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## Experiences of Bidialectism in College-Educated African Americans: An Exploratory Study

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Ina N. Owens  
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Americans: An Exploratory  
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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to explore experiences of bidialectism in college-educated African Americans. The major questions in this study attempted to answer the following:

1) How do college-educated African Americans perceive and negotiate differences between Black and Standard English? 2) Does negotiating two language systems impact their sense of cultural identity? If so, in what ways? and, 3) Is there a conflict involved in negotiating two language systems? If so, what is the nature of the conflict?

Eight interviews were conducted with graduate students who were both Black and Standard English speakers. Subjects ranged in age from 22 to 50. Questions were asked to gain insight into subjects' views about these two language systems. Questions were also asked to determine whether subjects experienced their bidialectism as a means of achieving greater linguistic resources for coping in society, or as a source of ambiguity and confusion.

Findings show that subjects determine which language system they will use according to their perceptions of the environment. Black English was considered a valuable resource for showing cultural solidarity in informal communication within the African American community. Standard English was considered a valuable resource for formal communication within the larger society. Other significant issues reveal that subjects expressed both feelings of conflict and resolution about negotiating two language systems.

**EXPERIENCES OF BIDIALECTISM IN COLLEGE-EDUCATED  
AFRICAN AMERICANS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

**A project based upon independent investigation, submitted  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Social Work.**

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**1996**

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*An individual's choice of speech style has symbolic value and interpretative consequences...*

-J. Gumperez

Sociolinguists are able to successfully argue that all languages and dialects [collectively referred to in this study as “language systems”] are equally adept at communicating necessary information among their speakers. Unfortunately, no society behaves as if all language systems are equal. As noted by Speicher and McMahon (1992), at least one language system in a given society emerges for the purpose of standardization. Cultural dominance determines which language system will be cultivated as this purisitic “ideal.” This cultivated language system becomes a symbol of power, as it functions as the frame of reference by which all other language systems are compared. Standard English, representing the widest spectrum of communication in both spoken and written form, has established such rank in American culture. Standard English has been and continues to be established by the dominant culture as the linguistic standard in America, making all other language systems part of a linguistic subculture (Taylor, 1978).

This “standard” language system chosen in American culture has nothing to do with any superiority or value of the language, but much to do with the power and prestige of those who use it (Speicher & McMahon, 1992). The attention given by the society to

language differences, however, plays an important part in creating and maintaining both the subtle and obvious boundaries of power, status, and role in society (Gumperez, 1982). Black English- the language of many African Americans- has suffered such effects. It is a language system which has suffered deep-seated prejudice in American culture.

Black English may be defined as a language system of particular significance to African Americans. Emerging out of the history of Africans and African Americans in the United States, Black English reflects the social, political, and psychological reality of Blacks in America. From its origins in West Africa to its present existence, Black English has followed a traceable pattern of development. It is a language system with its own components of syntax, grammar, phonology, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions which are a part of the African American culture.

Though Black English is an integral part of the cultural identity of many African Americans, linguistic and social evaluation often leaves Black English characterized as a deviant in relation to Standard English. As noted by Traugott (1978), these differences are often expressed in terms of “absence” or “omission” of features present in Standard English (p. 57). Consciously or unconsciously such terminology undoubtedly contributes to the concept that Black English is somehow linguistically deficient (Traugott). This has major implications for African Americans who express themselves using this language system.

The dominant culture has used Black English “as a conventional excuse to reinforce educational segregation and discrimination, thereby continuing to limit opportunity for Black advancement” (Taylor, 1978, p. 36). It is presumed that Black English speakers suffer from lack of education, poverty and isolation from mainstream culture, and thus

lack of the necessary intelligence to succeed within American society (Chimezie, 1973). African Americans seeking middle class status learn that Black English does not involve extensive “ethnic heterogeneity” (Traugott, 1976, p. 62) that will gain them access to mainstream culture. They become torn between competing linguistic forces from majority and minority cultures (Baugh, 1992) which call for both competence in the standard, as well as competence in the language of their community.

The contradictory nature of these two forces fosters a linguistic practice known as bidialectism. African Americans are able to retain Black English for use in social interactions within their own speech communities to promote group cohesion and solidarity. They are also able to acquire Standard English for use in more formal interactions, most especially for intergroup communication within mainstream culture in order to establish credibility. As noted by Taylor (1978), “Blacks who have attained some degree of socioeconomic advancement can switch back and forth from Black English to Standard English at will” (p. 36). Bidialectism becomes a way of negotiating between the two linguistic forces, as African Americans learn communicative competence according to the demands of various environments.

Hilliard (1983) states that language is not simply a means of communicating in a narrow sense. Psychologically, it is a prime source of identity. Language is also a cognitive structuring of the world which is linked to one’s world-view, identity, self-concept, and self esteem (Hilliard). Learning a language system does not simply involve learning to communicate, but also involves assimilating the culture’s system of meanings and its ways of thinking and reasoning. For middle-class aspiring African Americans, the politics of language cannot help but impact their sense of identity as they maneuver



between both the majority and minority cultures. The individual sociological and psychological effects of bidialectism upon African Americans, however, has been poorly understood in psychiatry, psychology, child development, and clinical social work.

This study was conducted to explore experiences of bidialectism in college-educated African Americans. College-educated African Americans were studied to reflect a sample population of persons striving to achieve upward mobility. The major questions in this study explored the following: 1) How do college-educated African Americans perceive and negotiate differences between Black and Standard English? 2) Does negotiating two language systems impact their sense of cultural identity? If so, in what way(s)? and, 3) Is there a conflict in negotiating two language systems? If so, what is the nature of the conflict? Cultural identity, as defined by Hammers and Blanc (1989), will be noted as “a set of symbolic systems including knowledge, norms, values, beliefs, language, art and customs, as well as habits and skills learned by members as they pertain to a particular group” (p. 115). Conflict as defined by Webster’s dictionary will be noted as “opposition or simultaneous functioning,” as it refers to using two different language systems. The objective of this study was to provide insight into both the sociological and psychological experience of using both Black and Standard English. Focus was placed upon discovering whether bidialectism leads to either greater flexibility in thinking and greater resources for coping in society, or rather, results in psychological conflicts which are based upon having to balance two sometimes conflicting and contradictory cultures.

This study may be useful knowledge in providing social services to African Americans, as it may help to provide insight into the experiences of those who are bidialectic. This study may also help to dispel some of the misconceptions and

stereotypes about Black English and those who use it. Beaman (1994) states that it is only when mental health professionals “become cognizant of cultural biases held in relation to Black English that they will be able to work effectively with individuals with whom they are not culturally similar” (p. 379). This is a vital task in order that social workers may not use Black English as an impediment to the therapeutic process, or fail to develop a positive therapeutic alliance with clients. Understanding language systems and the client’s experience of them is vital to meaningful communication within the counseling relationship. Exploring, understanding, and accepting the client’s language not only leads to a better understanding of the sociocultural world of the client, but also helps the therapist foster a more genuine empathy within the treatment relationship.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### The Historical Development of Black English

##### West African Roots

The sociohistorical development and influences upon Black English have been debated by many historians, linguists, and cultural anthropologists throughout several decades. Though some scholars cite the history of Black English as beginning in America, most scholars trace the history of Black English to the West Coast of Africa during the early stages of the slave trade (Dillard, 1972; McGinnis, 1975; Thomas, 1973). British traders arrived on the West African Coast during the seventeenth century. As speakers of mutually unintelligible languages, Africans and the British needed a way to overcome language barriers for the purposes of trading. Out of this desire to communicate evolved what Dillard (1972) terms “West African Pidgin English.” A simplified spoken medium used for communication between people of different linguistic backgrounds, this pidgin became the “unifying” language between the African and British peoples.

Traugott (1976) in her article entitled “Pidgins, Creoles, and the Origins of Black Vernacular English,” discusses the development of pidgin languages. Defining pidgin as “nobody’s native language” (p. 59), Traugott describes pidgin as a language typical of trade situations. Pidgins are limited in vocabulary and structure when compared to their

source languages, and thus allow for little more than basic communication. Their primary function is to “identify social groupings, differentiate speech functions (distinguish statements, commands, questions, and naming of trade objects and body parts), and specify local contexts (trading posts, ship, harbor, road, etc.)” (Traugott, p. 60). Africans began to use the vocabulary of the foreign language and the syntax and phonology of the native language. English was substituted for West African words, but the idiom of West African language patterns remained. West African Pidgin became a newly developed language between Africans and the British used for trading purposes. This language was passed on and further developed by slaves who entered America.

Evidence about early pidgin language is scarce, since pidgin was primarily a spoken rather than written language through the eighteenth century. Much of the knowledge about its origins has been acquired through representations of Black dialect in White and Black American literature, written reproductions of the dialect in journals, letters and diaries by Whites, as well as by generalized commentary about slave speech (Smitherman, 1977). Evidence is also based upon other English-based pidgins such as Gullah, Jamaican Creole, and other Caribbean and West African languages (Burling, 1973; McGinnis, 1975; Smitherman, 1977; Schneider, 1989; Winford, 1993). It is for this reason that the structure and influence upon pidgin and thus Black English have been debated. While some scholars argue that the substratum for Black English is West African language, others argue that British English is such substratum. In order to avoid such arguments on its diachronic origins, however, many other researchers have noted both languages as essential to the development of Black English. Still other researchers argue the influence of multiple languages upon Black English such as Irish, Portuguese,

Spanish, Dutch, and French (Taylor, 1968; Schneider, 1989; Traugott, 1975). Whether or not these languages can be included as possible influences, Black English's association to West Africa cannot be denied. Native Africans carried over elements of their native language into their Pidgin English. Some of these African elements (as many West African languages share a number of characteristics) were passed down through generations and have influenced the Black English of today.

### The Creolization Process

The pidgin which began on the coast of Africa developed among the British and African slaves who were transported to colonial America. Smitherman (1977) notes that as the first ships began to arrive in America in 1619, African slaves became more alienated from their native tongue. These slaves who spoke various native languages such as Ibo, Yoruba, and Hausa were brought together on American plantations. Slaves of mutually unintelligible languages came together as social subordinates to a socially dominant group of White slaveowners who spoke yet another language. Needing a way to communicate with their European slave traders, their slave masters, as well as with each other, African slaves continued to modify the pidgin which had begun in West Africa. These slaves continued to use and develop the language system that incorporated the masters' English language, as well as reflections of the grammar, pronunciation, and words from their African languages.

West African Pidgin English developed further as the result of the establishment of plantation life in America. As plantation communities became more settled and new generations of slaves were born into the New World, native African tongues became increasingly less heard and spoken (Smitherman, 1977). The new generation of slaves

began to model their first language upon the pidgin that surrounded them rather than upon either the original African languages of their parents or the English of their masters (Burling, 1973). This type of language which is spoken as a native language and used for daily purposes, but still shows evidence of having descended through a pidgin stage, is known as a "creole" (Burling, 1973). Traugott (1976) defines creole in detail:

As a native or home language, a creole has more linguistic functions than a pidgin and therefore is more varied in structure. More possibilities of subordination are present, and the vocabulary is greater. Various kinds of inflectional structures arise, partly because as native languages creoles are spoken more rapidly and with an easier flow than most pidgins, which allows for contractions of elements that tend to be separate words or particles in pidgin languages. Creoles thrive where there is a large ethnic mix and clear social stratification...(p. 61).

For the succeeding generations of the first New World slaves, creole became the native tongue. Influenced by older slaves as well as by overseers and slaveowners, this language became more established as generations adopted this creole language and expanded its syntactical and lexical features (McGinnis, 1975). Slaves began to marry and raise families, developing creole as a home language. By the end of the Civil War, many Blacks became well versed in Plantation Creole.

### Decreolization

Dillard (1972) points out that as early as 1705, Africans spoke different varieties of English. He labels these varieties as West African Pidgin English, Plantation Creole, and Standard English. The language variety in the slave population was attributed to the slave's place of origin, his status on the plantation, and his length of stay on the plantation (McGinnis, 1975). McGinnis notes as well that linguistic stratification also paralleled the social stratification of slaves. The distinction made between "house Negroes" and "field Negroes" may also have attributed to the language differences

among Black slaves (McGinnis). Greater and more frequent contact with Whites enabled Black house servants to acquire speech more similar to the local Standard, while social isolation from slaveowners made English dialect develop more slowly among Plantation Blacks.

Eliason (1956) notes that Whites spoke a variety of English-types which also affected the language acquisition among slaves. Addressing the implied myth that all Whites spoke the same English with no linguistic variation, Eliason notes that social, regional, and educational factors also impacted the English spoken by Whites. Slaves learned from the people with whom they were most closely associated. These people were most often overseers from various parts of England and the British Isles. Slaves thus learned English in part from overseers who were both literate and illiterate. This also accounted for the linguistic differences among slaves and their masters.

The frequency of interaction between Blacks and Whites contributed to language assimilation. However, social factors also simultaneously maintained linguistic differences. Though there may have been a high degree of interaction between Blacks and Whites, the nature of the interaction preserved linguistic differences. The interaction among social unequals employed a "system of etiquette" which determined when a slave could speak, what he could say, whom he could address, and what forms that address might take (McGinnis 1975, p. 7). It was this system of etiquette which also may have helped preserve the linguistic differences between Blacks and Whites (McGinnis, 1975).

Escott (1979) also builds upon this theory of linguistic differences residing in the social stratification of Blacks and Whites. He states that the "evil of enslavement and the strength of cultural differences set these two groups apart from each other and gave the

slaves a fundamental sense of themselves as an oppressed racial group” (Escott, p. 20). Thus, Schneider concludes (1989) that such an unequal relationship may have made Blacks more resistant to accepting Whites as “linguistic models” (p. 37). This resistance helped lead to further linguistic differentiation between the two groups.

While some scholars cite the period following the Civil War as the “decreolization process” (Traugott, 1976; Taylor, 1991), other scholars deny this as a distinct evolutionary stage of Black language (Schneider, 1989; D’Eloia, 1973). Traugott discusses decreolization as the “modification in the direction of superstrate language,” so much that, “the creole becomes largely assimilated into the superstrate language” (p. 61). Assimilation of the creole does not mean that all traces of the original creole are lost, but rather that earlier structures remain and become identifying features of the language. As generations of Blacks became more settled in America, creole language became modified more in the direction of the Standard. This decreolization process among Blacks continued throughout later history.

#### From Decreolization to Present Day Black English

Blacks began to migrate from the rural to the urban South, and continued to do so through the First and Second World Wars. It was during these wars that Blacks also began to migrate to the North and the West, where they settled into segregated communities. Past and present exposure to Whites contributed to the language assimilation on the one hand, while segregated communities allowed for the incubation and development of a distinct linguistic system. It was out of these conditions that Black English emerged.



Black English today has developed into a significant representation of “Black America’s linguistic-cultural African heritage, and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 2). Speicher and McMahon (1992) discuss the beginning of the shift in thought of Black English from ignorance to identity expression in the 1960’s and 1970’s. The advent of Black activism and Black pride, as well as civil rights and social reforms emerged during these decades. It was during this time that traditional views of Black English were finally questioned. Linguists began to demonstrate the nature of Black English’s phonological and syntactical rules, as well as its creole heritage with traceable ties to African languages.

Black English today is a clear grammatical structure which is part of the African linguistic tradition. Isolation of Blacks from the White mainstream; learning a language by ear; denial of education; the need to speak a lingo unintelligible to the slave master and other Whites; the habitat; and other particular life experiences from slavery to present (Chimezie, 1972), are all factors which have influenced this language and have helped continue its existence in American culture. Black English is a reflection of Black culture in America. It is a language system which has been and continues to be modified through successive African American generations on American soil.

### Language Development and Cultural Identity

#### The Relationship Between Language and Culture

Language development cannot be adequately examined without consideration of the social and cultural context in which it takes place. Though not always a condition of group membership, language is an important part of culture. Culture may be defined as

“a complex entity which comprises a set of symbolic systems, including knowledge, norms, values, beliefs, language, art and customs, as well as habits and skills learned by individuals as members of a given society” (Hammers & Blanc, 1989). Hammers and Blanc note the significance of the relationship between language and culture:

Language is a component of culture along with other entities like, for example, values, beliefs, and norms; language is a product of culture transmitted from one generation to the next in the socialization process; it also molds culture, that is to say, our cultural representations are shaped by language. But, unlike other components of culture, language interacts with it in specific ways: for language is a transmitter of culture; furthermore, it is the main tool for the internalization of culture by the individual (p. 116).

The integration of a culture into the individual’s personality constitutes cultural identity. Because language is such an important component of culture, it is often a salient feature of an individual’s cultural identity (Hammers & Blanc). For many African Americans, Black English is an important aspect of their cultural identity. It is one of the ways in which African Americans signal a connection to their community.

Kim and Gudykunst (1988) argue that “minority identity” (p. 114) is formed through contact with individuals from one’s own group, as well as through contact with individuals of the dominant culture. Taylor and Giles (1979) note that a communal group often becomes a minority group when it is not allowed to fully assimilate into the larger culture. Power-assigning social structures in the form of institutionalized racism have limited full access of various minority groups from acceptance into mainstream culture (Pinderhughes, 1989). Throughout history, African Americans have been a part of these marginalized groups.

According to Taylor and Giles (1989), the existence of a minority group suggests a majority which dominates the society through its ability to impose unequal terms on

minority groups. A minority group, therefore, is characterized by its “powerlessness to define the nature of its relationship to the majority, and therefore its own identity” (Hammers & Blanc, 1987, p. 159). Language thus becomes one of the criteria by which the dominant culture identifies and marginalizes minority groups in society. Black English within mainstream society has suffered such effects.

Black English has worked against African Americans as “comparative studies have been designed for the sole purpose of proving Blacks inferior” (Chimezie, 1973, p. 19). Scholars have documented past research which labeled Black English the result of “thick lips” and a “lazy tongue” (Chimezie, p. 22). Other scholars have denied or minimized the significance of African languages upon Black English. Black English, therefore, has been and continues to be perceived by the majority of society not as a part of cultural identity, but rather as the inability to speak Standard English.

As noted by Taylor (1978), Black English is not simply the result of lack of adequate exposure to Standard English. Black homes of every class are invaded daily with the exposure to mainstream White America, and with that exposure comes constant contact with standard English by the mass media. Thus, Taylor (1978) states, African Americans could easily learn Standard English. African Americans, however, as a result of their “frustration, alienation, and dissatisfaction with life in America use Black English as a psychological and emotional release system” (p. 34).

Taylor and Giles (1987) state that minority groups often try to redefine a vernacular by utilizing the language as a symbol of their distinctiveness despite wider stigmatization. Black English within the African American community has evolved as a major signifier of collective identity. Taylor (1978) notes that Black English is a form of expression

used to “cope with the hassles of everyday living with life in White America, to create a positive space for themselves in which they have no longer been outcasts, and to protect them against their fear of losing their identity” (p. 32). Black English has come to function as an important way of signifying and preserving cultural identity within the African American community.

### Ethnic Identity and Language Development

An individual's cultural and ethnic identity are primarily developed through the early social learning experiences that an individual has within his or her culture of origin. Ethnic identity may be defined as part of the collective, intergenerational, and cultural continuity as experienced by a member of a cultural group (Fishman, 1989). Bowles (1988) is one of the few authors who has written on the development of an ethnic self-concept. In her article entitled “Development of an Ethnic Self-Concept Among Blacks,” Bowles discusses ethnicity as a fundamental unit within self-representation. According to Bowles, ethnic culture influences an individual's manner of experiencing, perceiving, and behaving in subtle ways which are not always conscious even to its members. The cultural “ethos” (p. 104) is taken in, internalized, assimilated, and processed by the individual so that it becomes a part of the ethnic self-representation which is passed on throughout the generations. Language is a part of that cultural ethos.

Hammers and Blanc (1989) state that language is rooted in the child's interaction with significant others in his or her social network, who present him or her with a model or models of language behavior. For many African Americans, this social network is based at least in part within the African American community. These social networks include not only the family unit, but also extended family, church, school, as well as social

relations with other African Americans. It is in these social networks that the child often becomes exposed to Black English as a part of the community's collective identity.

Bowles (1988) also notes that cohesion of the ethnic self-representation is possible when the family and the larger environment affirm and accept a given ethnicity and the child is able to translate this acceptance internally. Language, as a part of the cultural ethos, helps to build a sense of cohesion in the individual. Participation in the language system of the community allows the child to discover the importance of language as a part of his cultural identity. Thus, for many African Americans, Black English becomes a part of ethnic self-representation and identity.

#### Socialization and Intragroup Communication

Socialization is a complex set of learning processes by which one learns to become a member of a group. Language can often be an integral part of the socialization process. Hammers and Blanc (1989) define the psychological mechanisms which are relevant to language development in the socialization process. These mechanisms include:

(1) identification, whereby a child identifies with others persons within a social network and behaves like those around him or her; (2) internalization, in which the child incorporates into his own value system the social values which are prevalent within the community; and, (3) the development of a social, cultural, or ethnic identity, in which the child- through social-psychological mechanisms like social comparison, categorization, and distinctiveness- builds his or her own self-image and defines himself or herself as a member of a group. The social network around the child transmits knowledge about the value system in the community which determines the status and relevance of language within a given environment. The child internalizes those functions which are valorized

and used within the community. It is through the socialization process that the child becomes cognizant of language functions and representations within a given community (Hammers and Blanc, 1989). Through socialization within the African American community, Black English becomes internalized as playing an essential role in the development of cultural identity. It also becomes integrated as a part of the individual's ethnic-self representation. Black English becomes recognized as a communication strategy which enables the individual to distinguish himself as a member of a distinct ethnolinguistic group, as well as to express ethnolinguistic group allegiances in intragroup communication.

### Bidialectism

#### Black English and Social Prejudice

Considerable progress has been made over the past two decades in examining Black English from both structural and cultural perspectives. Research however, has richly documented the negative social consequences associated with Black English in mainstream white culture (Garner & Rubin, 1986; Forhdam & Ogbu, 1986; Smitherman, 1977). Sociolinguists who argue that Black English should be treated as a "separate but equal" language find themselves in a bind: To argue Black English is not "bad" English, but rather a different language worthy in its own right, may only continue to limit the opportunity for Black advancement. Researchers have noted the negative effects of this language on access to institutionally controlled success such as employment and school achievement, namely reduced employability as well as limited expectations for Black English speaking students (Garner & Rubin, 1986; Smitherman, 1992). Johnson and Buttny (1982) note that when listeners hear language associated with

a particular group, that language evokes stereotyped characteristics of that group. In the case of Black English they state, “racist attitudes whether individually or culturally centered presumably shape a negative stereotype which is evoked by language characteristics associated with Black people” (p. 34). Lack of education, poverty, isolation from mainstream culture, and lack of intelligence necessary to succeed in the larger society (Chimezie, 1973), are all a part of the deep seated social prejudice against Black English which still remains inherent in mainstream culture. In America, Standard English has been and continues to be the language system most valued by the dominant culture. As a result, all other languages are subordinated as part of a linguistic subculture (Taylor, 1978).

#### Language, Intergroup Communication, and Upward Mobility

African Americans have an all-encompassing identity. They are African, which separates them out as ethnic minorities and links them to a common and collective heritage rooted in Africa. They are also however, American, which predisposes them to both the progressive and retrogressive norms, values, and actions of mainstream society (Smitherman, 1977). African Americans as an ethnic and subcultural group in America share in and are influenced by the experience of the dominant culture. According to Haskins and Butts (1973), the development of verbal behavior in African American children is therefore complicated due to the many aspects of the Black experience. These aspects “include family organization; interaction among families, the Black community, and the wider society; the impact of mass media upon cognitive development in Black children; and the effects of mass institutionalized racism on language development and cognitive ability” (p. 10). The interface between the

linguistic norm and subsequent verbal behavior becomes a complex issue, therefore, for African Americans who interact both within and outside of their community.

As African Americans seek to enter the mainstream of American culture, and to achieve and maintain middle-class status, the price of admittance becomes adapting and assimilating into the values of the larger culture. For many African Americans, this price includes a negotiation of language systems. The dominant culture imposes Standard English as the only "legitimate" language and "pursues a policy of assimilation" (Hammers & Blanc, 1989, p. 159). Other languages become stigmatized or devalored by the society. In order to participate within the larger society, African Americans are forced to learn the legitimate language. As described by Smitherman (1977), "White America insists upon Standard English as "the price of admission into its economic and social mainstream" (p. 12).

Research by Gudykunst (1986) on intergroup communication indicates that attitudes by "ingroups" [groups which are linguistically similar], are characterized by prejudice and ethnocentrism. These feelings of prejudice affect aspects such as communication effectiveness, social distance, communicative distances, and interpersonal trust with other groups. Giles (1979) states that ingroups tend to react favorably to members who converge toward them. Convergence involves "changing one's linguistic (language, dialect, vocabulary, or speech style) or paralinguistic behavior (tone of voice, speech rate, etc.), so as to be more similar to the conversational partner. Convergence is executed in order to seek approval, enhance comprehension, or show solidarity" (Kim & Gudykunst 1988, p. 160). As the ingroup, the dominant culture calls upon linguistic assimilation as



a criteria of acceptance into the culture. African Americans thus converge linguistically in order to move towards upward mobility within mainstream society.

For many African Americans, the vehicle towards upward mobility is through education. As noted by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), the way members of a population prepare their children for adulthood- through child rearing and formal schooling- is heavily influenced by their ideal images and characteristics of successful members of the population. Many African Americans within the community have internalized the awareness that mainstream society has held “little or no tolerance for Black English within its confines” (Williams, 1994). These images and beliefs thus are incorporated into the value systems of those responsible for the child’s upbringing. As a child matures and interacts within various environments, he or she begins to internalize not only “rule-governed and institutionalized programs for everyday life,” but also “rules of institution-based worlds, such as school, and becomes aware of social structures and their symbolic systems” (Hammers & Blanc, 1989, p. 72). Thus, the child begins to play an active role in learning how to succeed in the manner prescribed by the culture. The use of Standard English becomes internalized as one of the vehicles toward success within the larger society.

The study by Doss and Gross (1994) reflects how many African Americans have internalized the value placed upon Standard English by mainstream society. One-hundred-thirty African Americans were studied to determine the language system they valued most in a public and formal setting. Subjects were divided into three groups and listened to audiotapes of vernacular speech patterns of Black English, code-switching (using both Standard and Black English), and Standard English. The content was the

same in all scenarios, varying only in speech patterns. Subjects were then asked to complete an evaluation of the speaker. Results show that the Standard English model was preferred over the Black English or code-switching model.

Hoover's (1978) study of African American parents from various economic backgrounds also confirmed African Americans' awareness of conditional usage of Black English. Twenty-eight Black parents and community people were surveyed regarding their attitudes toward Black English. Hoover's research concluded that though African American parents do not hate their language, they adhere to rules for its use based on domain, channel, and topic. While they accept Black English usage in listening and speaking, they do not accept it in reading and writing. They also accept Black English in the home and some community contexts and other informal settings, but do not accept its use in most formal settings.

The results of these studies show that despite African Americans' connection to and constant use of Black English, they are well aware that Black English does not transfer well out of the cultural and community setting. Knowing that Black English is not sanctioned outside of the community, or is so only in limited situations, has major implications for those who aspire to obtain those opportunities which are available outside the African American community.

### Bidialectism Acquisition

The majority culture defines both optional and obligatory modes of communication within the culture. The minority culture thus must learn to interact according to such modes of communication. Bidialectism is the ability to communicate using two different

language systems (Dandy, 1991). African Americans often learn to incorporate both Black and Standard English into their linguistic repertoire.

African Americans learn to negotiate two language systems in order that they may carry out their full range of communicative encounters within and outside of their community (Riegel & Freedle, 1976). Garner and Rubin (1986) note that bidialectism allows Black English speakers to retain their native dialect for use in social interaction among members of their own speech communities. Bidialectism also allows African Americans to establish credibility when interacting in more formal situations, most especially when “participating in the economic and political life in the mainstream Anglo culture” (p. 34). African Americans are thus able to shift their use of language systems to meet the linguistic requirements of various environments.

African Americans learn to contextualize and define parameters for both Black and Standard English within different settings. They select the language system which they judge to be appropriate to the conditions which surround them. They learn to use Standard English to communicate effectively in the job market, in school, in conversing with people who speak another language, and in social settings which may help them achieve upward mobility (Taylor, 1991). They learn to use Black English at home and in their community to provide group cohesion and solidarity (Dandy, 1991). DeBose (1992) states the subsequent mobility of African Americans usually entails becoming bidialectic rather than moving completely into Standard English use. Through socialization within various environments, African Americans are often able to acquire competency in both Black and Standard English almost effortlessly, without deliberate didactic efforts (Garner & Rubin, 1986).

### Effects of Bidialectism and Biculturalism

Taylor (1978) states that learning a second language involves far more than the acquisition of a new set of symbols of communication. A variety of social and psychological consequences are included as well. Taylor argues that "Where two or more ethnolinguistic groups exist in an unequal relationship, second language learning will have important implications for ethnic identity, particularly for the less powerful group" (p. 68). These implications, however, vary among scholars.

Malave and Duquette (1991) note that intercultural experiences through language allow for the exploration of another world view, but also provoke questions about one's own values and assumptions, which is often a "disquieting experience" (p. 115).

Smitherman (1977) describes this disquieting experience as the "push-pull syndrome" in Black America (p. 34). According to Smitherman, African Americans face a "push" toward assimilation and adoption of the culture and language of the dominant society, while at the same time experience a "pull" away from the society's oppressive ways.

Riegel and Freedle (1976) label such experiences as resulting in a "cognitive load" (p. 28). They describe the experience of negotiating two linguistic systems in the following way:

The cognitive load does not merely reflect the size and structure of the linguistic repertoire, but also the emotional stress produced by the social forces operating in exercise of speech choices. Subsequently, the concept of cognitive load implicates...speech repertoire, speech community and appropriateness of choice, social matches and mismatches within and across speech communities, and operations which seek to resolve these forces when they arise (p. 28).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) submit that inherent in the development of an African American's collective identity is the opposition to the social identity of White

Americans. This identity develops in great part due to the way they are treated in economic, political, social, and psychological domains, which exclude them from true assimilation. Even with the assimilation of language, the issue of race often makes the boundaries to such domains impermeable. The identity of African Americans is helped to evolve by the fact that they perceive the treatment of them by the dominant culture as collective and enduring oppression.

African Americans realize and believe that regardless of their individual ability, training, education, economic status or physical appearance, they cannot achieve true assimilation. The minority group thus develops an oppositional cultural frame of reference which includes devices for protecting their identity and for maintaining boundaries between them and White Americans (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). As noted by sociolinguists, members of minority and ethnic groups signal solidarity with their group by selective use of the group's language (Kim & Gudykunst, 1988). Black English is used frequently as a way of showing loyalty to the community, as well as a way to avoid the threat and fear of total assimilation. As Black English maintains itself as a way of retaining close affinities with the African American community, Standard English is sometimes frowned upon by African Americans as a way of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 182). Inter-ethnic communication, Fordham and Ogbu note, often raises questions of loyalty to one's own culture, as well as perceptions of "crossing over" (Fishman, 1989, p. 29).

Other scholars however, discuss the intercultural experiences of ethnic minorities and offer different views on the acquisition of a second language and culture. Lafomboise,

Hardin, and Gerton (1993) discuss intercultural interactions as a positive and adaptive experience:

Although it is clear that ethnic minorities in the United States and elsewhere experience high levels of economic and social discrimination as well as other disadvantages, it is inappropriate to assume that this sociological reality produces a predictable negative psychological outcome. Research suggests that individuals living in two cultures may find the experience more beneficial than living in a monocultural life-style. The key to psychological well-being may well be the ability to develop and maintain competence in both cultures (p. 402).

Rashid (1984) discusses the notion of "biculturalism" in African Americans. Defining biculturalism in African Americans as "the ability to function effectively and productively within the context of America's core institutions while simultaneously retaining what many would consider an African American identity" (Rashid 1981, p. 58), Rashid notes that biculturalism "creates a sense of efficacy within the institutional structure of society along with a sense of pride and identification with one's ethnic roots" (p. 14). It may be assumed that a part of biculturalism involves adapting to the linguistic environments of both cultures, and thus includes bidialectism. Lafomboise, Hardin, and Gerton (1993) further expound upon the belief of biculturalism [and thus bidialectism] as a part of psychological well-being in minority and ethnic cultures. They state:

...differences in world-view and value conflicts may be the primary source of stress for bicultural individuals. If the values and beliefs of the two cultures are in conflict, the individual may internalize that conflict in an attempt to find an integrated resolution, but the difficulty in finding this resolution may well be what motivates the individual to fuse the two cultures as a stress-reducing solution (p. 403).

The study by Garner and Rubin (1986) focuses on individual experiences of bidialectism as it pertains to African Americans. Their study, using a small sample of middle-class Black attorneys, explored the attitudinal posture which allows middle-class Black professionals to become bidialectic while retaining their cultural identity. Results

show that these bidialectic speakers were able to maintain their sense of cultural identity by disassociating Standard English from any ethnic identification and by assigning positive value to their use of Black English. These subjects thus had little conflict negotiating language systems.

### Study Rationale and Relevance to Social Work

Though a growing body of literature exists which focuses on the sociological and psychological impact of language acquisition on bilingual speakers, fewer empirical studies have focused on the exploration of individual psychological and sociological experiences of bidialectism in African Americans. Research on or relating to this issue is mostly theoretical, or addresses language acquisition and implications on a more macro level. African Americans seeking middle-class status are pulled between competing linguistic forces from both the majority and minority cultures (Baugh, 1983). These forces call on them to simultaneously adapt to the linguistic values of the dominant culture in order to gain admission into the economic and social mainstream, as well as to maintain linguistic values to maintain and affirm cultural loyalties. More empirical research is needed to examine the ways in which bidialectism is perceived and negotiated by other populations within the African American community, as well as the impact this has on their sense of cultural identity.

The purpose of this study was to explore experiences of bidialectism in college-educated African Americans. The major questions of this research focused on the following: 1) How college-educated African Americans perceive and negotiate differences between Black and Standard English? 2) Does negotiating two language

systems impact their sense of cultural identity? If so, in what way(s)? and, 3) Is there a conflict in negotiating two language systems? If so, what is the nature of the conflict?

The objective of this study was to provide insight into whether bidialectism in some African Americans leads to growth and psychological resolution of the linguistic demands of various environments, or results in a sense of ambiguity and confusion. This research is important to clinical social work as it will aid therapists in learning more about the importance in understanding how language reflects and reveals the ways in which clients experience themselves in relation to their environment. It may also provide insight as well into the ways in which clients may experience the treatment relationship.



## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of bidialectism in college-educated African Americans. In order to accomplish this objective, three major questions were explored which included the following: 1) How do college-educated African Americans perceive and negotiate the differences between Black and Standard English? 2) Does negotiating two language systems impact their sense of cultural identity? If so, in what ways? and, 3) Is there a conflict in negotiating two language systems? If so, what is the nature of the conflict? This qualitative and exploratory study attempted to examine African Americans' sociological and psychological experience of using both Black and Standard English.

#### Design Rationale

The linguistic behavior of African Americans has been increasingly studied throughout the last four decades. Most of this research however, tends to either be historical or theoretical in nature, or focuses more on the impact and implications of African Americans' language usage at the macro level. Most of the research conducted also tends to focus primarily on African Americans' use of only one language system. Absent from this body of knowledge seems to be research which provides a balanced empirical inquiry into African Americans' experience of using both Standard and Black English. In an attempt to gain a greater understanding of bidialectism on a more

personal level, an exploratory approach using semi-structured interviews was conducted. It was hoped that this study would provide insight into both the sociological and psychological experience of bidialectism for African Americans, and serve as a building block for further research in this area.

### Sample

The sample group selected for investigation were African American students who were currently enrolled in a graduate program in the Chicagoland area. Graduate students were deliberately chosen for this study. As was suggested by the research, bidialectism seems to be most prevalent among educated, middle-class African Americans. It was assumed by the researcher that the graduate student population would be a valuable source for finding subjects whose backgrounds coincided with this finding. It was also assumed that this population would be likely to engage in bidialectism on a daily basis, and thus have both cognitive and emotional access to a discussion about their experiences of using two language systems.

Eight subjects were selected to participate in this study. The subjects were comprised of four males and four females. All of the subjects were American born, self-identified as African American, and currently enrolled in a graduate program. All subjects were also self-identified as bidialectic speakers of both Black and Standard English.

Subjects ranged in age from 22-50 years, with an average age of 32. All subjects were from middle-class backgrounds and described their communities while growing up as being predominantly African American. All subjects also identified their primary caretakers while growing up as African American. Six subjects were from two-parent households. The remaining two subjects were raised by single mothers.

Subjects in this study represented a variety of disciplines which included both Masters and Doctoral programs. These disciplines included the following: Master of Social Work (3); Master of Business Administration (2); Doctorate in Political Science (1), Doctorate in Divinity (1); and, Master of Public Policy (1). All subjects had plans to further their careers in their respective fields.

### Interview Guide

Two pilot interviews were conducted for this study. The original interview guide consisted of only eight questions, and was structured so as to ask alternating questions about the subjects' use of both Black and Standard English. The researcher, however, found that subjects had difficulty providing substantive answers when asked to constantly go back and forth into a discussion about both language systems. The beginning of the interview guide was revised so as to ask several questions about one language system before inquiring about the other (Appendix A). This method proved to be more effective in the second pilot interview, in that subjects were able to provide more thorough answers to questions. After the subjects were originally asked several questions about one language system at a time, they were more able in the later part of the interview to answer questions which asked for contrasts and comparisons about both language systems. The predominantly open-ended questions were scripted to reflect the major research questions. The researcher also asked for elaboration and clarification from subjects at the times in which it seemed necessary for them to expound upon their thoughts.

### Data Collection

Subjects were obtained by snowball sample. Though it was originally thought that the researcher would begin by attempting to find subjects by soliciting local Black student organizations, timing on the part of the researcher resulted in the use of an alternative method. The researcher was able to contact local college professors who were able to identify a few potential subjects. These subjects were interviewed and proved to be especially helpful in suggesting additional subjects for the sample.

Potential subjects were contacted by phone, and were informed of the research topic and purpose. Though the researcher was able to use contacts to identify subjects who met the selection criteria, subjects were questioned directly about their appropriateness for the study. All potential subjects who were identified and contacted met the selection criteria. Subjects were also informed of the research format. All subjects agreed by phone to participate in tape recorded, face-to-face interviews.

Consent forms were distributed to each subject prior to the interview (Appendix B). These forms introduced the researcher and included the purpose of the study, selection criteria, estimated length of the interview, and potential risks and benefits for participation. Consent forms also discussed confidentiality and the agreement that subjects may withdraw at any time from the study and have all information destroyed. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with subjects. Interviews ranged from thirty-five minutes to one-and-a-half hours in length.

### Data Analysis

Tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were analyzed and coded to detect both common and divergent themes which emerged from

each interview question. Interview questions were grouped and reported under one of the three major research questions. Notable themes which emerged from the interviews but were not in direct response to interview questions were also included in data analysis.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This study was designed to explore experiences of bidialectism in college-educated African Americans. Specific questions attempted to answer the following: 1) How do college-educated African Americans perceive and negotiate the differences between Black and Standard English? 2) Does negotiating two language systems impact their sense of cultural identity? If so, in what ways? and, 3) Is there a conflict involved in negotiating two language systems? If so, what is the nature of the conflict? The major findings of this study reflect both common and varied experiences in regards to African-American bidialectism. All subjects in this study negotiated their use of both Black and Standard English according to the way in which they assess they will be perceived in different environments. All subjects noted that the utility of Black English, which was identified as being used in only informal settings, is to express a sense of connection with other African Americans and to communicate a broad range of feelings. The majority (seven) of the subjects viewed Black English as an integral part of their cultural identity. All subjects also noted that the utility of Standard English, which was identified as being used in formal situations, is to connect with others outside of the African American community and to participate in the economic and social realms within the larger culture. The majority of subjects (seven) viewed Standard English as a part of their identity as

educated persons. One subject, however, denied experiencing a relationship between either language system and his identity.

The impact of negotiating two language systems seemed to carry dual feelings among subjects. All subjects discussed the notion of competing linguistic forces which call for them to adapt to the linguistic demands of various environments in order to achieve some level of acceptance within them. Though all subjects discussed negative effects of social forces which operate and affect their language style, all subjects also felt positively about their ability to maneuver and achieve competence within these two linguistic environments.

Findings from each interview question were organized into categories which correspond to one of the major research questions. Each category reports common themes as well as contrasting responses. Several examples from the interviews are also included to illustrate these findings.

### Perceptions and Negotiations of Black and Standard English

#### Definition of Black English

One of the major research questions focused on the ways in which subjects both perceive and negotiate differences between Black and Standard English. Question one asked subjects to define Black English and to identify the primary users of the language. All eight subjects identified Black English as a language system used primarily by African Americans. All subjects also described a common structure and style of Black English.

All eight subjects reported similar responses in terms of the basic structure of the language. Subjects defined the basic structure and vocabulary of Black English as a derivative of Standard English. They tended to identify Black English as a “composite of Standard English,” or as a “dialect” or “adaptation” of “the dominant culture’s language.” However, subjects noted a distinction between the two language systems. Black English was distinguished from Standard English by all eight subjects as a language system influenced specifically by African American culture. This finding was conveyed most clearly by two subjects who defined Black English as “Standard English with African American cultural inflections,” and as “English filled with the nuances and retentions of Black culture.”

Commonalties were also noted in subjects’ descriptions of Black English in terms of style. Six subjects described the oral quality of Black English. These subjects described Black English as being a “less formal” language than Standard English, as well as a language which allows for more expression and verbal creativity. One subject described this greater emphasis on expression than structure in the following way:

I think with Black English you use more adjectives, you are more descriptive. Verb tenses aren’t as important as in Standard English... You talk with a flare more and more for effect and feeling, instead of using a correct verb or pronouncing something right. You can exaggerate more words.

The description of Black English as a language which allows for more emotional expression was perhaps most uniquely captured by one subject who defined Black English in terms of having a rhythmic quality as well as its historical ties to African American culture. Evident in his response is a strong link between Black English and cultural and emotional expression:



[Black English] is English that it not as clipped. It's the energy you put into the speed of the words, into your intonation to express things...You can get that rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat rhythm that you can't get from Standard English...It's a more relaxed use of the words...It's informed by the South and also by the urban experience of African Americans...It's an emotional thing.

### Definition of Standard English

Question four asked subjects to define Standard English and to identify the primary users of the language. While subjects consistently associated the use of Black English primarily with African Americans, responses somewhat varied when subjects identified the primary users of Standard English. The majority (five) of the subjects identified White Americans as the primary users of Standard English. Two of these subjects also, however, included in their descriptions "educated African Americans," and "other groups when interacting on a professional level." Two other subjects generally identified Standard English as being used by the "majority of the society." One subject, however, responded by disassociating Standard English with American society. She stated:

Standard English is probably what they speak in England...I think everything else is a hybrid of that-based on context, and synchronization- all those things have created all these different types of English, and I don't think any one of them is standard...No one really speaks Standard English in this country-no one. We are all influenced by other languages and forms...

Subjects also contrasted Standard English with Black English in terms of both structure and style. All eight subjects defined Standard English as a more formal language than Black English. Two subjects identified the origins of Standard English in American culture as based in "traditional English," and "the King's language." Two other subjects characterized the structure of Standard English in terms of its "correctness," noting Standard English as "what you were taught in school as correct

grammar,” as well as what is “appropriate when interacting in formal situations.” Two other subjects described Standard English by characterizing it as a language with “rules and regulations” which requires “subject-verb agreement.” These two subjects also distinguished Standard English as a written language. “Standard English,” noted one of the subjects, “is the way I have to write.”

Subjects’ perceptions of Standard English as a more structured language with “rules and regulations” seemed to be referring to its oral qualities. Unlike subjects’ perceptions of Black English as a language with cultural benchmarks and creative expression, Standard English was perceived as lacking style. Standard English, as described by one subject, “is a sort of flat, kinda dead, culturally indeterminate language.” Another subject noted, “It doesn’t have a rhythm. It’s rigid. It’s dry.” Subjects also tended to describe Standard English as being more constricted in terms of emotional expression.

One subject noted:

[Standard English] is plain English. It lacks a certain rhythm, it lacks a certain spice, it’s very clipped...There is almost a certain restraint that you have to use in your speaking, and that affects your emotional response at the same time...There is a restraint in how you can express yourself.

#### Early Experiences of Language Acquisition

Question seven focused on gaining insight into the early influences upon subjects’ acquisition of both Black and Standard English. A specific question was asked about the language system(s) used in the childhood home. All eight subjects reported patterning their beginning language usage after parental figures (including mother, father, and grandparents). Five subjects reported using both Standard English and Black English in the home. One subject described her use of both language systems as a result of

observing the way in which both language systems were used by her parents. She recollected:

I would switch back and forth-half and half. Because some situations just called for it. Some situations were more serious in nature, like when my parents wanted to get their point across in a serious way they used Standard English. Black English was more for if you were being playful or joking.

The remaining three subjects discussed their early experiences of being allowed to use only Standard English among family. One subject discussed his understanding of the reason Standard English was stressed in his household:

Primarily we used Standard English in the home because my parents were both educators. They probably saw the importance of using Standard English as being important to the environment they were trying to make us a part of.

Question eight inquired about the way in which subjects understood the differences between Black English and Standard English. Findings show that the subjects learned of differences between these two language systems through their experiences of using language both in and out of the home. As noted in the demographic information, all eight subjects grew up in primarily African American communities. All eight subjects reported, however, having early educational experiences with White Americans. Of note was that despite the subjects' use of Standard English in their childhood home, seven subjects described gaining an understanding of Standard English as a separate language system through contact with the dominant culture. Six of these subjects rooted this understanding of Standard English as a separate language system in their first educational experiences with White Americans. One subject who reported using both Black English and Standard English in her home recalled one such experience:

I started going to a White school. I would use the word 'aint.' I wasn't aware at the time that that was Black English, because my whole world was Black at the time. I didn't have much experience with the White culture in regards to speaking to them. When I went to school though, I noticed that people spoke differently. I knew then that there were certain words you shouldn't say, because they didn't sound right. I knew 'we is' was wrong, and 'we are' was more appropriate. And when I went to more White schools I became aware that I spoke differently, or that I understood some words differently from my White classmates.

Two other subjects who grew up speaking only Standard English in their households, noted their understanding of Standard English as a separate language system was made explicit to them before their educational experiences with White Americans. One such subject discussed his parental influence on his language usage in the following way:

My mother has a Masters degree. My father was a [professional] for 25 years, so they had a notion of what it is you're supposed to be doing when you get out into the world, and they knew there were habits which needed to be broken in the home. They told me that it's O.K. to use Black English in certain times and places, but only when you get older. That's what they said when we were children, that you can only use Standard English in the home.

Subjects' responses regarding a beginning awareness of differences between both language systems also included a discussion about the value of each language. All subjects identified their early use of Standard English as a highly valued identifying marker of educational attainment. One subject discussed this link between Standard English and evidence of education:

We were allowed Black English during casual times, but not when we had company- even if the company was a Colored person, because it showed that your family was educating you. For our family the golden ring was education. You showed them that you had assimilated into the White culture.

Conversely, in later questions all eight subjects also discussed their perceptions of the negative value placed on the use of Black English. One subject noted that her beginning

negative perceptions of Black English were fostered by her family and the older generations in the community:

Education was stressed. Even Black folk who could not speak correct English knew how to correct you. Primarily in the older generation Black English is something that is looked upon negatively, as something which signals you are uneducated.

Beginning themes of Standard English as a reflection of assimilation into the dominant culture was another theme which began to surface with three subjects. This theme became more evident with other subjects in later questions when the researcher investigated possible conflicts in negotiating two language systems. One subject whose parents were college-educated spoke of her beginning awareness of the use of Standard English outside the home. She discussed her realization of Black English and Standard English as separate language systems:

Well you always know there's a difference, cause everybody is always talking about what Black people do is not as good from the time you are a child on up. My grandmother would say, 'Try to be more White-like to people.' You hear that as a kid. So I knew from the very beginning, from just observing people.

#### Development of Language Acquisition and Language Shifting

Several questions were asked in order to gain insight into the way in which subjects both developed and utilized their beginning understanding of their language acquisition. Question six asked whether or not subjects' language use was determined by environmental factors. All eight subjects reported their perceptions of the existence of different linguistic environments. Subjects also reported having an awareness of using different language systems within various environments. Question six also asked about the settings in which subjects utilized each language system. Findings show that these answers seemed to overlap with questions which asked about reasons why subjects use

each language system. Findings therefore were organized so as to report subjects' responses regarding their use of each language system.

#### Use of Black English

Question six A asked about the settings in which subjects use Black English. For all eight subjects, setting seemed to be the overriding factor in determining language use. All eight subjects reported using Black English in settings which they determined to be "informal." Subjects described these settings as "places of comfort and familiarity," such as "among friends," "neighbors," "inner-city youth," or in "casual conversation with other African Americans." One subject highlighted this notion of setting being the prevailing factor in his determination of language usage in the following way:

If I go into a meeting with another Black person, usually I approach it the same way I would if I were meeting with a White person or anyone else from another race. I would use Standard English, because it's in a professional environment.

Question two A asked subjects about their reasons for using Black English.

Responses seemed to indicate subjects' perceptions of Black English as holding positive value specifically within the African American community. All eight subjects discussed their use of Black English as a means of establishing credibility among members in the African American community. One subject highlighted this theme:

...[Black English] the language of social orientation. Most of the people around me speak Black English...Sometimes when talking to other African Americans it can help me be more understood more clearly. It helps me relate with people in my community.

#### Use of Standard English

Question six B asked about the settings in which subjects use Standard English. In contrasts to subjects' responses regarding their use of Black English in informal

situations, all eight subjects discussed their use of Standard English in settings which they determined to be “formal.” Subjects described these settings as places such as “at work,” “in the classroom,” and in other “professional” situations. Responses seemed to be captured most succinctly by one subject, who termed Standard English as ‘the language for conducting business, where the culture is predominated by educated and professional people.’”

Question five asked subjects about their reasons for using Standard English. Like their perceptions of Black English as holding a positive value within the African American community, all eight subjects seemed to view Standard English as having positive value primarily within the larger environment. Subjects indicated their use of Standard English to be especially important when communicating and attempting to establish credibility with others outside the African American community. All eight subjects indicated their use of Standard English as being related to a desire to communicate within the larger environment. Subjects also described Standard English as an expectation placed upon them by the dominant culture. One subject talked specifically about his experience of using Standard English as a means of acceptance and credibility in his work environment:

[Standard English] is expected by my audience in certain circles. In business the predominant culture is the White culture. Most of the people I deal with are educated, most of them are White. They have an expectation of what I will sound like. So I use Standard English to show that I am educated.

## Language Acquisition and Cultural Identity

### Black English and Cultural Identity

Questions were asked to explore whether or not language plays a role in subjects' sense of cultural identity. Question two B asked if using Black English relates to subjects' sense of their cultural identity. All eight subjects in earlier questions established Black English as having a particular association with the African American community. Seven subjects responded by discussing Black English as a significant part of both their individual and collective identities as African Americans.

Subjects spoke in a variety of ways about the importance of Black English to their individual identities. One subject noted, "It stresses that I am African American." Another subject noted, "It is a way of maintaining my cultural heritage." Common in seven responses was also subjects' perceptions of their use of Black English as a unifying element within the African American community. One subject noted:

It makes me more universal within my community. I think it helps establish some kind of bond that supersedes educational attainment, because Black English is a common language among us that equalizes everyone, no matter where they fall on the socioeconomic bar.

These seven subjects also described Black English as a "coded place" for other African Americans to verbally communicate a sense of commonality and connectedness specifically with other African Americans. Subjects also seemed to view Black English as also a way of disconnecting from the larger society. One subject illustrated this common response in her discussion of Black English as a both a means of unification as well as a means of separation:



I think [Black English] is sort of a common link. It allows us to have something that others don't understand or may not be able to relate to, but we as a race can understand and relate to. And it allows us to have something separate from everyone else. I think it is important for African Americans as a race to feel to some degree that we are not totally assimilating into the majority. Black English serves as a way for us to distinguish ourselves and say that we have not totally assimilated into the majority culture, that we still have a separate cultural identity that allows us to say that we are not completely becoming like the majority.

One subject however, gave a different response regarding the association of Black English and cultural identity. This subject, who was raised as a Standard English user in his home of origin, talked about his early and difficult experiences as a Standard English user in his African American community. He revealed very intense feelings of anger as he discussed very strong feelings against viewing Black English in relation to cultural identity:

...I do not believe in the essential nature of being Black. I think Black English is used all too much as a signifier. I think African Americans fall into the same trap of essentialism. Like you listen to 'Def Comedy Jam,' or something like that, and you hear them talk about what Whites do and what Blacks do, and if you listen closely it's the same thing Whites say we do. And we claim them as our own and then we say if you don't do this, you're not Black. That has been my experience growing up, that the use of Black English and Standard English is a way of differentiating between them and us, and I find that absurd. How you talk had no bearing on who you are, what you do, and what you know.

### Standard English and Cultural Identity

Question five B asked subjects whether or not using Standard English relates to their sense of cultural identity. Subjects responses seemed to differ regarding the use of Standard English and self-concept. Seven subjects described Standard English as having an impact on their sense of cultural identity. One subject denied any relationship between these two factors. Five of these subjects described Standard English as relating to their sense of cultural identity in a positive way. Of note however, was the finding that

four of these subjects focused their commentary about the relationship between Standard English and cultural identity on discussions about educational attainment and ambitions towards upward mobility. One subject captured this common finding in the following response:

[Standard English] does affect who I am as an African American. As an African American who wants to be successful career-wise, it's important to be versatile. It increases our versatility when we can use Standard English, just as if a person is bilingual. Standard English makes you more versatile and brings up your asset to an organization.

Two subjects however, cited Standard English as having a negative impact on their sense of cultural identity. One subject angrily described the impact of Standard English on his sense of identity in the following way:

It (Standard English) definitely influences it (sense of cultural identity). It makes me feel as if I have to assimilate. If you do not learn to assimilate into the dominant culture there is very little room for movement. I have tried to fight that, but it's been very difficult, and I've learned that. My mother told me to watch the White culture, telling me I have to watch them in order to get growth. It makes me angry that I have to be like them to be O.K. Standard English compromises who I am as an African American because it does not allow me the privilege of sharing my culture and identity with the larger society.

### Effects of Language System Environments

#### Language Consciousness

Several questions were asked in order to gain a greater understanding of subjects' inner experience of language usage. Question ten asked subjects about their level of awareness regarding their use of both Black and Standard English. Four subjects noted an equal amount of awareness regarding their use of both Black and Standard English in a given situation. The remaining four subjects reported having a greater awareness of the

times in which Standard English is used. Question nine asked subjects whether or not they were more comfortable using one language system over the other. Six subjects reported feeling equally comfortable using both language systems. One subject noted:

I can easily switch back between both languages with relative ease. I don't have to struggle to use either dialect. It's more an issue of if I am being effective in communicating with someone. That's how I judge my own comfort level.

The remaining two subjects reported feeling more comfortable using Black English. One subject described his experience of switching language systems:

It's like coming home and taking off a suit and putting on sweats and old shoes. When I slip out of my suit I slip out of my Standard English, I slip back into my Black English and breathe. It's like I exhale.

### Perceptions of Linguistic Environments

Question three asked subjects how they would be perceived if they only used Standard English in order to communicate within the African American community. All eight subjects reported use of only Standard English as being perceived negatively by the community. Subjects described this as being viewed by other African Americans as having "an inability to relate," and an attempt to "assimilate" completely into the dominant culture, which would result in a lack of acceptance by the community. One subject responded:

They would look at me and feel as if I was trying to be better than them. I think there is always that notion that if you sound more White, then you're trying to be better than somebody else...

Three subjects viewed the use of only Standard English as also having a negative impact upon others' perceptions of their sense of cultural identity. One subject commented:

I would be perceived as someone who was almost denying their cultural identity. To another group, I would be perceived as someone who was simply not exposed to African American culture, and that can be seen as negative.

Question twelve asked subjects how they felt they would be perceived by people outside of the African American community if they only used Black English in order to communicate. All eight subjects perceived the use of only Black English outside the African American community as being negative. Perceptions included feelings that subjects would be "marginalized, patronized, and ignored" by the dominant culture. Associated perceptions included feelings that subjects would be perceived as "less intelligent" and "inarticulate." The most common perception of the use of Black English outside the African American community was a reflection of a poor education. One subject noted the following:

I think they (White Americans) regard it as evidence of substandard education and substandard intelligence. They would think I did not have the ability to assimilate and conform, or at least the good sense to act as if I had been given privilege.

#### Emotional Effects of Language Usage

Question eleven asked subjects about their experiences of using a language system which they felt was incompatible with the linguistic environments at the given time. All subjects recalled experiences in which linguistic "errors" were made in various environments. Subjects discussed errors made in both formal and informal environments. Feelings described ranged from "embarrassment" to "anger." One subject discussed her feelings about using Black English in a formal work experience as reflecting her inability to assimilate. She stated:

...it makes me feel as if I have made that person take a step back from whichever direction we were headed in. If it was a meeting in which I'm trying to get something from them, or they're trying to get something from me, using Black English in that setting makes me feel as if I have made a mistake, as if it was something I shouldn't have done-like it was a slip-up. And all it did was make the person more aware of our differences.

Another subject described a painful experience in using Standard English among other African Americans in his African American community:

When I got married my wife and I bought a condo...There were very few minorities in the building, so of course I used Standard English. However, when we moved back to an all-Black neighborhood, I found there were reactions to some of my conversations with neighbors. I would overhear comments like 'He a tom,' or 'an oreo.' I was misconstrued as being Black on the outside, but White on the inside. And that hurt me deeply. Intellectually, I could understand that. They looked at me outwardly, but I understood where they were coming from. I knew that just from hearing that Standard English they would think that I was looking down on them. I am an educated person. African Americans have to live dual roles.

### Usefulness of Bidialectism

Questions fourteen and fifteen asked whether or not each language system was an asset or an obstacle for subjects in various linguistic environments. All subjects viewed using Black English within the African American community as an asset. Seven subjects however, viewed using Black English outside the African American community as an obstacle to upward mobility. All subjects also viewed using Standard English both in and outside the African American community as a asset, as long as they also had the ability to also use Black English in the African American community.

### Bidialectism During the Interview

The subjects' language style during the interview was not discussed. All eight subjects, however, spontaneously spoke in both Black and Standard English. Each

subject began his or her interview in Standard English, but later began to style-shift as the interview progressed. This became most often when subjects gave anecdotal accounts of past experiences regarding their language usage.

The researcher style-shifted only after such shifting was initiated by the subject. The researcher's ability to style-shift seemed to have had an impact on the results of at least three of the interviews. Though not talked about while taping, these subjects commented after completion of their interviews that their comfort level with the researcher was determined in part by the researcher's ability to style-shift. Each of these subjects noted that the researcher's ability to style-shift allowed for more candid responses to the interview questions.

#### Competency in Standard English

Competency in Standard English was raised by two subjects as being extremely important. Competency was viewed as a means to counterbalance the dominant culture's negative stereotypes regarding Black English. Subjects spoke of an awareness that the use of Black English outside the African American community is often a method by which African Americans are stereotyped and marginalized by society. In contrast, Standard English was expressed as a means of breaking down cultural barriers associated with Black English usage. Present in these subjects' interviews was a sense of victory about their ability to use Standard English not merely as a way of conforming or assimilating, but as a way of feeling a sense of power in a society in which they feel they have little control. One subject recalled how her ability to use Standard English allowed her to a manipulate a situation:

I am really quite a sponge. I'm a mimic too. I used to buy vintage clothing...And would get on the phone and sound totally white. I used to just really work it. They would give me a price and I would just [bargain them down]. And so I would speak their language on the phone, and show up and get the best deal, and they would have a heart attack... Often I've noticed that when I am speaking perfectly clear, you know-the verbs are where they are supposed to be and everything is in place, using three dollar words and five dollar words, that is often the time that whites will say "Huh?" like they don't understand what I am saying, because they are predicting that I am going to sound another way... [they are] surprised that this is a Black person who sounds more like a White person than they do.

Another subject also seemed to highlight his mastery of Standard English. He revealed both a great sense of anger and triumph in using Standard English to counteract his perception of stereotypes held about him as an African American. Throughout the interview this subject focused a great deal on his resentment of being "typecast" by both the dominant and African American cultures in regards to his language usage. This quote highlights his particular feelings of anger towards the dominant culture for his feelings of being stereotyped, as well as a sense of victory in being able to counteract such stereotypes:

One of my things is that I like to cause cognitive dissonance with the dominant culture. I have taken their training and have speared them with it in so many ways. To be able to write the way that I do, to be able to speak the way that I do, to have the vocabulary that I have, and to sit with someone White and have them say, "Now wait, what was that word, and what does it mean?" makes me very satisfied. When I was younger they would ask me who taught me how to speak, because I spoke Standard English better than they did. One of the ways you get back at the world is through language. I think that every Black person in this country is a guerrilla. There is a notion of inferpolitics, of working class resistance, in that oppressed people resist in very different ways... I think Standard English in the White world- Standard English coupled with a conscious ideology- is a form of resistance.

### Feelings About Bidialectism

Seven of the eight subjects described mixed feelings about their bidialectism throughout their interviews. While responses varied, most subjects expressed a sense of both burden and accomplishment regarding their use of both Black and Standard English. One subject highlighted these feelings as he expressed feelings of accomplishment and resignation regarding his need to keep Black and Standard English separate. He noted:

You learn where and when certain things are appropriate. Because we are minorities in this country,...You have to be able to communicate in a way that will not allow anyone to ignore you. Not everyone has to know that I use Black English. Not everyone has to know I use Standard English. See, because our world is so compartmentalized, Blacks and Whites often only get a picture of you in certain spaces. You have a Black sphere where you use Black English and feel like part of the collective, but around Whites you have to use Standard English to feel a part of that collective. You just do what you have to do.

Another subject also conveyed a sense of accomplishment and resignation as he spoke about bidialectism as a way of survival and as the result of educational opportunities:

My whole life has been about swimming in very different ponds all the time and crossing different boundaries all the time on a day to day basis...I think for educated Blacks it's just something you just have to do-you have to travel between different worlds.

One subject also highlighted other feelings of burden and confusion about having to negotiate different language environments:

I find it a strain. It is confining. It hinders the thinking process...But you have to do both as an educated Black American.

In contrast to most of the subjects who expressed an overall feeling of needing to style-shift in various situations, one subject described her comfort in her ability to



integrate both language systems into her speech pattern among both African Americans and Whites. This feeling is highlighted in the following quote:

I think maturity is making all of my languages come together. It's really wanting to be myself all of the time. I am mixing both up all the time, so that I can maintain some integrity about myself...an integration of both languages is who I am....I try to use both languages even among Whites.

Though subjects seemed to be on a continuum in regards to their feelings about their own bidialectism, there existed at least one major commonality amongst them. All of these subjects- no matter how ambivalent or resolved they were about their linguistic experiences- seemed to have an ability to adapt the linguistic demands of their environments. All of these subjects also seemed to pride themselves in their ability to perceive and negotiate different linguistic environments.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study explored experiences of bidialectism in college-educated African Americans. The results of this study reflect both commonalities and differences in relation to subjects' experiences of using both Black and Standard English. These results provide evidence for and illustrate issues addressed in the existing literature. The results of this study also highlight language as an significant issue which may have important implications upon the therapeutic process.

The results of this study support literature which suggests that bidialectism for African Americans is the result of their needing to carry out communicative encounters both within and outside of community (Riegel & Freedle, 1976). Supported by this study is also research which suggests that language systems are perceived and negotiated based upon the way African Americans feel they will be received by various environments (Dandy, 1991). Educated African Americans striving towards upward mobility are conscious of the "competing linguistic forces" (Baugh, 1991) which call upon them to both affirm and maintain their cultural ties to the African American community, as well as provide access for themselves into the political, economic, and social aspects of mainstream culture. They respond to these forces by expanding their linguistic repertoire and adapting their language to meet the linguistic demands of both environments.

Results of this study both support and differ from the literature regarding the relationship between language and cultural identity. Seven subjects supported the existing research which defines Black English as a part of African American cultural identity (Bowles, 1988; Hilliard, 1983; Taylor, 1978). For these subjects, Black English allows for more creative expression, and plays a major role in maintaining their sense of connectedness with the African American community. Results, however, differed with one subject who denied any connections with language and cultural identity.

Supported by this study is also Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) contention that African Americans are aware that Black English does not carry acceptance outside their community. Though not a part of their sense of cultural identity, Standard English becomes the way in which subjects cross over into the dominant culture, and establish credibility and acceptance within the larger environment. Standard English, then, becomes incorporated into other aspects of their identity. This aspect is associated in great part to their exposure to higher education and interactions outside their community.

The various effects of bidialectism and biculturalism on subjects as addressed in the literature by Riegel and Freedle (1976), and Lafomboise, Hardin, and Gerton et. (1993) were also evidenced in this study. In defining conflict as oppositional or simultaneous functioning, all subjects indicated a sense of conflict- in varying degrees- in negotiating two language systems. Supported in this study was the notion of a "cognitive load" which is placed upon upwardly mobile African Americans in their operation of language systems by social forces. Cognitive load was expressed by all subjects in their

acknowledgments and discussions about their perceptions of different speech communities, as well as an awareness of exercising different language styles within them. All subjects, however, expressed an ability to maintain competence in both environments. The ability to achieve competence in both language systems and maneuver in both social environments seems to parallel their task having to carry a larger linguistic repertoire than others around them. This creates a dual sense of both conflict and resolution about negotiating both language systems.

#### Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

Experiences of bidialectism in African Americans has not received adequate attention by mental health professionals. Though not generalizable to the entire African American community, this study does suggest that consideration about language preference should be undertaken when engaging in the therapeutic process. As noted by Pinderhughes (1989) culture-free service delivery is nonexistent. Therapists need to remain aware of their "their own ethnic proclivities which may lead to a lack of awareness or misunderstanding of others' cultural identities" (Williams, 1994, p. 21). Having an awareness of one's own social conditioning, as well as that of the client, aids in the therapeutic process. Among these considerations must be the impact of language and culture on communication.

Knowing how social, political, and economic forces impact the client's perception of language is an important issue to consider. Many African Americans face the tasks of competing linguistic forces which call upon them to considers a variety of factors in

regards to their communication. The need to express ethnic identity and cultural solidarity with the African American community, the need to establish credibility for interactions within the larger society, and their acute awareness-whether conscious or unconscious that they will be judged according to the language system they use, are all factors which impact the language choices of many African Americans. African Americans' conscious or unconscious perceptions of the way in which they may be perceived by others may also affect language choice in the process of psychotherapy. This is an issue which must be considered in treatment of some of these clients, as it may impact the way in which the client both relates in and makes use of the treatment relationship.

Though this study was informative in providing some beginning information about African American bidialectism, further study should address this experience in greater depth. More focus and inquiry should be placed upon subjects' experience with identity development, and how this has either been the result of or reason for their linguistic repertoire. Further study in this area may also include college-educated African Americans' experiences in psychotherapy. Emphasis may be placed on how the language they used within the treatment relationship either helped or hindered the therapeutic process.

### Conclusion

As noted by Keller (1993), "Language is one of the ways we either know or refuse to know each other, reject, tolerate, or accept each other." Accepting and validating one's

choice in language can lead to the development of mature empathy between the client and therapist. Clients will usually not identify feelings around linguistic challenges or frustrations. Having an awareness of Black English as being a part of the cultural identity and way of expression for many African Americans, but also the knowledge that for many of these African Americans, language choice is also impacted by the way they feel they will be perceived by others. Their goals, and their identity as educated persons, may lead to a greater understanding of the issues in which the client is facing. Therapists should be willing to engage in open discussions about the ways in which language affects the way some African Americans perceive their sometimes seemingly conflicting and contradictory identities as defined in great part by linguistic environments. Clients are able to do their best work when they feel that the clinician is accepting of all aspects of themselves within the treatment relationship. Language is part of the way in which the client offers a part of the self into the treatment. Understanding and allowing this to be discussed in the treatment may enable the therapist and client to engage in a more meaningful and authentic interaction.

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## Appendix A

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This interview will last for about one hour. In the beginning of the interview, I will begin by briefly asking you basic questions about yourself and your background. The second part of the interview will focus on your experiences as both a Black and Standard English user. You may feel free to decline to answer a question at any time. You may also feel free to elaborate as much as you would like on any question.

#### Part I: Demographic questions:

1. Gender
2. What is your age?
3. What is your year in school?
4. How do you identify yourself racially or ethnically?
5. Who (was/were) your primary giver(s)?
6. How would you identify your primary caregiver(s) racially or ethnically?
7. How would you describe the community in which you were raised racially or ethnically?
8. Do you consider yourself a Black English speaker?
9. Do you consider yourself a standard English speaker?
10. How would you describe your socioeconomic status?
11. What are your future occupational goals?

Part II: The next part of this interview will focus on your experiences as both a Black and a Standard English speaker. It will ask specific questions about your awareness and feelings about using both languages, as well as how such may or may not relate to your sense of cultural identity.

1. How would you define Black English? Who do you think primarily uses Black English?

2. A. Why do you speak Black English?  
  
B. Do you think using Black English relates to your sense of identity as an African American? Why or why not?
3. How do you think you would be perceived by the African American community if you did not use Black English?
4. A. How would you define Standard English? Who do you think primarily speaks Standard English?
5. A. Why do you speak Standard English?  
  
B. Do you think that speaking Standard English relates to your sense of identity as an African American? Why or why not?
6. Do you speak differently in different situations, depending upon the environment?
  - A. In what settings do you speak Black English?
  - B. In what settings do you speak Standard English?
7. In your home as you were growing up, were you primarily a Black English speaker, a Standard English speaker, or both? Why?
8. When or how did you learn the differences between Black and Standard English?
9. Are you more comfortable using one language over the other? Why or why not?
10. A. Are you aware of the times in which you are using Black English in a given situation?  
  
B. Are you aware of the times in which you are using Standard English in a given situation?  
  
C. Are you more aware of the times in which you are using one language over the other? Explain.
11. Have you been in a situation and realized that you said something in the type of English which you felt was inappropriate for the setting? If so, what happened? What were your feelings about it?
12. How do you think you would be perceived by people outside of the African American community if you only used Black English in order to communicate?

**13. Do you think you can effectively communicate anything you want to say in both Black and Standard English?**

**A. If no, explain what you feel you cannot communicate in both languages.**

**B. If yes, explain why you choose one language over the other.**

**14. A. Have you felt that being a Black English speaker has been an asset or an obstacle for you within the African American community? Explain.**

**B. Have you felt that being a Black English speaker has been an asset or an obstacle for you outside the African American community? Explain.**

**15. A. Have you felt that being a Standard English speaker has been an asset or an obstacle for you within the African American community? Explain.**

**B. Have you felt that being a Standard English speaker has been an asset or obstacle for you outside of the African American community? Explain.**

**16. Is there anything you would like to add?**

**Thank you for participating in this study.**

Appendix B

Consent Form

Dear Student:

I am a Master of social work (M.S.W.) candidate at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study which is designed to explore your attitudes and opinions about African American language usage. This study will explore your experience of knowing and using both Black English and Standard English, and well as how this relates to your sense of cultural identity.

To participate in this study you must fit the following criteria: 1) American born; 2) self-identified as African American; 3) enrolled in a college or graduate program; and 4) a speaker of both Standard English and Black English.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a personal interview with the researcher. The interview will be structured with specific questions and will last for approximately one hour. The interview will be tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis purposes. All identifying information will be kept **CONFIDENTIAL**.

Confidentiality will be protected by coding the information and filing it under lock and key, and will be disclosed only with your permission. The information given by you will be used only in a way that cannot be identified with you. If you give permission by signing this document, the data will be used confidentially for scientific presentations and publications.

As this is an independent study, no college credit or financial compensation will be offered. Benefits to participation in this study are academic. Your participation will help further research on issues related to African Americans.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask them. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, as you are not required to respond to questions you do not wish to answer. You are also free to withdraw from this study at any time. If you decide to withdraw, all information will be destroyed.

**BY SIGNING THIS FORM YOU ARE AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY, HAVING READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
DATE

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

Ina N. Owens  
4715 S. Greenwood Ave  
Chicago, Il. 60615  
(312) 624-4653

Please contact me if you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent.

## Appendix C

### Human Subjects Review

**Research Title:** The Experience of Bidialectism Among College-Educated African Americans: An Exploratory Study

**Name:** Ina N. Owens

#### **Project Purpose and Design**

This exploratory study will be conducted in partial fulfillment of the M.S.W. degree at Smith College School for Social Work. The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of bidialectism among college-educated African Americans and its relationship to cultural identity. The study will focus on the following questions: 1) How do African American college students perceive and negotiate differences between Black and Standard English? 2) Is there a psychological conflict in using two language systems, and if so, what is the nature of the conflict? 3) How does this relate to one's sense of cultural identity? The results of this study should provide insight into both the intrapsychic and sociological experience of bidialectism among African Americans.

#### **Participants**

The participants for this study will be self-identified African Americans who were born in the United States, and are currently enrolled college students. Participants must also self-identify as bidialectic Americans who use both Black and Standard English. A small sample size of about 10 students will be recruited, and it is hoped that an equal number of men and women will be available for study. The age will range from 18-30 years. Participants will be recruited by snowball method from the Black student population at a local university in Chicago.

#### **Nature of the Participation of Research**

Researcher will distribute a letter which will introduce the researcher, briefly describe the nature of the study, and its relevancy to the field of social work. The letter will request participation in the study, and also include proper information for researcher to be contacted for any reason by subjects. Data for this study will be obtained by face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions. Interviews will be approximately one hour in length.

#### **Risks and Benefits to Participants**

There are no known risks to potential participants of this study. There will also be no incentives offered for participation. It is hoped that participants will see the benefit of their participation as furthering research on issues related to African Americans, and will consent to interview on this premise.

### **Procedures for Informed Consent**

Researcher will obtain written informed consent of each participant before conducting each interview. Consent will include permission to have interviews audiotaped. Tapes will be transcribed and used solely for analysis purposes. Participants will be told in advance of interview that they may refuse to answer any of the questions in the interview if they so choose, and that at any time they are allowed to stop and request the interview be withdrawn from study. They will also be assured this study is independent research, and in no way related to their studies at the university.

### **Confidentiality of Participants**

All written consent forms will be locked up and filed separately from research data. No identifying information about subjects (other than general or demographic) will be used in either oral or written form. Audiotapes will be transcribed, and transcriptions will be used confidentially for scientific presentations and publications.

Student's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Advisor's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_