was that issues such as authenticity in teacher intentions, deficit thinking, racism, poverty, cultural competence, and an extreme lack of resources were attributed to the data in question. The general feeling was that although there are poor choices being made by African American males across the country; they
are not waking up with a desire to fail. They are waking up and making the choices available to them that will best help them survive.

The information Ricky provided unfortunately made no impact on the other participants. It was as if they had worked on the same project and received the information first hand. Lonnie shares, “The reality is just different for African American males if quality options are not available than society expects us to simply chose the best of the low quality options available.” The participants all agreed that education, while necessary and beneficial, was an unpleasant endeavor at best.

I remember feeling stupid and like I did not belong at my high school because I was hoodwinked in middle school. My grades said I was smart but I realized exactly how much information my schools left out when compared to the students at my new private school. It was embarrassing, so many times I wanted to quit because I had to work so hard to catch up. The thought that really disturbs me is what if I did not figure this out until college or the workforce. I would have been too far behind to catch up. Graduating with honors to find out I was on a remedial level would have been devastating. I know it because it happened to countless friends of mine from my old neighborhood. You don’t want to believe it’s intentional but it just cannot be coincidence.

Those were words shared by John and Heath further explained that he also had countless friends with great GPAs that could not pass the ACT test or test into college courses on the community college Accuplacer test. His high school let kids “run amuck” and only passed them in order to make space for the next kids they would do absolutely nothing to prepare for the next level. For example, “As an athlete I did not have to go to class, I received special privileges, my friends that should have been ineligible sitting with a tutor somewhere, never missed a game.”

At that school Heath felt if students wanted an education they had to go take it. “In order to get in AP classes my father had to come to the school and basically threaten the principal to provide me the opportunity or he would report them to media.” Heath’s description of his school experience was both unfortunate and horrific all the way through. At one point he said, “I hate to
admit but my school was like East Side high in the movie Lean on Me before Joe Clark…lol.”

He further stated,

I had friends with 4.0 grade point averages that only scored a 15 on the ACT. Their classes were fluff and they left high school grossly underprepared. Many are paying for the poor effort we were allowed to put in high school today. We weren’t challenged or expected to do well consistently throughout the building… We were known as the high school party school... Girls walked around pregnant, people smoked weed, people ditched, in fact the school performed so poorly the district closed it a few years after I graduated. The school had no college counseling plan, I was never asked once in four years about college, unless it pertained to getting a football scholarship. The building was run down and there was no real spirit in the school. There were many classes lacking books, the technology was ancient, and every other day something else in the building did not work, you would have thought out of order was an official room number in the building!

Education, for the participants is both of dire importance and difficult to attain. It is an unfortunate reality that the professional experience of Ricky and the experiences of Heath and John are not isolated incidents. These incidents, for the participants, simply demonstrated the regular occurrence of the added stressors faced by African American males in the pursuit of excellence. Each participant had very detailed examples of how the educational system or an actual educator attempted to discourage them throughout their quest to attain the much needed education. Dewayne revealed,

I will never forget a teacher told me that I should not ever be down about my grades after I performed poorly on a test. She told me that my grades wouldn’t matter after graduation because the military or trade jobs did not check grades, just completion. She then added insult to injury by adding that I just needed to stay good with my hands and physically fit to handle the long hours. For example; Dwayne, as a plumber you will make a great living but it may require a 12 to 15 hour day on occasion and I needed to be prepared for that. At the conclusion of this ridiculous conversation two things happened: first I was suspended from school for cursing the teacher out and the second I decided I was going to have a field in math because she was my math teacher and I was going to prove her wrong. I cannot front though… that shit really hurt my feelings, my own damn teacher had counted me out.
Dwayne revealed that the encounter with his math teacher was one of many experiences that had him conflicted about education and his role within it. There were several occasions where Dwayne felt like giving up and quitting education all together because the more focused he became on his studies the harder it seemed to access the education he so desperately sought.

I feel like until I got to college at an HBCU (Historically Black College and University); I had to literally take my education. Elementary school stands out the most in my mind due to the principal’s office and referrals. My teacher would send me there for blinking, I swear. I was in a pretty diverse class but I was one three African American boys. Anytime we horse played or got out of line it was a check next to our name versus what I truly feel was several warning with others. Four checks meant to the principal’s office, which was really in-school suspension. I remember days when I would have four checks within two hours of being at school and I was not a bad kid. I hated (and use I this word understanding its meaning) my teacher. She would tell my mom I was falling behind and needed extra help, when I only needed to have my tail in class to learn. How was I supposed to learn when I spent the majority of the day in suspension writing a paper on my behavior and how I will follow the rules that seemed to apply to no one else except the African American boys in the class. It always seemed like I was educated by default; like well he is in the room so if he learns he learns but it won’t be because it was intentional. Most of my academic development happened outside of school. Needless to say, I developed a healthy disapproval for many aspects of school and that was largely responsible for my choice in an HBCU. I decided just give the people (teachers and counselors) what they wanted to hear, that way I could graduate with good grades, leave, and go to a place where I would be accepted, understood, and celebrated.

Lonnie also shared personal experiences of his educational pursuits. Unlike Dwayne, Lonnie did not have a teacher that seemed to have it out for him or even one that specifically discouraged his career pursuits. Lonnie endured a culture where everyone simply had no expectations. The administrators were nice, respectful, and even seemed culturally competent but intentional deposits into Lonnie’s educational toolkit simply were not made. He states,

Although a pretty positive overall experience in high school; the down side was the low expectations; we (Blacks) were managed rather than taught. There wasn’t lots of accountability or grand expectations from the teachers, leadership within the building, or community at large. African American really weren’t encouraged to leave the county; college was not even a part of any conversation. It was more like stay in town, be a mechanic, join the military. Educational advancement wasn’t a huge conversation. There are some pretty smart guys in my hometown that could be so much more.
Lonnie’s greatest experience with educational inequity occurred in college. It was here for the first time he experienced flat out discrimination and the attitude that as an African American male he was not supposed to be capable of academic excellence. In regards to college Lonnie said,

My college experiences, while they have paid off, were the polar opposite of high school, it was all bad. I was one of 20 African American students on campus of nearly 3,000 students, none of the professors looked like me, most of the students looked at me awkwardly, so needless to say the environment did not cater to my cultural needs. I did not have much difficulty with the curriculum because I had been prepared pretty well in high school for the demands of college. That being said, I had a mastery of the subjects but professors that were certain I was a cheat and not capable of the caliber of work I provided consistently. While unfair, I had to build a reputation and prove that I was extremely intelligent and synonymous with “A” quality work. In my collegiate tenure I have retaken at least four tests; the joy in the midst of this oppression was actually scoring higher on the retests each time! Instead of expelling me for cheating I had to be celebrated for excellence and apologies were made. These experiences motivated me, I was never going to play down to African American males being ignorant, I was never going to let them be right about me, and I certainly wanted to demonstrate that I was supposed to be there. What made the experiences worth it was when the professor that consistently accused me of cheating was promoted to Dean and had to be responsible for leading me across the stage to receive my degree, which came with honors!

Jackson stated,

Once I got to college the environment was hostile. Attending an all White school I learned very quickly how White America as whole has really viewed African American men; especially when you are not providing services as an athlete or entertainer. At 5’5” and 230 pounds, they knew I wasn’t an athlete so why was I going to college? What the hell are you doing here? So yes it was very hostile and I’m not going to lie I was very angry the entire time I was in college because I knew I did not fit in and was constantly reminded by ignorant comments and not having much on campus that catered to me. In terms of curriculum I really did not embrace the curriculum from high school through college because I saw where they had African American history excluded. I was fortunate enough to be able to learn Black history outside of school. That knowledge made me feel formal education intentionally excluded and minimized accomplishments of African Americans and as a result I rebelled and could care less of the educational experience. It was flawed and broken; I just wanted the piece of paper because that opened the workforce door! School honestly did not necessarily make me feel like I was supposed to be successful. I simply knew it was a means to an end.
John also felt out of place during his educational journey. Attending a private high school was different and caused extreme culture shock for John. “I felt like the Wizard of Oz, I knew I wasn’t in Kansas anymore.” He went on to explain,

My high school experience is where I experienced more than the struggles of my neighborhood; students wearing confederate belt buckles, I tested into a slower paced class that was helpful but marginalized the students within it. The program offered the same college preparatory classes but at a slower pace and smaller class size. Although I was a great student, I needed this help to catch up with my private school counterparts. I learned my previous school did not do the developing my grades suggested. On many occasions I was asked questions about being poor, my hair, told not to date the White girls, and flat out called Nigger. The environment was filled with difficulty…It was the worst environment ever but I got a tremendous education, one that guaranteed college.

The participants, although faced with some challenging scenarios, all persevered and attained their education goals. The pursuit was filled with obstacles but the participants believe the obstacles were tests of strength, opportunities to prove others wrong, and simply actions fueled by hate and/or ignorance, all things that can be overcome. The participants all agreed the most difficult experiences to deal with as African American males are the inequitable educational experiences. Each concurred for African American males, especially in youth, this is a tremendous feat to overcome and the inequities truly alienate a person all together, abandoning the pursuit of success.

*Theme 5: Viewed through a Funhouse Mirror and the Effects It Has on Us All*

The theme, being viewed through a fun house mirror and the effects it has on us all captures the participants’ views on how society in general perceives African American males, no matter the accomplishments, socioeconomic status, contributions, or acts of service. The theme also addresses the effects the perceptions held by society can have on the community as well as African American males. The theme was actually captured in the individual interview with Heath. He shared that no matter the product you place in front of society when it comes to
African American males, the view is altered as if they are seeing only the distorted image reflected in a fun house mirror. The perception from the onset is distorted and the actual clear picture is never seen. The skewed picture reinforces negative perceptions that increase the challenges African American males face. This metaphor resonated with all of the participants and emerged as the name to encompass the participants’ views on how they are perceived by society.

According to the participants, society in general has a negative perception of African American males and has a very different belief on what success looks like for African American males. Society’s definition is limiting, disrespectful, and an absolute detriment to African American males. In many cases the participants believe that this limiting definition, which is portrayed and supported on a macro level, is largely responsible for the continued and increasing number of African American males experiencing a lack of success in the most important areas of life.

The participants further agree that society believes completing the bare minimum is success and that anything more is exceptional or some sort of rare and miraculous occurrence. Kevin told a story about a high school counselor who congratulated him on graduating and when he asked about college the counselor was extremely surprised saying, “Really? You want to go to college? Why? I assumed since you have made this amazing milestone you would be happy.” While Kevin doesn’t feel the counselor was racist, he said it was a true moment of clarity in regards to the perception of his potential. When talking with other African American male classmates, he learned his experience was not unique; college was never a conversation for any of his friends. Their conversations with counselors focused on making a living with trades, the military, and government jobs. It is beyond limiting to think that high school graduation was
supposed to be the epitome of what these young men could accomplish educationally. Kevin was now certain the perception was not about him individually but African Americas in general.

Lonnie follows up with scenarios focused around his profession, where he serves as the Senior Vice President of a local health care company. He shares that in five years in this role he has not attended a meeting where members of the majority race have not been surprised that he is African American, well educated, articulate, and holding the number two position in the company. He laughed as he shared about countless meetings where prior to introducing himself, people assumed he was there for an interview, asked if he needed directions, or in the worst scenario of all, a colleague flat out expressed her surprise to see an African American in that role and said, “it’s like you are an alien I just don’t see Black guys here (at this level) no offense.”

Jackson contributed an experience on an airplane. He was late for a flight and ended up being one of the last individual seated on the plane. When Jackson got on the plane he plopped down into his seat, which was located in first class. A White couple looked at him and told him that this airline did not do open seating. They just wanted to let him know that he was in first class and wanted to save him the embarrassment of the flight attendant moving him. After laughing on the inside he thanked them for the information and proceeded to put on his headphones. The couple, then agitated that he did not leave, called the flight attendant to report him. He then showed his ticket to the couple and said, “Sorry if it bothers you but I am here to stay enjoy your flight.” They apologized and then asked him who he was. Was he a celebrity on vacation or some famous rapper? He simply replied, “Have a nice flight I am normal just like you.”

The other participants shared similar experiences and collectively their conclusion was that in our society African American males are counted out and much like the early post-slavery
era, are simply expected to survive and not thrive. Heath shares, “Whether the beliefs are rooted in race or simply traditionalized; low expectations, praising mediocrity, and the glorification of shortcomings has been adopted by society as the African American male experience.

In Table 4.4 the participants listed characteristics society used to describe African American males. Table 4.6 provides a deeper view and lists the thoughts the participants feel society has in regards to African American males. These thoughts are gathered from the perspectives of the participants based on the experiences of their daily interaction with the world.

Table 4.6

Participant Reported Thoughts of African American Males by Society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Thoughts participants believe are supported by society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>African American males are a lost generation that cares more about rims and designer shades than the wellbeing of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>African American males only focus on how to make quick money and overspend on material possessions. No focus on education or bettering themselves. Happy with status quo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwayne</td>
<td>African American males are the skilled laborers of the country as well as the key make up of military infantry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>African American males are too focused on what other people have rather than what they need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>African American males lack the courage to uplift community and are greedy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>African American males are entertainers that depend on talent and are too lazy to embrace intellect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heath</td>
<td>African American males are a societal nonfactor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>African American are losers that are underdogs, struggle, greedy, and lazy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie</td>
<td>African American males are lack luster, lazy, insecure, and lack confidence. They make horrible decisions regarding money and disrespect our women regularly. They do not understand concepts such as honor, pride, and a relentless attitude to succeed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>African American male are crooks destined for incarcerated, they aspire to only be professional athletes, they are jobless, nonexistent fathers, many wish they were White, they are media minstrel shows, and destined to fail.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The views held by society are dangerous and directly influence masses of people. The participants agree that media outlets are the most responsible because there is a choice in what
they portray. Holding up the fun mirror is a direct attack on African American males and creates additional obstacles that must be overcome. Alex shares,

BET, Rap music, CNN, the local newspaper and media in general all set the stage to bash us. Society then both honors and accepts this by catering to the thoughts, embracing the madness, and believing all African American males behave inappropriately. What is even more dangerous is the influence this can have over younger African American males, especially those in poverty that may only see this distorted perception. This perception upholds flawed principles, fueling negativity in our young men.

The participants reveal how society’s view puts African American males in great peril. Negative views, although primarily created by stereotyping, lack of access to the true reality of African American males, and a distorted reality become accepted thoughts and practices because they are being projected through every viable media option. The new thoughts and practices are then duplicated in the open for everyone to experience, shaping increased negative perceptions and bolstering the view seen in the fun mirror. Kevin shares,

Think about it when a young man constantly sees violence, negativity, and achievement through negative methods; much like my childhood, you begin to take the persona on because you are looking to feel a void. For a long time you struggle with how far you can go but the more these things are reinforced the easier it becomes to wake up one day with a new life style society has created for you. Unfortunately for African American males the life style was not influenced by the Cosby show as you once wished. In a blink of an eye you have lost yourself and began reinforcing the distorted perceptions taken on by society.

John agreed with Kevin as he explained how the volume of distorted perceptions not only potentially affects young African American males but everyone. A chain reaction of events occurs that leave African American males an open target for criticism and abuse. The reaction could easily flow in the following direction: the influence of the distorted view of African American males reinforces the destruction of the African American family so African American women are becoming more critical and less patient; community members are becoming
increasingly afraid of interactions with African American males for fear of criminal intentions, police profiling increases; business owners stop taking chances on African American males looking for work, relationship tension rises in communities because local employers are not hiring; and then desperate African American males begin to buy into the perceptions set forth by society. Nahum says,

Suddenly you have a well-intentioned African American male that has his back in the corner and only has the goal of survival in mind. It is in these moments being a thug, selling some drugs, or anything else that pays quickly seems like a worthwhile endeavor. Once this act happens all African American males are then judged by one man’s deed. This is not fair or appropriate but it is the effect society has and the issue it is causing.

The participants, especially Alan, are really irritated by this reality. Alan shares, “The fact is there are men who are African American that happen to be bad people. That doesn’t mean I deserve to pay for their transgressions.” Society’s ignorance makes for a long day every day for successful African American males. For example, Heath explains that due to society being so critical African American men have to go above and beyond for individuals to know that “you are one of the good ones.” This means that everything from the way one walks and talks to the type of car one drives is consistently being assessed. Herman further states, “You have to “ABO” always be on…you don’t have the luxury to take a break as an African American man. As soon as you relax that is the moment you get let go or blamed for something that someone else has failed at!” All of the participants agreed to the notion that in order to be successful African Americans, they simply have to do everything better, there is less room for error, and bottom line is, they have to be exceptional.

The perceptions regarding African American males are so bad that even a harmless dinner is magnified to the point of annoyance. Lonnie told a story about a time when a group of Kappa, an African American fraternity, men that are all fathers took their toddler children to a
local restaurant for dinner. Lonnie expressed being disheartened because so many people asked what the occasion was and if everything was alright. He even shared that one woman flat out said, “It’s about time we see African American men with their children, you guys rock!” The participants all agreed if that scenario happened with all White males, there would have been no fan fair; it would have simply been another night out at dinner. The participants agreed that in everyday life, due to the perception of African American males, they don’t get a day off from realizing, thinking about, or being reminded that they are of the African American Diaspora.

The participants were all very clear that there are major concerns that need to be addressed regarding the perceptions of African American males. It is an uphill battle, as the reflection society is seeing in the fun mirror in relation to African American males is by design. Heath said,

It is very easy to quit trying when you don’t feel wanted, respected or valued… How can we address educational or success concerns when the perception of African American males in the society is committed to viewing us collectively as inadequate.

The consensus of the participants is that perceptions are intentionally created to ensure the majority of African American males do not capitalize on their potential. The participants agree that these actions have to push all African American males to get motivated and set on proving everyone wrong. Nahum stated, “We all have to remember these are the very reasons why we are so resilient. We have to rely on that strength and also use these negative perceptions as fuel for motivation.” Alan adds,

These perceptions are a joke and they do encourage me to continue being successful and ensure as many brothers that I know are successful as well. I want to be able to look back on those who said we couldn’t be successful or those who designed the system for us to fail and throw it back in their face. We need to say no more are certain African American males slipping through a crack to success, I want us to blow down the wall and say look we did what you thought we couldn’t and did it with class and dignity.
Distorted perceptions of African American males are abundant; they cause a disruption in the attitudes and thoughts of many, and can be very misleading for some African American males. These perceptions, according to the participants, are to be looked upon as opportunities to educate misguided members of society and, at all costs, should never be embraced by African American males. The opinions or thoughts of others should not dictate the journey that African American males take but rather serve as fuel to ensure success is attained.

Section Four: Interesting New Statements of Meaning

The completed review of the data from by the participants provided the themes discussed in section three. However, in addition to the themes revealed there were also several statements of meanings that are critical to the thoughts and daily lived experiences of successful African American males but were not rich enough in the interviews, transcripts, and notes to emerge as actual themes of the study.

The five themes presented are critical components of success for African American males. There are some other elements that several of the participants feel affect the success or lack thereof experienced by African American males. The additional interesting statements of meaning that emerged are: Faith, School Structure, and Learning from Failure.

FAITH

While not discussed in great detail; the participants all agreed that faith, which was defined as, the power of prayer and believing in something greater than oneself, was an important form of encouragement for African American males as they pursue success. Faith allows resiliency, Ricky revealed, “It was my faith that everything would work out that gave me the strength to be resilient and keep moving forward despite the many forms of resistance.”
Additionally, the participants were in agreement that faith plays a crucial role in how they make decisions, the way they react in situations that confront them, and is a shield that creates the vision necessary to see blessings in the midst of negative situations. Alan elaborated that faith in God allows African American males to turn the other cheek. Without faith on several occasions there could have been physical consequences for the ignorant and inappropriate actions African American males have endured. Ricky shared, “Faith allows forgiveness because you are encouraged to believe that humans will eventually act with honor and God will help create the path to get us there.”

Furthermore, having faith provides individuals the strength to believe that a higher power will make a way when times seem most dark. When the impossible occurs or when it seems as human beings we cannot shoulder the burden, it is one’s faith that allows one too simply, “put it in God’s hands.” When great things do occur, faith is the vehicle that allows a person to have a testimony. According to the participants, it is the testimonies of mentors, family members, and peers that often times inspire others to keep moving forward. This is extremely important for African American males because the slightest encouragement goes a long way on the journey to success.

*School Structure*

Although Education is a theme within this study the new statements of meaning about the structure of school emerged. It was not a large part of the overall data collected but statements emerged enough to ensure that the participants concern for the school structure playing a role in limiting the success of African American males was important.

The participants’ commitment to attaining an education and enduring a variety of hardships in order to complete it suggests that education continues to be the basis of an
individual's success and self-fulfillment. If the purpose of education is to educate, stimulate, and prepare individuals for success then the system should not be designed on a foundation that was meant to exclude minorities. African American males can never truly appreciate the process of education if they are consistently met with barriers, gate keepers, and intentional setbacks. Lonnie states, “Education in its current structure dividing and excluding people rather than being a vehicle that brings people closer to their community and their success.”

Due to the importance of education the participants within this study feel modifications or reform to the structure of the educational system as they experienced it are extremely overdue. Shawn referred to his great grandfather who had to teach himself to read saying,

The educational system was not meant for African Americans, the very system we are fighting to learn from is the very system that was established prior to the Emancipation Proclamation, the same system in place during the era of the “Black Codes”, during the era of Jim Crow, during the era that followed the Civil Rights movement, the very model in place today. This is a fundamental disrespect to all cultures; there is no way to receive an equitable unbiased education from start to finish in this system if you are an African American male.

Kevin shares,

This whole education system is a HAM (Hot Ass Mess). Education was created for rich White males. Everyone else can be educated but they have to follow suit of the majority. Diversity is missing in education because it is not valued by the majority, therefore not considered. The teachers don’t look like us, don’t understand us, or comprehend our experience; so how can they realistically educate us? How can you be an educator with a narrow frame of reference for what students should like? The system is in dire need of an overhaul.

Ricky explained that it was not a secret that the system was broken and that the conversation has to now be intentionally focused on solutions. The current reality is that the system is broken in the eyes of many, especially African American males, but it is working perfectly for those that created it. The system is aiding in the intentional suffocation of success as it relates to African American males.
What began to emerge from the conversation was the feeling that education, especially elementary and secondary school has become a dumping ground that is polluting the educational experience of African American males. The participants express that quality teachers are not being recruited due to the low salaries associated with the teaching profession, another flaw of the system, and the most qualified to teach are ignored or do not even consider teaching as a viable career option. Heath stated the following,

When I returned home from college I really considered being a teacher and then I woke up from that crazy dream. There was no way I could attract a beautiful woman, start a family, and provide the quality of life I am interested in having on a teacher’s salary. No way, I went straight to a technology company where my starting pay was four times that of a teacher with about the same time commitment. If I could make a similar living in education, I would teach and coach at a high school in a blink of an eye.

In addition to a lack of appropriate recruitment strategies, teacher preparation standards are low and becoming a teacher is too attainable when compared to other professions that are extremely important to the welfare of our society. Jackson shared,

Becoming a lawyer was difficult, becoming a tenured college professor of medical doctor is difficult and takes time, but becoming a teacher is often the easy way out of college after four years. There has got to be something wrong when the folks who were lazy in school in some cases get rewarded with the opportunity to educate our children. The process of becoming a teacher should be much more rigorous and teachers should be compensated based on the importance of their jobs to society.

In agreement Nick shares his views on individuals in the teaching profession,

I feel like these days many teachers are stealing pay checks. They become teachers in order to receive summers off. They are leaving the building as soon as the bell rings, not teaching thoroughly and simply preparing students for state exams and not teaching students how to think. It seems to be more about repetition and memorization rather than thinking critically and problem solving. It is absolutely astounding we have high school graduated African American males that have to use the pictures on a cash register at a fast food restaurants or end up having to attend a community college because their skill sets are so remedial that they cannot achieve the scores needed to enter a four year school. This is happening because a broken system is allowing it to happen. I don’t blame this on the teachers because they presented themselves and were hired. I blame the structure and systems; after all, the system is responsible for the hiring practices. I feel sorry for the
great teacher we do have because they are outnumbered by and associated with horrible, lazy, no passionate possessing colleagues.

John adds to the conversation with a slightly different perspective. He is of the opinion that most are passionate and do care about students but they are placed poorly, stretched too thin, and in some cases, just there to have something to do. For example he shares,

Many teachers end up being White girls that come from affluent families or either women that have married well and decide to teach because they want to give back. No offense if you want to give back serve food in a shelter, don’t play with the futures of children. I also know girls that I went to college with who have no desire to teach but like to travel in the summer so that is the profession they chose. “I get paid to travel for three months of the year that thought alone makes the time zoom by,” is what they say. I tell them all the time you are in it for the wrong reason and please never go teach in my old neighborhood there are enough problems there already. These are the teachers being placed in the inner city, teachers with passion or ulterior motives that lack the cultural competency required and the practical ability to connect with African American boys. Then you get the teachers that actually are good but they are poor. The extra time they should be using on lesson planning and developing as teachers is being used working swing shifts as bar tenders or store clerks. If you make so little money professionally that you have to take on other jobs to make it, then how long can you stay passionate? How long can you stay energized? I don’t believe you can so then you end up with teachers like the character in the movie Bad Teacher, a deranged woman in the building corrupting students by ignoring them due to their own baggage and selfish concerns. The system is in immediate need of an overhaul. Our students should not have to endure this and parents shouldn’t have to supplement for it.

Learning from Failure

Failure was the last statement of meaning that had importance among the participants. Failure is a powerful motivator when understood, learned from, and used correctly. For example, the participants described failure as learning opportunities disguised as little inconveniences. It is a fact that experiencing failure creates inconvenience, sadness, and stress but it provides valuable learning lessons, periods of reflection, gives clear and distinct messages around what does not work, and strength. Whether the positive or negative aspects of failure are tapped into is up to the individual. Approaching failure with an optimistic attitude yields
tremendous results, failure has to be embraced and engaged otherwise mediocrity and stagnation surface and create yet another barrier to success.

These statement of meanings are not themes but have provided additional information helpful in understanding the experiences of successful African American males. It was interesting to learn that faith is a precursor to or empowers resiliency. The participants also made it very clear that their experiences have given them insight on the structure of the educational system but they have not been able to share their concerns regarding a system they believe to be chronically flawed and broken.

Section Five: Results of the Posed Research Questions

Phenomenology is a wide open process that has a method centered on discovery around the object in question. Although focused a great deal on discovery, phenomenology is also guided by a set of research questions. Within this methodology, researchers and interviewers alike must be aware that it is easy to become so engaged in the dialogue that participants can take the discussion in many different directions that stray away from the intent of research questions (van Manen, 1990). Throughout this study there were times were as the researcher I became very engrossed in the conversations and had to pull myself out to stay objective and facilitate in a way that kept us on task. Overall this was not extremely difficult due to the nature of the study, at each point along the way the participants were discussing their experiences or thoughts about them. However, in order to ensure there was no deviation from the research questions I prepared thoroughly. Prior to each interview, I reviewed each interview question so they were clear in my mind. Throughout the focus groups and interviews I took notes on items that I wanted to follow up on later. This allowed me not to interrupt any stories or the momentum of any participant.
With the notes completed, I had the information necessary to follow up with participants to secure clarity in regards to the research questions.

I was very alert and was careful not to let rambling occur; however, in some instances I did let it go because the conversation was rich and provided very beneficial and interesting information. This actually helped me improve my approach to manage the conversation and taught me that it was important to let the conversation be as fluid and organic as possible in order to ensure no relevant story or thought of the participants went unheard. The data collected for each research question is presented in the sections that follow.

Research Question 1: Are there certain factors that contribute to the social and educational success of some African American males?

The answer to this question is most certainly yes. The summary stories, themes, and additional statements of meanings previously discussed truly answer this research questions. Indeed there are certain factors that contribute to African American males achieving success. The participants all demonstrate that in order for an African American male to achieve success he must seek and maintain positive relationships, understand resilience and use it in the face of adversity, connect with family and use them as an unfahtering support network while learning lessons from their coaching and experiences, be both intentional and unapologetic about securing a quality education at all costs, and most importantly, accept that there will unfair perceptions of African American males but not embracing or trying on these flawed perceptions.

Additionally, in answering this research question we learn success for African American males is intentional and very much by design. The success experienced by African American males is not by happenstance or luck; it is premeditated and diligently earned. Each participant had very similar and specific examples to share regarding factors that they attribute to their
success. Based on the information attained from the interviews, transcripts, and notes, table 4.7 that follows lists twelve jewels of wisdom that in conjunction with the emerged themes factor into success. The participants believe that when embraced the odds of attaining success definitely increases in the favor of African American males.

Table 4.7

Twelve Jewels of Wisdom that Foster Success in African American Males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being well dressed and spoken</th>
<th>Being well read and educated</th>
<th>Being socially and civic oriented</th>
<th>Being a visionary and dream oriented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being committed to community service and servant leadership</td>
<td>Having multiple mentors and serving as one</td>
<td>Possession of internal strengths: Resilience, Courage, Humility, Determination, and restraint</td>
<td>Having a sense of faith and a moral compass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attaining the appropriate degrees, licenses, or certifications</td>
<td>Being politically active and conscious</td>
<td>Commitment to family</td>
<td>Having the ability to think critically and entrepreneurially</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Research Question 2: What effect does the societal impression of African American males have on you?*

For each participant the societal impression is a negative one that both fuels and reinforces the negative stereotypes associated with African American males. The societal impression is a powerful force that has far reaching arms and irresponsibly educates individuals to assume the worst first and be pleasantly surprised at the alternative. Theme 5, Viewed through a funhouse mirror and the effects it has on us all, clearly demonstrates the participants’ thoughts on how society views African American males.
For the participants, society’s impression has served as source of motivation and a call to action. The call to action is centered from confidence, swagger, and determination. The men have developed a “prove them wrong mentality” and are consistently making efforts to dispel the generalized negative assumptions of African American males. Table 4.8 lists quotes that demonstrate the participants overall attitude of motivation and not defeat by the negative views of society.

Table 4.8
Quotes Demonstrating the Effects of Society’s View of African American Males on the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heath</td>
<td>I am smart confident, powerful, and educated. Society’s view simply makes me push harder for people to see how talented African American males. I want us all to be the “essence of until”!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lonnie</td>
<td>I cannot lie. I kind of like that society perceives us negatively. It is such a great to command a room full of people counting you out. Their jobs drop in amazement and I keep on moving forward. Love your haters because they motivate you to achieve more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>I don’t know about anyone else. The last thing I am is a deadbeat or anything else. Every time I hear a negative portrayal of African American males I make it my business to achieve something else. Like T.I. It’s motivation; my haters are fuel to my fire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendrick</td>
<td>Society can kiss my ass! I am here despite societal view and will continue to be. The furthest thought from my mind is society’s view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Despite the struggle, like Maya Angelou Still I rise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>I have spent my life proving people wrong. This is business as usual and I am open. My goal is just to ensure all African American males feel the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Society makes me want achieve at all cost. Failure is not an option only success. Each time I hit a goal, I set a new one. That is just what we do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>I am pissed. Who gives anyone the right to put you in a box? My goal is to achieve success in every aspect in my life and explode the boxes ignorance that maybe plaguing those around me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>Lol…Society sucks I don’t. The message in twisted so as long as I know what is right I will just keep hitting new levels in life and enjoy society cringe as I change lives and thoughts about African American men on a daily basis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.8 (CON’T)

| Dwayne  | Finding some positive people helped me find hope and believe in myself, I gained the courage to try and to picture a different life for myself. Now I am always dreaming bigger than I am living and only sleeping long enough to dream. Society’s views are a nonfactor in my life because I only chose achievement. |

Additionally, society’s impression has increased the expectations participants have for every African American male. The expectation is that in order to respond and change the culture of thought regarding African American males and to increase the numbers of African American males reaching success a change in thinking has to occur for everyone. The first thing is we have to STOP reinforcing the negative stereotypes and begin believing in the possibility of achieving anything we put our minds too. African American males collectively agree that society is wrong and operate in that manner consistently. Kendrick shares,

As African American males we get a horrible deck dealt our way; however, the reality is we are failing in major areas of life and my expectation is that we stop. I am convinced if we change our thinking we change our lives. No more buying into society and if we are we have to hold each other accountable and demand success. It is time for everyone to believe into the other side of the story, the story that demonstrates we are smart, educated, family oriented, and socially aware. This is my expectation of all African American males moving forward.

The participants are expecting individuals to work harder, exercise restraint within the face of adversity, and commit to complete in all aspects of education. Most importantly, societal impressions have made sure the participants are dedicated to achieving in all that they endeavor in order to ensure that success can be role modeled, normal achievements are not overrated, and that every African American male has access to an equitable existence with our majoritarian counterparts.

*Research Question 3: Compared to your unsuccessful peers what did you do differently?*
The participants in this study all acknowledged being exposed to or knowing unsuccessful African American males. Surprisingly, there are similarities in the intentions of successful and unsuccessful African American males but there are drastic differences in the approach to attaining success. The primary difference is the patience and commitment to achievement despite circumstance. Successful African American males, specifically the participants in this study, are looking at their situations as opportunities for learning and not as barriers. Lonnie said, “Yes times have been challenging but each challenge is an opportunity to grow and increase your chances at achieving more.”

The participants explain in attaining success there are some things that they had to do differently than unsuccessful African American males who may have come from the same neighborhood or have had identifiable experiences. The first difference between the two is understanding what success means. For the participants their choices and action support their definitions of success; the ability to commit to the notion of achievement in every aspect of personal endeavor while consistently setting and achieving realistic goals. These goals must allow an individual to maintain the quality of life personally desired without sacrificing one’s integrity, moral compass, cultural beliefs, or the responsibility to help others, be role models, and law abiding citizens. This definition was agreed upon by each participant after their individual definitions were reviewed for similarities and then crafted into one definition by the researcher. The final definition was agreed upon by all participants.

Based on the transcripts, notes, and interviews primary critical differences include but are not limited to the characteristics displayed in table 4.9.
Table 4.9 Characteristics Separating Successful African American Males from Unsuccessful African American Males

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possession of a positive thought process and the ability to talk great to themselves</th>
<th>Not accepting the deficit and limiting thinking set before them</th>
<th>Committing to working harder, being smarter, proving them wrong, and learning when to be flexible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking, finding, and accepting mentoring</td>
<td>Evaluating and selecting the appropriate peer groups</td>
<td>Being involved in other extracurricular activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking academic rigor</td>
<td>Demanding respect</td>
<td>Learning from negative choices and decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being socially concerned and involved in the community</td>
<td>Goal setting and implementing a success plan</td>
<td>Being unapologetic about pursuit of anything positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question 4: What characteristics do successful and unsuccessful African American males share?**

The participants in this study were very similar in thought process, experience, and approach at achieving success. However, the participants also revealed that they have much in common with their unsuccessful African American counterparts. Although there are enormous differences in the outcomes of successful and unsuccessful African American males, the two groups do share some common characteristics.

The participants help reveal that charisma, leadership influence, being protective, survival instincts, the need for acceptance, and resourcefulness are the characteristics that the two group of men share. Kevin offered,

I know this all too well because I have been on both sides of the coin. The major difference in me is not my characteristics. My thinking, educational, and attitudes are different but I am still Kevin. When I was getting in trouble I was still a leader, people loved me, I found a way to survive, and my motivation was always looking out for my
family. For too long my options were just limited and I lacked a positive path to follow. Being unsuccessful does not make someone a lesser being with cave man qualities. Unsuccessful African American males are usually the most talented buy also the most misguided.

Heath agreed explaining, in his peer group the guys that chose negativity were all leaders, they lead their gangs and were well respected, and a lot of times were actually very helpful. These were not bad guys. They were frustrated young men looking for a helping hand that was not extended so they simply made the best of their situation whether positive or negative. He indicated,

I really and truly believe the bad choices made by many African American males are rooted in survival and later morph into something more after a guy has done too much to turn back. I knew guys that ditched school to work to pay bills but found out drugs paid more than Sonic. These guys were smart talented, and very resourceful. I remember one guy in particular that started a candy store using stolen goods from a local store that had no security. The money he made was being used to pay for his sister’s private school. I am not condoning his actions but rather demonstrating his talent because within two weeks he had several locations and was picking up money and no longer selling the stuff directly. He had employees and even counted inventory. This was a young talented man in need of help so he helped himself. If he had a stable home life he could be a CEO right now instead of a felon.

Successful and unsuccessful African American males do share characteristics and in most cases want similar things from life; the path to attain them has just been different.

Research Question 5: Can your success be duplicated? How?

Yes, without a doubt. However, a critical factor in duplicating success is possessing its meaning. Based on the voices and lived experiences of these participants the following definition of success was created; Success is defined as the ability to commit to the notion of achievement in every aspect of personal endeavor while consistently setting and achieving realistic goals. These goals must allow an individual to maintain the quality of life personally desired without sacrificing integrity, moral compass, cultural beliefs, or the responsibility to help
others, be role models, and law abiding citizens. This understanding is the foundation of any duplication efforts.

Additionally, the participants show that many African American males are sharing the same experiences, living in the same areas, and often times sharing similar fates if accepted. In the experiences of successful African American males there are many influences that nurture an attitude of success and achievement. The most obvious are the five emerged themes presented in this study, the additional statements meaning, and the 12 jewels of wisdom from table 4.7. The participants support it is about exposing African American males to these conditions. Additionally, the participants’ success is duplicable by changing the options for African American males that have overwhelming exposure to the distorted perceptions accepted within society. Shawn shares, “We have to do a better job of making sure all African American males have access to a quality education to help with thinking critically about their situations and also access to positive relationships”. Nick adds, “The more exposure to what’s right will help eliminate what’s wrong.”

The participants are in agreement that the appropriate environment, a change of thought, and exposure to the five themes which emerged from this study will duplicate the success they have experienced in other African American males.

Chapter Summary

The findings chapter begins with a presentation of the participants demographics. The demographics were gathered from a survey each participant filled out. The participants are all adult African American males that have attained college degrees, personally identify as being successful, and all personally know or have had exposure to African American males that are not successful. The participants are all associated with an international organization called Kappa
Alpha Psi, a fraternity that has a fundamental purpose of achievement in every field of human endeavor and prides itself on the success of its members. In order to maintain membership or association with the Denver chapter after college graduation individuals must demonstrate through action and thought that they are living according to this purpose.

This chapter also presents several summaries. The summaries provide an in-depth look into the experiences of several of the highly engaged participants. The participants included in the summary narrative section were selected from the initial focus groups based on participation, interest, and passion displayed. Five of the participants were selected to explore their individual experiences further to discover additional meaning.

The five participants that contributed to the deeper look into the experiences of successful African American males are Ricky, Heath, John, Kevin, and Shawn. Each profile title describes the element most intimately involved in their search of success. Ricky achieved success against all odds. Kevin achieved success because he did not let the neighborhood win. John achieved success because he decided not to succumb to pressure and just “do him” and let others “do them.” Shawn achieved success because it was designed that way. Heath achieved success due to the involvement and commitment of his father. In addition, each profile describes the participant’s background, challenges to success, their response to those challenges, and insight into where they are now.

Additional descriptions of the experiences of all ten participants are found in a discussion around five themes that emerged from the data collected in the study. The five themes are of paramount importance in describing and revealing the essence of the phenomenon as it relates to the success of African American males. The themes truly give the participants the voice they
have not had in addressing this concern and it lends to the authenticity and provides a deeper understanding of the participant’s’ experiences.

The first theme is the power of positive relationships. The power of positive relationships discusses the impact that mentors, peers, and other positive relationships have on successful African American men. In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise is the second theme and describes how resilience is a tool African American males use to face adversity and ensure they stay on a path to success. The third theme is family. This theme discusses the power and impact family influence and involvement have in assisting African American males achieve success. A Tale of Two Cities: Liberation and Inequity in Education is the fourth theme. A thorough conversation on the both the importance of education and the impact it has on helping an individual change his stars takes place as well as shines a light on the challenges associated with attaining that much needed education. The fifth and final theme is being viewed through a funhouse mirror and the effects it has on us all. The section discusses the distorted view society has on African American males and the effects these perceptions can have on the community as well as African American males.

The chapter then views several statements of meaning on faith, school structure, and learning from failure. These did not emerge as themes but were mentioned enough to be important data points that help create a deep and rich understanding of the experiences of successful African American males. We learn that faith is a precursor of resiliency, the participants are in direct disagreement with the structure of the school system, and failure is often a great opportunity to learn more about success.

Each participant is actively seeking to continue reaching levels of success and ensure that others are able to do the same without intentional and/or external barriers, inequities in their
daily lived experiences, and most importantly, without being misunderstood or predetermined as men associated with failure first.

The chapter ends with a review of the original research questions presented. These are the questions that guided and framed the study while honoring the flexibility, openness, and objectivity required in phenomenological research. While phenomenology is not method oriented, it is structured, valuable, and provides rich information based on the data collected within the study. Chapter V will include a discussion on the interpretation and implications of these findings. In addition, recommendations will be presented.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The welfare of African American males continues to be a part of a highly debated conversation. Despite the pessimistic perspectives toward African American males in the areas of education, social class, and economic status, my study takes a more optimistic focus. Within the research the focus has been too much on the plight of African American males and not enough on the solutions to the proposed crisis or learning from the segment of the population not associated with negative indicators (Giribaldi, 1992; Holzman, 2010; Hopkins, 1997; Price, 2000).

The participants in this study negate every negative, flawed, ignorant, and downright disrespectful attitude ever associated with African American males. The fact that 100% of the participants are committed family men, highly intelligent, gainfully employed, socially conscious, politically active, and service oriented demonstrates that there is more to African American males than the concept of “educational underachievement and societal failure (Lewis, 2009; Lewis & Erskine, 2008).” Regarding the experiences of African American males it is time to tell the true story and abandon the propaganda fueled by centuries of racism, inequality, ignorance, and fear (Anderson, 2008; Babwin, 2004; Bell, 1987, 1992, 2004; Carnoy, 1994; Feagin, 2006; Fordham, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gewerts, 2003; Harper & Tuckman; 2006; hooks, 2000).

There are countless African American males experiencing success despite the many educational and societal barriers they face. These men are not in hiding, are not anomalies, and are present in all aspects of life. The challenge in acknowledging these men is not due to their lack of presence or accomplishment but, rather, the scant documentation of success stories
appropriately demonstrating the successes of African American males (Berry III, 2005; Lewis, 2009; Majors & Billson, 1992). This phenomenological research study, using the voices of ten successful African American males, tells a counter narrative to the abundance of research that suggests African American males are in such a crisis that their very existence is in jeopardy.

Extremely rich data were gathered from the interviews, focus groups, and transcripts of the participants. In an effort to capture and understand the lived experiences of the successful African American male participants, five themes and several statements of meanings emerged from the study. The five themes are (a) The Power of Positive Relationships, (b) In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise, (c) Family, (d) A Tale of Two Cities: Liberation and Inequity in Education, and (e) Viewed Through a Funhouse Mirror and the Effects it has on Us All. The several additional patterns (non-themes) relating to the experiences of the participants are faith, school structure, and learning from failure.

This chapter presents an interpretation and discussion of key findings. It includes a summary discussion of each research question, specific discussion around the five themes and the additional statements of meaning, and the study’s alignment to other research studies. The chapter also provides the essence of the phenomenon, implications of the research, and offers recommendations for African American males, parents of African American males, and educational leaders and reformers. Chapter five concludes with recommendations for future research and final thoughts from the researcher.

*Interpretation and Discussion of Key Findings*

*Research Questions*

*Research question #1, Are there certain factors that contribute to the social and educational success of some African American males?* The answer is yes as the study
determined there are factors shared among successful African American males. This finding is important because it demonstrates that success for African American males is not a coincidence among a subtle few, instead it is an intentional pursuit that can be planned for and actively sought out. The findings not only confirm that there are factors in common in regard to success but also identify the factors. This is extremely important because it reinforces the power of voice related to a unique lived experience (Cook-Sather, 2006; Omery, 1983). It also suggests that exposure to these factors yields success, begging the question: Why aren’t all African American males exposed to these factors? The very fact that there are contributors to their success supports the little acknowledged truth of the successful African American male and directly disputes the dilemma driven data.

Research question #2, What effect does the societal impression of African American males have on you? The answers given serve as a source of strength and inspiration for all African American males. The negative connotations associated with African American males by society serve as a source of motivation for these men. This is important because it is actually hearing negativity that fuels the resilience found in African American males. It is the actual practice of telling African American males that they cannot, are incapable, and are unqualified that fuels the fire of achievement at the highest levels. Without this negativity fueling African American males, the participants feel some of the greatest feats from African American males could possibly not exist.

What excited me the most about this finding was that anger and claiming the role of a victim did not emerge. I was concerned the participants might complain about being alienated, targeted, and simply being tired of being on the receiving end of abuse. Not one participant responded in this way. There was acknowledgement that individual situations at times are
frustrating but, overall, the negativity was welcomed motivation to keep pushing forward. Honestly, research aside, in that moment I was extremely proud to be associated with these African American men. Lonnie, one of the participants, summed it best during his interview, “…You know you have to love your haters to receive their blessings really and truly the hater make the greatest investment in us so we should be grateful, I know I am. Shit I love my haters!”

In my opinion, this further demonstrates the restraint, integrity, humility, and courage in African American males. I am in agreement with Fries-Britt (1998 & 2004), possessing the ability to move on without anger or bitterness, choosing success and achievement over retaliation, reconstructing negativity as a positive conductor for success, and being brave enough to turn the other cheek all in the face of isolation and constant adversity speaks volumes; not only about the strength and talents of African American males, but also about the type of men African American males are. They are the type of men who do the right thing because of who they are and not because of who is watching; men that value forgiveness; men that exude pride, passion, and swagger; men that are strong enough to destroy, smart enough to protect, and humble enough to serve. African American men are all these things despite a pessimistic societal impression.

_Research question #3, Compared to your unsuccessful peers what did you do differently?_ The answers here were surprising. I expected to hear many different strategies, beliefs, and approaches to success from successful African American males. However, I found more similarities than differences; the common denominators for these men were education, positive affective expression, and involvement. The differences were specific to the immediate environments; in many cases successful and unsuccessful African males are using similar types
of resources but lack the same access to formal education and positive influences. Each group simply takes advantage of the environment most readily available to them specifically (Holzman, 2010; Toldson, 2010). An education; whether it is informal, formalized or learned in the street, provides exposure to a particular type of success, support system, provides the confidence and courage to pursue that success, and the involvement provides purpose and direct access to others who have achieved that particular success (positive or negative). For successful African American males the difference is simply their exposure is to positive successful people role modeling and confirming the appropriate paths to success.

Research Question # 4, What characteristics do successful and unsuccessful African American males share. Surprisingly, the short answer is there are several important shared characteristics of successful and unsuccessful African American males. The participants revealed that charisma, leadership influence, being protective, survival instincts, the need for acceptance, and resourcefulness are the characteristics that the two groups of men share. These findings are important because it demonstrates that although approaches might differ, African American males share similar value systems and largely want the same from life. They want to be happy, free, safe, valued, and needed; all while ensuring their families have the same. Identifying these similarities further increases the importance of the voice these participants share. With similar value systems and needs, identifying solutions and celebrating success becomes much less complex.

Research Question # 5, Can your success be duplicated? How? The answer is yes. All of the similarities found within successful African American males, the values shared with unsuccessful African American males, the desire to share personal experiences, and commitment by successful African American males to “leave no man behind” allows for duplication (Berry,
Duplication has to be supported by all in order to be accomplished. The participants’ share it is a simple combination of the right mind set and the appropriate environment. Success can be yielded by all African American males; they only need to be exposed to the right ingredients.

Five Themes

The Power of Positive Relationships. The successful African American male participants were very clear that achieving success requires access to, engagement from, observation of, and advice from positive people. The first theme, The Power of Positive Relationships, accurately captures the participants’ feelings. The idea of positive relationships is notable because it emphasizes that it is positive influence and interaction from anyone, not just a defined mentor that the participants feel is necessary to engage in success. The positive relationships can consist of mentors, friends, coaches, teachers, school peers, and in some instances, the consistent observation of a stranger engaged in positive acts. Each participant had multiple examples of how positive relationships had a direct impact on their current success.

The ability to attain positive relationships was not only necessary but critical for the participants. Kevin, Dwayne, and John specifically credit their access to positive relationships for literally saving their lives. The influence, coaching, and direction provided in moments of despair, confusion, and uncertainty yielded positive choices and outcomes. Without positive relationships in these moments, failure was a more likely outcome.

The participants’ view of positive relationships is echoed in the literature and something I personally believe. Hare (2003) and Grover (2004) support that positive relationships and mentoring are crucial elements in achieving success. Similar to the participants, as a youth I was at a crossroads for years and it was the powerful but gentle nudge of an African American male
that inspired me to want more from my life. It was his brief involvement that helped me realize I was more than the lie society led me to embrace. Without his engagement I would have continued feeling inadequate and inferior to my white counterparts even though I was already more intelligent, capable, and accomplished than many. The relationship inspired me to grab onto my success and denounce anything less than excellence.

Successful African American males have a responsibility to be visible examples of success for the community and must begin to become intentional about sharing success stories and engaging other African American males (Harper, 2009). There is strength in learning from another African American male’s experience, maturity gained in having a trustworthy ear, and hope in seeing someone that looks like you living the dream you aspire to achieve. This is of paramount importance for successful African American men. The success achieved means nothing if not paid forward and is in vain if not duplicated. Successful African American males have to be unapologetic about showing up and connecting with other African American males. Each relationship created is unlocking potential, creating paths of self-actualization, and reinforces why the participants of this study, researchers (Berry III, 2005; Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Harper, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009), and I disagree that success is missing or not attainable for African American males. Each new positive relationship secures the success of another African American male.

*In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise.* Barrier breakers, blockade busters, and allergic to adversity are characteristics that can be used to describe the second theme, In Face of Adversity: Still I Rise. This theme discusses the resiliency of African American males. Despite all of the barriers, negative perceptions, reported failures, and doomsday messaging referenced toward African American males, the participants of this study forge ahead to achieve success. The
participants offer that resiliency is instrumental in the success of African American males (Braddock, 1991; Days, 2001; Garmezy, 1985; Harper, 2009). Resiliency has provided the participants strength and courage to intentionally pursue success despite being knocked down and wounded repeatedly throughout the journey.

Resilience, for the participants, is a divine gift given to everyone but particularly to African American males due to the abundance of adversity they face (Alcorta, 2006). The men in the study revealed that God knew these trials and tribulations were destined and gave them a helping hand in the form of resiliency (Tyler, 2012; Walsh, 1999). Each participant offered several examples of how they had been treated poorly, counted out, or assumed irrelevant. In each situation it was their resilience that inspired them not to quit, resiliency that reminded them it is not how one starts but how one chooses to finish, and, finally, that success is a right for all and not a privilege for a select few. For the participants, the ability to take a hit and keep going is resiliency; it is also the secret ingredient to success for all African American males.

Resilience is a prevalent component of African American men. There are countless successful African American men in our society tapping the wells of resilience to ensure they can carry on and keep moving forward. The most visible is the President of the United States, Barrack Obama. Although he is the leader of the free world President Obama is still attacked on many fronts by the very people he seeks to serve. Racist jokes are commonplace; just a few examples include, “Obama sneaks reparations and affirmative action into health care bill,” an Obama replica being hung from a tree during a Halloween celebration in California (Alternet.org, 2012), and YouTube videos of individuals referring to the first family saying “this the first time monkeys have been in the white since Bubbles (Michael Jackson’s pet),” (Alternet.org, 2012). In 2009, The Huffington Post documented the disregard for Obama within
the walls of Congress when President Obama was publicly disrespected, laughed at, and called a liar during a speech on health care by Representative Joe Wilson. Despite these acts and many more, President Obama ran for re-election to serve every American, including those people who may seek to cause harm. Our president has shown himself to be a person who serves everyone with integrity, respect, and honor. During his re-election speech on November 7, 2012, just a day after receiving death threats from all over the country (Alternet.org, 2012), Obama demonstrates the power of resilience by saying:

And I know that every American wants her future to be just as bright. That's who we are. That's the country I'm so proud to lead as your president. And tonight, despite all the hardship we've been through, despite all the frustrations of Washington, I've never been more hopeful about our future. I have never been more hopeful about America. And I ask you to sustain that hope. I'm not talking about blind optimism, the kind of hope that just ignores the enormity of the tasks ahead or the roadblocks that stand in our path. I'm not talking about the wishful idealism that allows us to just sit on the sidelines or shirk from a fight. I have always believed that hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting.

Talking to the American people Obama showed his resilience, ability to move forward, and his desire to take others with him. His message was a message of resiliency. Another great example of an African American male demonstrating resilience is Denver’s former mayor, Wellington Webb. When running for his first term, three days before the election the papers forecasted Mr. Webb losing by a landslide. Rather than quitting or being discouraged he embraced the negative news and put on a pair of walking shoes. After walking day and night for three days, attempting to speak to every eligible voter in the city, Mayor Webb was announced the first African American male mayor of the city and county of Denver. The participants in this study were right; resilience is definitely a tool to reach success.

*Family.* Different from positive relationships is the third emerged theme, family. While the power of positive relationships focuses more on role modeling, decision making, and having
positive outlets to identify with, the family is much more specific. The participants share that family involvement for African American males, especially in the developmental and preadolescence stages of life, is of paramount importance in ensuring success as an adult (Fan, 2001; Sanders, 1998; Smith & Hausfaus, 1998). For many of the participants it was the family that first advocated for them, demanded excellence, and were intentional about training them for leadership and success. For example, Shawn and Heath describe their families as the vehicles that drove their success. Their families were unapologetic about expectations, pushed education, and provided a solid foundation to nurture achievement.

The engagement of parents in particular was important. Participants described how in childhood their parents got them involved in the community, advocated for the right classes and educational tracks, provided discipline, and showed unconditional support. Additionally, other family members, including the extended family, played a role. The participants discussed that family helped set up an accountability structure and, in some cases, the actions of family members not experiencing success or involving themselves in negative activities served to reinforce the importance of making positive choices in order to achieve success.

The researchers (Berry III, 2005; Fan, 2001) support the finding regarding the importance of family involvement in this study as do I. For African Americans the family is the center point of operations (Sanders, 1998). The family is where the first lessons are learned and, for the participants, a significant source of strength. The family is where African American men are nurtured, kept safe, and where their foundations are developed. We have to ensure that families are equipped with the necessary tools to advocate for the successful young men living within their homes.
As an educator I see many families that struggle to support young men due to a lack of advocacy skills on their behalf and knowledge of resources. Parents need to demonstrate their ability to be the protector of their young men as early as possible. The young men need to view parents as protectors, defenders, and advocates. Parents need to understand that schools do have low expectations for African American males and protect their youth from low expectations through involvement (Berry III, 2005). In this capacity parents must send a message that poor school performance is not an option and stress the importance of academic excellence as it relates to societal and professional success. Additionally, as protectors and defenders parents should not be quick to accept opinions offered by school personnel and NOT be intimidated by school authority figures.

Participation in educational activities alone is not enough; young men must be celebrated for their involvement and achievement in educational activities. The participants all expressed the importance of education and those with very involved parents were thankful for that lesson. However, education is more than a necessity. Although education is acknowledged by most as having a great return on investment, the participants did not become appreciative of their education until high school or even college. I believe this is counterproductive and risks success for African American males. Young men have to not only realize they need an education but must truly appreciate and love it like they would a sport or extracurricular activity. The sooner a young man is committed to and believes in education the faster he will start his journey to success.

In my life it was education that provided me the freedom or liberated me from the path of failure. I wasted valuable time and opportunities not engaging in the educational process earlier in life but I had no clue it was an option for me. There was no one in my immediate environment
demonstrating or discussing its relevance. Some African American males will have to be engaged and reminded that they are destined for greatness, that success is there for the taking, and that it starts with a quality basic educational foundation.

The stories of successful African American males are important in this regard. With many parents not having advocacy skills, where would they learn the importance of making education a critical aspect of the early development of their young man? For me it was a story and brief interaction with a successful African American male that lit my fire for success and achievement. Successful African American males have to step up and ensure we are visible, accessible, and available to share the stories needed to assist other African American males in embarking on their journey to success.

Accessing the stories of successful African American is not as complex as one may think. It is clear the media is intent upon bolstering the negative associations with African American males; consequently, that vehicle may not be the most efficient because stories of success may be lost within the sea of negativity. Families must work within their networks to provide extracurricular activities for their young men where they will be exposed to role models. They need to provide access to varied organizations that could include, but are not limited to, athletic teams, church organizations, community programs, extracurricular activities at school, and even informal conversations with seasoned adults. Accessing these activities is meeting the stories where they are actually happening, the service platform. Successful African American males believe in service and this is where there stories can be seen in action. Once involved, parents, family members, and young men have to honor their responsibility of sharing those stories and invite other individuals to become involved as well. By working together the stories are heard,
role modeling is provided, and families accomplish one of their true functions: nurturing, protecting and developing their youth.

*A Tale of Two Cities: Liberation and Inequity in Education.* According to the participants, the sentiments of Charles Dickens, (1920) capture their experiences with education best. Education, for African American males, and for the participants in this study in particular, is described as a dichotomous relationship between love and hate. For many, including myself, education has proven to be the great equalizer in accessing success (Berry III, 2005; Toldson, 2010). The participants all feel they owe a debt of gratitude to their education. Education is directly responsible for allowing some of the participants to see a world outside of their immediate environment, creating a path to financial and professional stability, increasing networks, changing views and attitudes, and so much more. The individuals in this study feel that success starts and stops with educational attainment (Harper 2006, 2009; Holzman, 2010).

However, although there is appreciation for the outcomes afforded by education, the participants also acknowledge the inequity, barriers, and challenges associated with pursuing a high quality education. It was disheartening to listen to the educational experiences of the participants. These men experienced deficit thinking in the classroom, racism, being ignored, patronized, ostracized, and poor advisement at every level in their educational experience. Adding salt to the wound, the participants indicated that even when they managed success they were accused of cheating or treated as some sort of educational enigma, a fact that infuriates me but does not surprise me. Deficit thinking among teachers is so extreme that they are taking on the belief that success is not possible (Anderson, 2008; Baker, 1999; Baron, Tom, and Cooper, 1985) for African American males. Any type of success is attributed to a miracle or act of dishonesty (Blake & Darling, 1994).
I believe one of the most damaging and disrespectful things done to a person is robbing them of their accomplishments. It is an intentional attack on their confidence, well-being, and sends the message that you are personally trying to halt their progress. Whether intentional or subconscious, these blatant acts of discrimination and sabotage have to stop. African American males, although equipped with resiliency, should not have to feel like going to school every day is synonymous with mortal combat. Educators collectively have must begin doing right by African American males.

Overall, most participants did not have the appropriate resources, teachers, or administrators to create an environment that demonstrated commitment to the educational welfare of African American males. hooks, (2000) emphasizes that in order to receive an education individuals should not have to sacrifice the culture, integrity, moral compass, or anything that makes them uniquely who they are. How can this be honored with no resources, cultural relevance, sensitivity, or competence existing inside the buildings educating African American males? In my mind this very obvious oversight suggests that maybe educating African American males is not the primary objective—maybe the objective is limiting the success of African American males. I cannot stress enough the importance of showcasing all of the success experienced and achieved within the African American male community. It is only through hearing the loud and proud voices that limiting, deficit-driven educational practices are eliminated.

**Viewed through a Funhouse Mirror and the Effects it has on Us All.** The final emerged theme was the idea that society views African American males in a distorted manner and this effectively perpetuates negativity. The participants revealed that they felt as though they were being looked at through funhouse mirrors. In other words, when an outsider viewed them, a
distorted and inaccurate reflection is transposed. When society considers African American males, it associates them with the negative images and dismal data often discussed in both popular and academic circles (Fan, 2001; Giribaldi, 1992; Hrabowski, Matton, & Greif, 1998; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Lewis, 2009; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Lewis & Moore, 2004). As I reflect on this finding I get a very clear message. I see that although much work has been done there is still so much more to do in regards to racial equality in America. I cannot help but think about next year being the 50th anniversary of the “I Have a Dream” speech by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I find myself asking, has it been realized or is it a dream deferred? I think about the comments and distorted views people have associated with our nation’s first African American president, Barrack Obama. I think about young African American males being feared, judged, and prosecuted for doing nothing other than being of African American descent. After all that African American males have experienced in this country, still we are required to prove that we belong and continue to be portrayed, in my opinion, as minstrels.

This finding demonstrates the deep rooted and systemic racism embedded in this society (Bell, 2004). The distorted views African American males face are founded in ignorance, racism, and fear. I find myself wondering...What would the state of African Americans be if legislation and laws were not in place mandating we have certain rights? I believe that racism is still relevant and the stories of these men demonstrate that it is still affecting daily lived experiences of African American males. The mere fact that we still need laws to facilitate the idea of equality supports there is still much work to do. Without intentional change at the deepest level of our human core, African Americans will have to continue to endure and combat
the distorted views within society. The whole cannot be changed without addressing the sum of its parts. Racism has been deeply rooted in the very core of our nation’s existence.

The participants, while in disagreement with the distorted views placed upon them, welcome the misguided perceptions, describing them as fuel for achievement in every endeavor. A burning desire to prove “them” wrong and achieve success at all costs is awakened in the participants when confronted with the negative views embraced by society at large. This attitude of prove them wrong is strong and supported by researchers (Harper, 2009). However, I disagree with this approach. I believe in resilience—being able to accomplish in spite of barriers, but achieving just to show somebody you can is dangerous, in my opinion. What happens when you when prove them wrong? Are you fulfilled? What is your motivation to continue achieving after you say, “I told you so”? This thought that proving the majority wrong will change anything is simply inaccurate. I believe this because we, African Americans, have been proving society wrong since the emancipation proclamation and the adversity still exists. African American men have to be committed to success for the right reasons; otherwise, it will be short lived, easily forgotten, and not very impactful. Proving people wrong may be a byproduct of attaining meaningful success, but it should not be the goal. Meaningful success can only be attained when it actually means something to the pursuer. If seeking success for the wrong reasons, no one will be proven wrong and potentially negative perceptions will be reinforced.

Addition Statements of Meaning. In addition to the five themes, several other important factors emerged that are important in understanding the experiences of the participants. Faith, School Structure, and Learning from Failure are the additional statements of meaning that emerged from the research. The participants all feel that having faith, or the belief in something
greater than human beings, is necessary to access resilience as well as to forgive individuals for ignorance and the treatment unfairly placed on African American males in the pursuit of success.

Tyler (2012) reveals that resiliency is activated by faith; individuals press forward because they have faith in God that the end result is where the blessings are located. It is faith that helps African American males turn the other cheek in instances where they may want to react differently. Having faith reinforces beliefs such as “two wrongs don’t make a right” and do right because of who you are despite the actions of another. I believe that faith is a precursor to resilience and I also believe it is the gasoline to fuel the journey to success. The road to success is often unknown and it is one’s faith that lights the path and leads someone to completion.

School structure emerged from the participants’ beliefs that the systems and structures that support education currently are flawed, broken, and need to be replaced. Learning from failures also emerged. The participants feel moments of failure are the best times to learn, be resilient, and grow from the experience. Failure, according to the participants, is simply learning at its best.

Study Alignment to Other Research Studies

African American males have been discussed in great depth in recent years. It is highly publicized that within the walls of education at every level the African American male experience is characterized by low achievement rates, poor completion percentages, curriculum inequity, alarming expulsion and suspension percentages, overrepresentation in special education, general education, vocational education, and underrepresentation in rigorous or gifted and talented courses (Fan, 2001; Giribaldi, 1992; Hrabowski, Matton, & Greif, 1998; Lewis, 2009; National Urban League, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Patton, 1995; Price, 2000; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).
This study sought to shine a bright light on the voices of successful African American males and support the data that show, despite the many reported obstacles there are successful African American males achieving in the highest areas civically, socially, academically, and so much more (Berry III, 2005; Bonner, 2001; Braddock, 1999; Fries-Britt 2002, 2004; Hare, 2003; Harper 2004, 2005, 2008, 2009). This study has provided rich information and the voices of the participants are loud and clear: African American males are successful despite challenges and the potential ignoring of the African American male voice as it relates to their lived experiences of academic and societal success.

This study’s findings align with the body of research already existing in regards to African American males (Berry III, 2005; Harper, 2004, 2005, 2009). Table 5.1 displays themes, ideas, and findings of this study and lists previously published literature that aligns with it.

Table 5.1 Ideas and Findings from this Study that Align with Previously Published Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Idea or Finding From This Study</th>
<th>Previously Published Literature Aligning with Findings and Ideas of this Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>neglected to highlight and discuss the voices and stories of successful African American males.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The literature and society support that African American males are failing in every major aspect of life:</td>
<td>Braun, Wang, Jenkins, &amp; Weinbaum, 2006; Education Trust, 2003; Fan, 2001; Giribaldi, 1992; Hrabowski, Matton, &amp; Greif, 1998; Lewis &amp; Erskine, 2008; Lewis, 2009; Lewis, James, Hancock, &amp; Hill-Jackson, 2008; Lewis &amp; Moore, 2004; Obiakor &amp; Beachum, 2006; National Urban League, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Patton, 1995; Price, 2000; Steinberg, Dornbusch, &amp; Brown, 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>educationally, professionally, in the family, socially, civically, socio economic status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1: The Power of Positive Relationships. Summary: Positive relationships are an important aspect of</td>
<td>Anderson, 2008; Babwin, 2004; Benson, Leffert, Scales, &amp;Blyth, 1998; Blake &amp; Darling, Bonner, 2001; 1994; Collins, 2006; Davis, 2003; Fries-Britt 1997; Lewis &amp; Moore, 2004; Shaun &amp; John, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achieving success for African American males. These relationships can range from peer groups to formal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mentor / mentee relationships.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.1 (CON’T)

| Summary: There are two sides to every story; despite the many academic and societal barriers that plague African American males, there are still African American males succeeding in every facet of life. | |

| Summary: Family plays a role in the development, encouragement, and preparation of African American males. Family involvement directly affects the success of African American males. | |

| Summary: Education is a gift and a curse for African American males. It ensures success but the process of attaining a quality education comes at extreme sacrifice for many African American males | |

| Theme 5: Viewed Through a Funhouse Mirror and the Effects it has on Us All. | Hrabowski, Matton, & Greif, 1998; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Lewis, 2009; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Lewis & Moore, 2004; Obiakor & Beachum, 2006; National Urban League, 2007; Noguera, 2003 |
| Summary: Society’s perception of African American males is distorted and misguided. The distorted perception however, is used as a motivator by African American males to achieve at the highest levels. | |

**Essence of the Phenomenon**

The essence of the phenomenon is not a finding but rather the researcher’s interpretation of the emerged themes (Omery, 1983; van Manen, 1990). Although the themes were presented separately, they are all combined and intertwined together to form a comprehensive meaning or essence of the entire phenomenon through the reflections of the researcher. After much thought, reflection, and review of the data, I believe an essence that calls for deep internal renewal, personal development, and an external call to action has surfaced. Comprehensively, the themes combined to create the essential phenomenon (essence of the phenomenon): A Quest for Fearless Existence. A Quest for Fearless Existence refers to the commitment of attaining an existence
where an individual can thrive, succeed, develop, and engage without the sacrifice of self or having to endure intentional obstacles of exterior barriers. The fearless existence the participants are questing for is one where equitable education is accessible, there is an objective view of African American males based on their individual actions and choices, success is attained without having to go the extra mile, and African American males are once again meaningful contributors and leaders within their families, communities, and professions.

The essence that emerges from this study is partly due to the collective success the participants have experienced, the desire for all African American males to achieve success appropriately, my experiences with the phenomenon, and the actions of both African American males and societal factors that create blockades to success. Reaching societal and educational success is not easy for anyone; it takes the time, talents, and treasures of many stakeholders for one person to reach it. The participants realize this but also know that for African American males, additionally, it requires resilience, determination, and enduring disproportionate amounts of hardship compared to members of the majoritarian society.

The shared themes all demonstrate an underlying desire of a fearless existence. The reality for each participant in this study is that they have had to persevere to reach to success, are actively engaged in ensuring success for other African American males, and they themselves are still navigating the terrain to maintain and bolster accomplishments achieved thus far. The essence of this study reveals that the participants desire an environment where they can pursue success with an unbiased fair shot. In other words, they want an opportunity to pursue success without being marginalized from other members of society and to remove the obstacles that exist in the very institutions African American males have to engage with in order to attain their desired success.
In the world of a fearless existence African American males would be viewed simply as human and not African American. When the news came on the stories would be objective and not favor negative stories. In the classrooms the teachers would give their all, demand rigor, challenge the students to want push harder, and never speak failure into the life of any students. In the professional world African American men in CEO roles would be as normal as a Caucasian male in a CEO role. In politics the African American Commander in Chief would receive the respect and admiration that comes with the title. In an environment of supporting a fearless existence no special handouts would exist, African American males would not seek special treatment. They would simply want to be treated fairly and provided the platform to reciprocate that treatment to everyone else. A fearless existence for African American males is a positive existence for us all.

Implications

African American males have been a major subject of conversation within academic literature for at least thirty years. In this thirty years the conversation has been consistent and committed to the description of, drawing attention to, and the discussion of the dilemmas or plights facing African American males (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006; Education Trust, 2003; Fan, 2001; Giribaldi, 1992; Hrabowski, Matton, & Greif, 1998; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Lewis, 2009; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Lewis & Moore, 2004; Obiakor & Beachum, 2006; National Urban League, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Patton, 1995; Price, 2000; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

This study, while also focusing on African American males, is intentionally set in a different direction; a direction change attempting to add a new dimension to understanding the experiences of African American males in our society using the power of the participants’ voices.
(Cook-Sather, 2006). The literature is oversaturated with dilemma and there is an enormous gap within the literature in the areas of solutions, successes, and the voices of African American males. Although this study is not comprehensive to all African American males, as it only looks into the lives of ten men, I am prayerful that it is a pathway for other researchers to begin engaging in research that gives voice to the voiceless and tells a counter story to the to the often heard “doom and gloom.”

It was interesting to learn how willing the participants were to share some of the most intimate aspects of their lives. Their interest in the study was genuine. These men want their experiences considered when working with African American males. An opportunity to be heard in this capacity resonated with the participants because it was also an opportunity to serve. Through this study, we learned that these participants believe service or the unselfish concern for the welfare of others is an aspect that bolsters success. It is very important that the voices of these men and other African American males are captured. The participants were not shy about their appreciation for the study being conducted or their disappointment that these types of conversations do not happen more often. These gentlemen are living testimonies of success, they have navigated the system without sacrificing their culture or identity, and they want to be involved. As researchers, this platform must be created and as an African American male I believe the uncontaminated success (success attained legally or without sacrifice of self) these men have achieved must be replicated.

bell hooks (2000) suggests that an individual should never be required to dissolve familial and/or cultural ties in order to succeed in life. She further adds that education in its current structure is a source of division that rejects people of color if they do not assimilate into the dominant culture (hooks, 2000). Education should not be a source of division for individuals,
rather a vehicle that brings people closer to their community and their success. The exploration of voices such as those recorded in this study allow us to embrace the thoughts of bell hooks by understanding how these men kept their identities, evaluate the sources of division they experienced, and begin to brainstorm solutions that might halt these stressors.

Exploring the lives of these participants as it relates to their overall success also uncovered a seemingly obvious but consistently ignored reality. African American males have to endure extreme measures to attain success. The overall feeling presented in this study is that educational barriers and other inequities sometimes feel intentional. Findings from this study can help ensure others understand the feeling of inequity amongst African American males, generate conversation to address the inequities, and more importantly, give the very individuals living the experience a seat at the table to participate in generating solutions.

The voices that lead to findings in this study are also capable of addressing the misguided and distorted beliefs held by society at large (Grover, 2004). By using the findings of this study to encourage an increase in the amount of studies focusing on success and solutions, society can become more informed that another side to the story of failure and shortcomings associated with African American males exists. Telling increased success stories will not only assist in changing the societal view of African American males but it will also help reinforce a positive viewpoint for the African American youth that often lack role models and embrace the distorted perceptions offered by media outlets. The findings from this research will contribute to restoring an objective view of the African American males.

**Recommendations**

As an educator, an African American, and a researcher it is beyond evident to me that there are challenges for African American males in our society. However, hearing the stories of
the participants has reinforced my belief that there are successful African American males achieving at the highest levels. The challenge is these men often do not have the platforms necessary or an interested audience to promote their stories and accomplishments. The experiences of these men are complex and there are many factors to consider. When reflecting on the entire study additional challenges and questions also present themselves. This study cannot shoulder the burden of addressing all the concerns that researchers and scholars may raise in relation to the experiences of African American males when reviewing this study. My goal is simply to bring unheard voices to the forefront and capture an authentic understanding into the lived experiences of successful African American males. I hope this research is of interest to many and inspires even more to continue finding the opportunities to challenge others to abandon dilemma thinking and engage in a conversation of success, accomplishment, and solution as it relates to African American males. Findings from this study have prompted me to make the following recommendations to educational leaders and reformers, parents, and African American males themselves.

**Recommendations to Secondary Educational Leaders and Reformers**

The first set of recommendations is for educational leaders and those engaged in educational reform. The findings within this support research that asserts the school system is flawed and needs an overhaul due to the inequities prevalent in the African American experience (Bell, 1992, 2004; hooks, 2000; Lewis & Moore, 2008). The issue of educational inequity has to be addressed and all relevant stake holders need to be included in reform conversations.

Recommendations to support an effort such as this are:

- School officials should engage successful African American male alumni and community members in discussion regarding their experiences and ask those interested to assist in
creating working groups to address challenges and concerns in the schools. Select members should be invited to a larger conversation regarding extensive educational reform.

- The discussion of equitable versus equal budget allocations should take place to ensure every student in every building has access to the same tools and resources. It would be advantageous for states to create a state wide task force to discuss these concerns, solicit solutions, and identify the best practices currently in use addressing similar challenges.

- School should consider discounted extracurricular activities and providing support service programming to address students’ nonacademic needs and also provide students with an advocate that can assist when questions arise regarding racism, teaching deficits, and integrity concerns within the teaching staff. In many cases the participants feel unheard and not valued when reporting a disservice.

Recommendations to Parents

The findings from this study demonstrated that family involvement, particularly of the parents, plays a critical role in the success of African American males. Participants also revealed that when parents were not involved, they watched many of their peers struggle, lack accountability, and ultimately, they experienced educational failures. The participants in this study all were directly affected by the involvement of their parents and other family members. Based on these findings the following recommendations are for parents of African American males.

- Parents need to be involved in all aspects of their young man’s education from the onset. This involvement should include regularly visiting the school, meeting consistently with teachers and counselors, requesting gifted and talented or rigorous courses for the
student, and providing supplemental educational opportunities in the summer. The supplemental instruction can be as informal as mandatory library reading daily or as formal as a tutoring program or summer school.

- Provide opportunities for the young men to get involved in multiple organizations that foster life skills, intellectual stimulation, discipline, service opportunities, and the opportunity to view positive African American males. Examples of these organizations could include but not be limited to: religious organizations, athletic programs, Boy Scouts, school sponsored programs, summer camps, fraternity programming, auxiliary programs, neighborhood functions, and much more. It is important that the young men have a diverse experience amongst their activities.

**Recommendations to African American Males**

The participants in this study are all successful and offered some very powerful personal stories but were also adamant about the role that African American males must play in activating their own success. There was consensus that obstacles do exist; however, there was also agreement that these obstacles were meant to be overcome, challenges were simply educational opportunities, and that African American males have to be unapologetic about their pursuit of success. With this belief the following recommendations were developed for African American males:

- Successful African American males must unite and hold the school system accountable for providing equitable experiences for all students, particularly those schools that cater to a large population of African American males. The participants believe this is best accomplished through involvement in educational politics, visiting neighborhood schools
(even when you have no children enrolled), volunteering time, talents, and treasures, and creating small groups of African American males to adopt schools.

- African American males must commit to complete a quality education, become financially literate, and embrace the idea of terminal degrees. These degrees should be earned not from an attitude of necessity but rather one of self-fulfillment and the love and thirst for knowledge. An education earned can never be taken but can always be used.

- African American males need to embrace the jewels of wisdom that foster success. The characteristics were offered by participants and displayed in table 4.7. They are:
  1. Being committed to the concept of family
  2. Being well dressed and spoken
  3. Being well read and educated
  4. Being socially and civically active
  5. Being a visionary and dream oriented
  6. Being committed to community service and servant leadership
  7. Having multiple mentors and serving as one
  8. Being resilient, courageous, humble, determined and patient
  9. Having a sense of faith and a moral compass
  10. Being politically active and conscious
  11. Having the ability to think critically and entrepreneurially

- African American males must collectively use society’s negative perceptions as one of many motivators for success and not as a defining factor in who we are. In instances where African American males are witnessing these negative traits being taken on we
must step in and redirect the behavior through role modeling, conversation, and extending the helping hand of mentorship.

Future Research

This study was rich in data and provided an in-depth look into the lived experiences of several successful African American males. This information will be of interest to additional scholars interested in the body of work surrounding this population. The room for research regarding African American males is a robust and complex space. Yet, the following areas need further research to increase our understanding of the experiences of successful African American males in our society:

1. Examine successful African American males from other geographical locations and varying age spectrums from youth to retirement. It would be interesting to see if similar themes emerge within each age category.

2. Duplicate this study regionally or nationally with other successful African American males with similar demographics in order to determine if similar themes develop and also to assess whether the findings could become generalized across all African American males.

3. Conduct a longitudinal study tracking the experiences of African American males intentionally exposed to themes in this study versus young men who are not for a comparative analysis of their observed and reported experiences.

4. Create additional studies on the impact of voice in addressing educational needs and reform efforts as it relates to the African American male experience.

5. Use the findings from this study to explore unsuccessful African American males to determine if their lack of success is linked to the absence of the themes
successful African American attribute to success. This could allow for further assessment of the ability to generalize themes across a larger spectrum of African American males.

_Final Thoughts of the Researcher_

Although armed with resilience and other tools, African American males should not have to constantly defend their right to exist and engage in society. African American males, in my opinion, should be offended when society celebrates the mediocre and status quo. For example, high school graduation is a rite of passage, a precursor to entering the workforce or a collegiate experience. It is supposed to happen and we should be proud of African American males when they reach this milestone, we should not treat them as if they just conducted a miracle. I take offense when African American men are belittled in this manner because we should not be told to settle for just being good when we are destined for greatness.

Cater G. Woodson (1933) notes that the educational system of a country is obsolete and worthless unless it revolutionizes the social order. Men of scholarship and prophetic insight must show us the right way and lead us into light which is shining brighter and brighter. This concept from Carter G. Woodson embodies what this research is striving to inform. Successful African American males are men of scholarship that possess prophetic insight into the experiences of African American males. These men are the experts and must not simply be included but must be given the opportunity to lead the effort in ensuring that all African American males that desire success have the opportunity to attain it. The opportunity to intervene in the lives of young African American males that are susceptible to the negative perceptions of society and a flawed educational system must be given to these men.
Successful African American males have to be highlighted and given the necessary platform to role model success and also to hold other African American males accountable. This work is important and not for the faint of heart. The success of an entire race continues to be in question but it seems no one is ever looking to truly answer the question. Successful African American males must create avenues to discuss their experiences and bolster their voice, whether they are asked or not. Society must be made aware we do not celebrate mediocre or status quo. Within African American males status quo should never be perceived as some tremendous feat or viewed as a miracle, it should be viewed as business as usual.

Within the classroom deficit thinking amongst teachers has to be eliminated. A student can never form a favorite class or discipline if they are counted out, put down, or patronized with every experience. The men that have successfully navigated these waters have a responsibility to ensure these poor experiences are not passed on and that the teachers exhibiting these limiting behaviors are quickly identified and removed from positions of trust with our students.

The stories of successful African American males have to be told. It is the best defense to the pessimistic perceptions often associated with African American males. These success stories are paramount in helping young men self-actualize and achieve lifelong dreams, break cycles of poverty and educational underachievement, as well as the far reaching political, social, emotional, and economic consequences associated with embracing the negative perceptions. I am proud to contribute the voices of my study participants to the literature and hope it has a far reaching affect in the engagement and mobilization of stories of other successful African American men.

Summary
The findings from this phenomenological study represent the unique but shared experiences of ten successful African American males. What we learn is that the road to educational and societal success for African American males is long, rough, and rugged and African American men have to be ready to take up the long journey to achieve success. This study contributes to a small section of the literature that speaks life into African American males and educates society that African American males are so much more than the dilemmas supported by the majority of the research and societal perceptions.

There is a distinct gap in what the literature espouses about African American males and what is actually being accomplished in this community. What has become overwhelmingly obvious in this research is that the voices of African American males have to be embraced and given relevance into the conversation on success and improving the lived conditions of other African American males. As a society we can no longer afford to exclude the success stories of African American males or celebrate mediocrity, and we have to commit to providing an equitable experience for all people. Edwards and Polite (1992) summarize it best: in order for more African American males to experience and achieve meaningful success, it is critical to focus on the success stories of those African American men and boys who are successful, and to identify strengths, skills, and other significant factors necessary to foster success. I am hopeful this addition to the literature brings awareness to the education community on the work that must be undertaken to ensure that all African American males understand that educational and societal success is their right and not a privilege for a select few.
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Trio Programs: [http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html)


Dear Executive Leadership of Denver Kappa Alpha Psi,

I am a doctoral candidate at The University of Colorado Denver and am preparing to undertake research for my Ph.D. in Education Leadership and Innovation. I am hopeful you will assist me in connecting with possible participants for this dissertation research from your organization?

My core interest is African American males; more specifically what do successful African American males have in common? What do the attribute to their success and what was their educational experience like? Currently, both popular as well as academic articles focus a lot of attention to the negative factors facing African American males. I am concerned that this focus is limiting opportunities to create solutions and only reinforce the dilemmas. Therefore, I want to ask successful African Americans in or associated with your organization about their educational and societal success experiences. This conversation may produce constructive ideas for improving the experiences of African American males and surely create a vehicle to better understand the experiences associated with successful African American Males.

I am asking you to please forward this email to all your members, high school program associates, and their parents. Any interested participants can simply email me (ryan.ross@ccd.edu) or call me directly at 303-524-4180. The project will be conducted via face-to-face audio tape-recorded interviews, focus groups, and potentially, a small written
assignment during the spring semester of 2012. My goal is to have participation from 16 participants.

**Frequently Asked Questions:**

1. **How long will it take the participants?** The scheduled interviews may up to 90 minutes. The demographic survey will take less than 10 minutes.
2. **How much time is allotted for the data collection part of the project?** My goal is to have all data collected in the spring semester of 2012. That means time is of the essence!
3. **What about participants’ privacy?** Each participant has a pseudonym. I will not ask the name of the participant’s school, place of employment, or county of residency. However, some non-identifying information is asked. Confidentially is carefully maintained and guarded.
4. Full disclosure and information about the project is available to all interested potential participants.

Thank you very much for your assistance in this doctoral research project; I am grateful for your assistance in helping me connect with potential participants for this research.

Ryan Ross, M.Ed.

303-524-4180

ryan.ross@ccd.edu

University of Colorado Denver
APPENDIX B
Letter to Potential Participants

Dear Potential Research Participant,

Thank you for responding to the request asking for successful African American males to contact me about my Ph.D. research project! The basic idea is to give you a stronger, collective, voice about what your experiences as an African American male. I am overwhelmed with excitement about the possibility of your participation and equally excited to uncover what will be shared.

To participate in the study, I ask that you first complete consent to participate form and a demographic survey to ensure you are an appropriate match for this study. Most likely, you will participate in a minimum of two but potentially three ways; an individual interview, a focus group, or asked to complete a follow up phone call for any additional questions or clarification. Please feel free to email or call me as soon as possible so we can talk more about the study and set up a first interview time.

If you agree to be part of this project, and I certainly hope you do, your confidential responses will greatly assist the profession. Knowing how busy you are, I do ask that you contact me as soon as possible so we can establish a time to get your participation arranged in the near future. I also ask that you hand me the completed demographic survey when we meet to talk. At that first interview, I will ask that you read over and sign a one-page Informed Consent form. If, at any time, you feel uncomfortable and do not want to proceed with the interview, we will stop.
This research will give you an opportunity to describe your daily, lived experiences and thoughts about a successful African American male. This will help all of us but most importantly - it will help change the conversation currently happening. I am very grateful for your assistance and I value the unique contribution that you can make to my study.

Again, please do not hesitate to call or email with questions or concerns.

Thank you again,
Warm regards,

Ryan Ross, M.Ed.

ryan.ross@ccd.edu

303-524-4180

University of Colorado Denver
APPENDIX C
Letter to Potential Participants

Informed Consent: Participant Release Agreement

Research Project Title: Addressing the Crisis: Exploring the Experiences of Successful African American Males

Researcher: Ryan E. Ross, Doctoral candidate;
Educational Leadership and Innovation Program
School of Education & Human Development; UCDHSC
P.O. Box 173364, Campus Box 106, Denver, CO 80217-3364

Phone: Mobile: 303-524-4180
E-mail: ryan.ross@ccd.edu

I agree to participate in a doctoral research study of successful African American male experiences. I understand the purpose and nature of this study, and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a Ph.D. degree, including a dissertation and any other future publications. I understand that a brief synopsis of each participant, including myself, will be used and will include the following information: a pseudonym, personal experiences, and non-identifiable demographic information. This information is collected on a brief demographic survey. I understand I will participate in interviews, a focus group, or be asked to complete a follow up phone call or individual meeting. I grant permission for my participation to be digitally video and/or audio-recorded. Confidentially is carefully maintained and guarded.

In any research study there is an element of risk. In this interview-based study, the risks are minimal but still real. I understand that the interviews are designed to minimize any discomfort. However, I realize discussing my professional, educational, and / or personal
experiences may bring up unpleasant thoughts or feelings. If at anytime I feel uncomfortable, I know I am encouraged to request a break or terminate the interview. I also understand the risks of confidentiality; while the researcher has made promises to safeguard my identity, I understand something could happen to jeopardize my anonymity.

There are benefits to participating in educational research as well. I understand that the benefits of participating in this research study are primarily to assist with a Ph.D. dissertation process. I also understand that by describing my experiences, I may increase the understanding of the African American experience and my voice has the opportunity to provide valuable information to academics and education policy makers. Another benefit to my participating in this study is that my contribution may ultimately benefit students’ learning and their overall school experience.

__________________________________________

Please sign your name

Date
APPENDIX D

Demographic Survey

Demographics: Please tell me about yourself and your school

1. Ethnicity: (Fill in the blank)

☐ __________________________

2. Age Classification: (Select one)

☐ High School Senior
☐ Working Professional
☐ Retired Professional

3. I personally know African American males that have been or are incarcerated:

(Select one)

☐ Yes
☐ No

4. I personally know African Americans associated with gangs or other illegal activities. (Select one)

☐ Yes
☐ No

5. I personally know African American males who are either un or under employed.

(Select one)

☐ Yes
5. I personally know African American males that have experienced educational underachievement or have dropped out of high school. (Select one)

☐ Yes
☐ No

6. I would consider myself successful in the following areas: (Select all that apply)

☐ Family
☐ Education
☐ Professionally
☐ Community
☐ Spiritually
☐ Professional Relationships
☐ Personal Relationships

8. I attended or have been accepted into the following college or university: (Fill in the blank)

☐ ________________________________

10. Education: please check any of the following that apply to indicate the level of education you have completed: High School students please write in the highest degree you plan to achieve (Select any that apply).

☐ ________________________________ (high school participant only)
☐ BA/BS
☐ Alternative Certification/Licensure
☐ MA/MS
☐ J.D or Doctorate

11. I have been convicted of a crime (Select one)?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Thank you participating!
APPENDIX E

Interview and Focus Group Questions

1) When you hear African American Males, what characteristics come to mind? What reinforces these thoughts for you?

2) How do you define success for you? For African American Males? In your opinion how does society define success for African American males?

3) How do you define societal success for you? For African American Males? In your opinion how does society define societal success for African American males?

4) How do you define educational achievement for you? For African American males? In your opinion how does society define educational achievement for African American males?

5) What is the purpose of education?

6) What was your educational experience like?
   a) What was the environment like?
   b) What was your experience with the curriculum?
   c) Did you ever feel belittled or out casted? Please explain.
   d) Did you feel your experience was equitable compared to your white counterparts?
   e) Did your experience make you feel like you were supposed to be successful? Please explain.

7) What is /was your professional career goal?

8) Is your education helping you accomplish this goal?

9) What does this mean for the way we do school?
   a. If school no longer existed, could you learn what you need to?
b. If you could change the way we did school, how would you change it and why?

10) Research suggests that African American males are failing socially in the areas of family, education, employment, and citizenship. Have you avoided donning this title? How?

   a) Do you know AA males that support this stereotype? What is the reason?

   b) What is difference between you and AA males you know that are supporting the suggested research?

   c) What strategies did you use to overcome any obstacles that may have threatened your success? How could these work for other AA males?

11) What factors to you attribute most to the success you have experienced?

12) Is there value in education reformers and policy makers asking males such as you about the success you have experienced? Why?

13) If asked how could we ensure more AA males experienced academic and societal success what would you suggest?