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Rebecca M. C. Ramer  
How I Got Over: Young African  
American Men Tell the Story of  
How They Achieved Academic  
Success  
A Descriptive Study

## **ABSTRACT**

African American males fall behind their White counterparts in almost every measure of academic success. College completion rates for Black males are the lowest among all racial/ethnic groups in the United States. This exploratory study interviewed 13 African American men who were currently enrolled in college or who had graduated college. The goal of the study was to identify factors that these successful men identified as having contributed to their academic achievement. Thirteen men between the ages of 18 and 40 who identify as African American participated in semi-structured interviews that were recorded and then analyzed using a grounded theory framework. The study confirms the importance of family support as well as the need for school reform. A number of themes not previously identified in the literature emerged, including the role of peer support as a motivating force for academic achievement, and the benefits of externalizing racist stereotypes. Further explanation of the study's findings, areas for future research, and implications for policy and clinical social work practice are discussed.

**HOW I GOT OVER: YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN TELL THE  
STORY OF HOW THEY ACHIEVED ACADEMIC SUCCESS  
A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY**

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

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2016

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify which factors young, academically successful, African American men view as central to their ability to achieve academic success. This was accomplished by exploring the lived experiences of college-educated African American men between the ages of 18 and 40. For the purposes of this study the term *academic success* will be used to describe a person who is either currently enrolled in a four-year college or university, or who has already earned his bachelor's degree. The term *African American* will be applied to any person who identifies as African American or Black, including Afro-Latinos and those who are biracial or multiracial, when one of their races is Black.

The justification for this study was to contribute to the literature which addresses the significant achievement gap between African American males and their White and female counterparts. This was accomplished by piloting an interview protocol intended to facilitate a rich telling of their stories. An assessment of this study protocol can be used to inform further research in the area of academic achievement in African American males.

Currently, African American males are the least likely group of students to complete college. In fact, only 47% of African American males graduate from high school on time, compared to 78% of White males (Harper, 2012). This phenomenon is especially troubling when we consider the importance of a college education in today's society. College-graduates outperform their less-educated peers on virtually every economic measure ("The

Rising Cost,” 2014). College graduates make more money, have a lower unemployment rate, and hold more full time jobs than those who hold only a high school diploma. Today the difference in pay between college graduates and high school graduates is greater than it ever has been. This means that the cost of not attending college is greater than it used to be. In addition to economic advantages, college graduates are more politically engaged, experience lower rates of divorce, and have a longer life expectancy than those with less education.

Since the 1970’s many scholars have conducted studies and written theoretical papers on the causes of the African American male achievement gap. As suggested by Noguera (2003), these scholars can be roughly divided into two groups: structuralists and culturalists. Structuralists believe that the source of behavior can be found in the social environment. They reason that people fail when they are not given the resources they need to succeed. According to this paradigm, in order to close the achievement gap, we as a society must change the policies and practices that prevent African American boys and young men from realizing their full potentials. Culturalists, on the other hand, believe that the achievement gap is the result of beliefs, values, habits and other cultural patterns in which education is devalued and dismissed by African American males (Noguera, 2003; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Osbourne, 1999). In the past two decades scholars have sought to synthesize these two schools of thought, rather than identifying African American males as the helpless victims of an unjust system, *or* assigning them full responsibility for their own individual and collective hardship.

Since 2010 some scholars have argued that the abundance of studies on the achievement gap have not benefited African American males, but only served to highlight their deficits, thus perpetuating the negative stereotypes that harm them (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf,

Chen, & Rouse, 2012; Harper, 2012; Harper and Davis, 2012). These writers point out that in spite of the obstacles that African American males face as students there are those who manage to succeed academically. They call for more strengths-based studies that bring to light the educational achievements of African American males, and identify factors that contribute to success (Harper & Davis, 2012). This study is intended to do exactly that; to explore the life experiences of young, academically successful African American males, through their own eyes, in hopes of discovering new pathways to success for *all* African American males.

Some of the protective factors commonly found in the literature include being raised in a supportive family (Harper & Davis, 2012; Harper, 2012), belonging to a faith community (Barrett, 2010; Harper, 2012), and receiving support from teachers and other school officials (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Harper, 2012; Noguera, 2003). Of these factors, the one most commonly written about is school support. This may be due to the assumption that it is more feasible to change school policies and practices than it is to change conditions within the home or community. Other potentially protective factors remain understudied, including sports (DeMeulenaere, 2010), Afrocentrism (Majors & Billson, 1992; Noguera, 2003; Osbourne, 1999), and the influence of peer groups, which has been studied in African American girls (Horvat & Lewis, 2003), but not in boys.

The findings of this study may be used to help social work clinicians, as well as families, school officials and policy makers to develop a better understanding of the obstacles that African Americans males face as students. More importantly, it will contribute to the discussion around potential interventions on both the micro and macro levels to begin to narrow, and one day, close the achievement gap. This is a moral imperative for the field of



social work, which aims to promote social justice for all marginalized people (Code of Ethics, National Association of Social Workers, 2008).

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This literature review will focus narrowly on the nature of the achievement gap, as well as research addressing the causes of the achievement gap. This review will also examine research on protective factors that have been identified in the literature, as well as strategies that have been proposed for closing the achievement gap.

#### The Nature of the Achievement Gap

**Racial gap.** African American males fall behind their White counterparts in almost every measure of academic success. Black male college completion rates are the lowest among all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. (Harper, 2012). In elementary school Black males score significantly lower than White males on standardized reading and math tests (Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse & Chen, 2012). This discrepancy remains even when researchers account for socioeconomic status (Fantuzzo et al. 2012; Noguera, 2003). African American males are overrepresented in special education classes and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Grantham, 2010). They are also the most likely to be suspended or expelled from schools (Noguera, 2003). The above data point to race as a significant factor in mitigating the academic success of Black males.

**Gender gap.** African American males are also outperformed by their female counterparts. Since 2000, at least 66 percent of all Black college degree recipients in the U.S. have been women (McDaniel, DiPrete, Buchmann & Shwed, 2011). While the gender gap is

consistent across all racial/ethnic groups in the United States, it is significantly more pronounced among African Americans. This intra-racial gap has been documented throughout the 1900's (McDaniel et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010). Among Whites who hold bachelor's degrees, however, women have only been outperforming men since mid-1980 (McDaniel et al., 2011).

### **Causes of the African American Male Achievement Gap**

Osbourne (1999) summarizes three of the main arguments made by “culturalist” scholars about the roots of the achievement gap: Steele’s “stereotype threat model;” Fordham & Ogbu’s “cultural-ecological perspective,” and Majors and Billson’s “cool pose” theory. All three of these conceptualizations emphasize obstacles that prevent African American boys from “identifying with academics,” or from incorporating academics into their self-concept (p. 556). This concept of “identification with education” is rooted in the symbolic interactionist perspective of self-esteem, which asserts that people are likely to selectively value areas of life in which they as individuals or as members of a larger group excel. Conversely, this perspective states that people are likely to devalue areas of life in which they as individuals or as members of a larger group are thought to be deficient by others. Osbourne uses this paradigm to explain the achievement gap. He argues that, in an effort to protect their self-esteem, African American males devalue education because they fear, consciously or subconsciously, that they will not excel in this area. With little internal incentive to achieve academically, African American males put less effort into their schooling, and thus underperform academically.

**Stereotype threat model.** According to Steele (1997), “stereotype threat” creates anxiety in African American male students because the wrong answer becomes not only

personally damaging, but also confirms a stereotype. This anxiety has a negative effect on school performance, and thus contributes to the achievement gap. A more recent study by Wasserberg (2014) of 198 African American children at an urban elementary school supports this idea. The study found that presenting a reading test as diagnostic of abilities negatively affected the performance of children who were aware of racial stereotypes, but not of those unaware of such stereotypes.

**Cultural-ecological perspective.** Fordham & Ogbu (1986) draw a distinction between voluntary minorities—those who willingly immigrate to the United States, and involuntary minorities—Native Americans and African Americans who became minorities through conquest and enslavement. They argue that involuntary minorities develop a culture of opposition against the oppressor. Applied to the discussion of AA achievement gap, African American males do not identify with education for fear of the social cost of “selling out” or “acting White.”

**Cool pose theory.** As suggested by Majors and Billson (1992), cool pose theory asserts that African American males adopt a façade of calmness, emotionlessness, fearlessness and aloofness to counter the inner pain that they experience as members of a subjugated group. Passed down through generations, this façade, and the associated behaviors, have a negative effect on academic achievement. Teachers perceive African American male students as uninterested in learning and disregard their potential and their need for support. As a result, African American males are not encouraged to succeed. Lack of engagement and lack of school support become a vicious cycle, leading to lack of achievement.

**Racial discrimination.** Other scholars, called “structuralists” have pointed to racial discrimination in schools as the root cause of the achievement gap. African American males, they say, are more easily labeled as behavior problems, and are punished more severely than White males for similar offenses (Noguera, 2003). Black males are also over-referred to special education classes and under-referred to gifted programs (Grantham, 2010; Noguera, 2003). Low teacher expectations and culturally biased curricula have been cited as additional causes of low achievement in African American male students (Noguera, 2003). Noguera’s survey of 537 seniors at a magnet high school found that African American males were the most likely group of students to perceive their teachers as unsupportive of their academic achievement. In response to the statement “My teachers support me and care about my success in their class,” 80 percent of Black males disagreed or strongly disagreed, compared to 46 percent of White males (p. 448). Noguera asserts that this perceived lack of teacher support contributes to the academic underachievement.

**Gender differences.** Although this area deserves further study, research indicates that African American females consistently outperform African American males in almost every measure of academic success (McDaniel et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010; Harper, 2012). Beginning in the 1980s, White females began to outperform White males, whereas the gender gap in academic achievement for African Americans dates back to the early 1900’s and persists today (Perkins, 2011).

It has been reasoned that the gender achievement gap can be attributed to historical, economic and sociological factors (McDaniel et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010). Pre-Civil War African Americans encouraged women to become educated in order to “uplift the race.” Since slaves were denied access to literacy and education, free African Americans of the time

saw education as essential for their elevation as a people. Emancipation and Reconstruction gave new rights to African American males and thus created gender distinctions in the African American community, which had not previously existed. African American men developed more patriarchal views about the role of women in society, which were similar to those of White men concerning White women of the time. The only problem was that by the early 1900s, “the reality was that they (African American men) were not economically able to sustain a patriarchal existence” (Perkins, 2010, p. 3). With limited employment opportunities available to African American men, African American women had to help support their families financially. Educated African American men were routinely denied positions commensurate with their level of education. As a result, African American families disproportionately educated their daughters, who could easily find work as teachers in racially segregated schools. This tradition in African American culture, of prioritizing the education of daughters over the education of sons has continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and persists today (McDaniel, et al., 2011; Perkins, 2010). These historical factors and their present-day ramifications contribute to the gender gap in African American education.

### **Protective Factors**

**Family support.** Family support is one of the often-cited protective factors for African American male students. The idea of the liberating potential of education, that is, the belief in the power of education to transcend poverty and social disadvantage, is usually shaped by the family, and is passed down through generations. Three themes emerged from Harper and Davis’s (2012) exploratory study of Black men in academia: participants had an awareness of educational inequalities, a belief in education as the “great equalizer,” and “purposeful pursuits” of PhD in education (Harper & Davis, 2012, p.111). These findings are

contrary to assumptions discussed by Forman and Ogbu (1986); specifically, that those who find school inequitable will resist schooling. Participants in this study wanted to pursue careers in education specifically because of the lack of African American males in the field. Their experiences of inequitable schooling inspired them to achieve academic success in order to affect change. This is reminiscent of the social imperative to “uplift the race” discussed by Perkins (2010). Some participants cited a desire to be a positive role model for younger male family members as academic motivation.

**School support.** Many scholars have pointed to supportive school environments as another potential protective factor for at-risk African American male students (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Grantham, 2010; Harper, 2012; Osbourne, 1999; Noguera, 2003). Corprew & Cunningham (2011) explored the association between negative youth experiences and bravado attitudes in African American urban males. Bravado, or hyper-masculinity, involves an idealization of toughness, sexual promiscuity, and interpersonal violence, often displayed by physical posturing, speech and demeanor. This posturing, speech and demeanor are closely related to what Majors and Billson (1992) call “cool pose,” and may have a negative effect on school performance. Corprew and Cunningham (2011) also examine perceived school support as a potential protective factor for these youths. Surveying adolescent African American males, they found that perceived school support was correlated with less bravado, and was especially influential for males with high negative youth experiences. Since bravado attitudes have been linked to negative academic outcomes (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Majors & Billson, 1992; Steele, 1997), this study represents strong evidence for school support as a protective factor for at-risk African American males.

**Faith.** Studies have also shown that religiously involved African American male students fair better than those who do not belong to a faith community (Barrett, 2010; Harper, 2012). Barrett seeks to understand the unique contributions that African American churches make in promoting positive educational outcomes among their congregations' youth; more specifically, he wonders what the Black Church offers that schools fail to offer. This paper is based on a case study of a large urban church. This church helped youth achieve academically by promoting a critical consciousness, providing a context where students are valued and academic success is encouraged and expected, publicly recognizing academic success, addressing issues of character, and providing a relatively diverse social community.

Barrett (2010) highlights the fact that Black churches tend to be socioeconomically diverse, as middle-class African Americans often attend churches in poorer and more racially segregated neighborhoods. Interaction with middle-class African Americans provides poor and working-class African American youth an expansion in what Barrett calls the "social distribution of possibilities" (p. 258). One strength of the study is Barrett's in-depth look into the phenomenon of how the Black Church can serve as a protective factor for African American males. One major weakness of the study is that it lacks generalizability, since information is gathered from only one source.

While Barrett focused on the benefits of belonging to a faith community, work by Harper (2012) indicates that personal faith can play a positive role in academic success. Harper reports a high degree of religiosity among his 219 academically successful participants. Nearly all identified as Christian, and reported attending church. In addition,



participants prayed often and exhibited what Harper calls a “spiritual locus of control.” This term refers to the participants’ attributing their successes to the will of God.

**Peer Support.** Another possible protective factor for African American male students is peer support. Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that many academically successful African American female high school students received encouragement from their friends, regardless of friends’ academic standing. Currently, there appears to be a significant lack of research identifying peer support as contributing to academic success in African American males.

**Sports.** Another area that deserves more research is the impact of sports on the academic achievement of African American males. Literature from the sociology of sports suggests that student athletes generally earn better grades than their non-athlete peers however, there is a dearth of literature that specifically studies African American male student athletes. DeMeulenaere (2010) conducted a qualitative study of four African American male athletes at an urban high school. Interviews with these participants revealed a number of ways in which participation in sports contributed to academic achievement. These include providing structure, building confidence, enabling exposure to positive peer and adult role models, and generating college aspirations.

**Afrocentrism.** A final potential protective factor that is in need of more research is Afrocentrism, a term used by Osbourne (1999) and Noguera (2003), and discussed more at length by Majors and Billson (1992). Asante (1991) defines Afrocentrism as “a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person” (p.172). Afrocentrism is a response to the Eurocentric status quo that takes African and African-descended people out of the margins and places them at the center of history. Majors

& Billson (1992) explain that Afrocentrism is beneficial as it “encourages Black Americans to transcend their problems by reclaiming traditional African values (p. 111).” Such values include emphasis on community, dedication to family, and social responsibility (Noguera, 2003; Majors & Billson 1992).

### **Possible Solutions**

Many scholars point to school reform as the key to closing the African American male achievement gap (Barrett, 2010; Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Grantham, 2010; Noguera, 2003; Osbourne, 1999). Osbourne emphasizes the importance of preventing students from “disidentifying” with academics, and encouraging those who may have already “disidentified” to “reidentify.” Teachers can do this by implementing a multicultural curriculum throughout the year, rather than only during Black History Month, and by incorporating Afrocentric ideals into their teaching. Osbourne also advises policy-makers to work to change remediation practices. Separating children based on a lack of skills sends a negative message to those placed in lower level classes, and takes the challenge out of their schooling.

Noguera (2003) advises the creation of more supportive school environments. He believes that in order to improve educational outcomes for African American males, schools must become spaces where African American boys do not need to protect their egos, and thus do not need to develop oppositional attitudes that impede academic success. Similarly, Barrett, (2010) recommends that schools, like churches, can raise expectations, recognize small successes, and engage parents by reaching out more and being more flexible to parents’ schedules. School should also address issues of character, and work to make children feel a part of the school community.

Corprew & Cunningham (2011) suggest that teachers be trained to develop an understanding of the contextual social development of African American males and how bravado attitudes fit into this picture. They advise that trainings should consist of both the study of empirical knowledge, and interaction with African American males, so that teachers may evaluate personal biases and how they might be communicated to their students.

### **Conclusion**

There is much debate among scholars about what may contribute to academic underachievement in African American males. Many imagine the achievement gap to be rooted in structural problems, such as a lack of funding and racial discrimination in schools. Others believe that the achievement gap is the result of maladaptive cultural patterns rooted in a legacy of racial oppression. More recently scholars have begun to identify protective factors that may help more African American males to succeed academically. They cite family support, school support, and religious involvement as some of the most effective buffers between African American male students and the risk factors that make their academic success improbable, and suggest practical measures that may be employed to enable more African American males to excel in school. Most of these measures involve policy reform and changes in the ways that teachers interact with their students. Thus far, little attention has been paid to what actual African American males view as pathways to their own academic success. Academically successful African American men are the most qualified to identify what factors may be most effective at facilitating academic achievement in African American boys and young men. This study attempts to fill a very important gap in the literature, by allowing the voices of African American males to be heard.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Purpose and Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of young, academically successful African American men with the goal of developing an understanding of the factors that led to their success. As such, the research question was: What factors do young, academically successful, African American men view as key to their ability to achieve academic success?

#### **Research Design**

This qualitative, exploratory, study piloted an interview protocol aimed at identifying, through narrative stories, events or influences which academically successful African American men viewed as instrumental in their decision to enter and complete college. The research was inductive, which means that the theory was generated from the findings discovered through data analysis. This inductive method allowed participants as much freedom as possible to tell their unique stories, including experiences not mentioned in the existing literature. In this way, the interview format was intended to provide insight into methods that could be employed to study this important area in greater detail. The discussion chapter will reflect on themes uncovered by participants, as well as the interview protocol itself, and will point to recommendations for future research.

The study consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews with college-educated African American men between the ages of 18 and 40. Each participant was asked a series of open-

ended questions about his childhood and adolescent experiences of education. Interviews were audio recorded and reviewed. The collected narrative data was then analyzed for themes that emerged across interviews. General impressions and considerations for future research were drawn from these identified themes.

### **Sample**

The sample frame included young, college-educated African American men. In order to qualify for the study potential participants had to meet the following criteria: 1) identified as male 2) identified as African American or Black 3) attended grades K-12 in the United States 4) either completed a bachelor's degree or currently enrolled in a four-year college. Potential participants were excluded from the study if they failed to meet any of the aforementioned criteria or if they were personally known to the researcher.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, primarily through the researchers' social network of family, friends, classmates and associates. Each was asked to spread the word about the study by word-of-mouth, as well as by forwarding the recruitment email to potential participants. The study was also advertised on social media. The recruitment flyer was posted to the researcher's personal Facebook page, along with a message asking Facebook friends to share it on their respective pages. Additionally, recruitment flyers were posted and distributed at local businesses, community centers and libraries. Finally, the researcher handed out flyers during the Berkley Beantown Jazz Festival in Boston. The recruitment flyer contained a picture of a young Black man in graduation regalia, as well as a brief description of the study, participant inclusion criteria and the researcher's contact information. Recruitment materials can be found in Appendix B.

Twenty participants were recruited, thirteen of which both met the study's inclusion criteria, and followed through with returning the consent form and participating in the interview. All 13 participants agreed to have their interviews audio recorded. Once potential participants became aware of the study, they contacted the researcher via her personal email address. After receiving the initial email, each respondent was asked for his phone number, as well as a list of times he would be available to talk over the phone. Once the researcher received a response email, she called the respondent in order to screen him for eligibility, which was determined by his self-report. This phone call also gave the potential participant an opportunity to ask any questions he had about the study. At the end of the conversation, the researcher asked each respondent for his mailing address, and explained that she would be sending him two hard copies of the consent form, one of which he needed to sign and return to her in order to participate in the study. Once she received the consent form, she called him again to schedule a time, and in some cases, a place for the interview.

### **Ethics and Safeguards**

The main risk to study participants was the possibility of psychological distress. During the interview process participants were asked to recall critical childhood and adolescent experiences that took place at home, at school and within their communities. These types of questions could have brought up unpleasant memories from participants' past that may have been uncomfortable or painful for them to discuss. In an effort to protect participants from negative psychological reactions, the researcher was mindful of their emotional states throughout the interview process, and reminded them that they could take breaks, skip questions or discontinue the interview altogether, as needed or desired, without penalty.

The main benefit to participants was that the interview gave them an opportunity to add their personal experiences and insights to the discussion in academia about the best ways to help African American males achieve academic success. Additionally, this study may in some small way serve to make researchers, therapists, educators, families and policy-makers more aware of the obstacles faced by African American boys and young men, as well as the factors that help them to overcome those obstacles. This may eventually lead to new and better possibilities for African American male students.

Other general ethical considerations included the voluntary nature of the study, and informed consent procedures. All participants volunteered to take part in the study. The researcher did not recruit or interview any individuals who have been clients of hers or who have worked under her in any capacity. She also excluded family, friends, classmates, coworkers and any other person who was personally known to her. Participants were not members of vulnerable populations such as minors, inmates or inpatients. All participants signed informed consent forms approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee before being interviewed.

On two occasions the researcher made changes to the study protocol, which were approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee. The first change of protocol was approved on February 9, 2015, and involved two changes in the participant inclusion criteria: The required age of participants was changed from 18-35 to 18-40, and the requirement that participants be US-born was changed to include all men who attended K-12 in the US. These changes were made to increase the feasibility of recruitment. The second protocol change was approved on September 28, 2015 and involved rewording of interview questions to make them more open-ended. This was done to increase participants' ability to tell their own

stories, with minimal influence from the researcher. Lastly, the informed consent form was changed to indicate a later date by which participants would have to request to have their contributed data removed from the study. This change was necessary since the actual interviews were postponed past the date indicated in the original approved HSP application.

The final major ethical consideration was confidentiality. The researcher addressed this issue by taking steps to protect participants' identities, as well as demographic information that could be used to identify them. During the interview process, she met with some participants in a private study room in a library. The rest, she spoke to via video chat in a private room in her home. During data collection and analysis, pseudonyms were used for all participants. Additionally, when describing the sample, the researcher used participants' demographics in aggregate, rather than connecting them to particular participants who are quoted throughout the findings and discussion chapters.

The recordings of interviews have been stored in the researcher's computer, which is secured with a password. They will never be uploaded or shared with anyone. All interview notes remain stored only on her computer. The audio and word files have been saved using pseudonyms. Upon completing her research, the researcher transferred all files containing research information onto a USB drive, and erased them from her computer. In accordance with federal regulations, the USB drive has been stored in a locked file where it will remain for three years, at which point it will be destroyed.

### **Data Collection**

The study consisted of thirteen semi-structured, interviews. Each interview was 45 to 90 minutes in duration, depending upon how much time the participant needed to tell his



story. Three of the thirteen interviews were conducted in person. The other nine interviews took place via video chat.

The interview guide began with a demographic questionnaire, which asked each participant to identify, among other demographic categories, his age, hometown, socioeconomic status, and the national origins of his parents (Appendix D). The answers to these questions were intended to reveal possible trends within subgroups of the sample, such as 35 to 40 year-olds or children of single mothers. Although the sample was too small to make any definitive claims about sub-group trends, differences among subgroups may highlight a need for further research in a specific area. After the demographic questionnaire, questions moved toward themes of childhood and adolescent experiences of education at school, at home and in the community. Examples of questions and prompts include the following:

1. Describe your educational journey.
2. Did you face any obstacles as a student? If so, what were they?
3. Was there someone in your life who supported your academic pursuits? If so, who and how were they helpful?

Answers to these and other questions were audio recorded, and reviewed. The researcher also took notes during interviews in order to mark non-verbal communication, such as the facial expressions, gestures and postures of participants.

## **Data Analysis**

**Demographic Data.** Demographic data for participants were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The sample in this study fell into the following demographic categories: age, racial/ethnic identity, hometown, structure of family of origin, parental national origins,

socioeconomic status, mother's highest level of education, father's highest level of education, participant's highest level of education, type of undergraduate institution, college major, graduate program, and occupation.

**Age.** Participant ages ranged from 23 to 40, with the average age being 29, the median age being 28 and the most common ages being 26 and 32.

**Racial/Ethnic Identity.** All participants identified as Black/African American. Additionally, three men identified as West Indian/Caribbean, one as biracial/multiracial, and one as Latino. One participant acknowledged that he had a White parent, but stated that he identified as Black, not biracial.

**Hometown.** Participants were raised in diverse geographic locations throughout the US. Five came from New York City; one from Boston, Massachusetts; one from Baton Rouge, Louisiana; one from Rockville, Maryland; one from Cincinnati, Ohio; one from Seattle Washington, one from Portland, Oregon; one from Fort Worth, Texas; one who spent his childhood in Baltimore, Maryland and his adolescent years in Boca Raton, FL.

**Family Structure.** Of the thirteen participants, five were raised by a single mother, five were raised by two biological parents, and three were raised by their mother and stepfather. All three of those raised by their mother and stepfather also had contact with their biological fathers. Additionally, they all reported living with a single mother for a time, before their mothers remarried.

**Parental National Origins.** Eight participants reported US-born parents, while five reported foreign-born parents, who immigrated to the US as adults. Of those with immigrant parents, two had Haitian parents. The remaining three participants reported parents from Trinidad, Panama and Nigeria. All children of immigrant parents reported that their mother

and father were from the same country.

**Socioeconomic Status.** Nine of thirteen participants reported growing up in a low-income family. They described their families as poor, working class, blue collar or lower-middle class. The remaining four participants described their families as middle to upper-middle class.

**Parental Education.** When asked about their mothers' highest level of education, participants' answers varied significantly. Four mothers held graduate degrees; three held bachelor's degrees, one had attended some college; three held high school diplomas; two had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. When asked about their fathers' highest level of education, participants' answers were also wide-ranging. One father held two graduate degrees; two held bachelor's degrees; one held an associate's degree; and five held high school diplomas. Two participants reported not knowing their fathers' highest level of education.

**Participant Education.** Twelve of thirteen participants held at least a bachelor's degree, while one was currently enrolled in an undergraduate program. Three were currently enrolled in their first graduate program. Four held graduate degrees. Of these four, two were working on their second graduate degree.

### **Qualitative data**

Data were analyzed primarily through the use of grounded theory. In this method the goal of the researcher is "to build up inductively a systematic theory that is grounded in, or based on observation" (Engel & Schutt, 2013, p. 316).

Grounded theory can be broken up into three phases. In the first phase, the researcher attempts to make meaning of the participant's responses within the context of the research objective. This was accomplished by listening to each participant's recorded responses.

While listening, the researcher paraphrased responses, selected significant quotes and made preliminary interpretations that potentially related to larger themes that might be revealed in the study.

The second phase involves a careful comparison of all participants' responses in order to identify common and divergent themes. This researcher completed this task by listening to the recorded responses for a second time, this time focusing on themes that emerged across interviews. She then wrote down more quotes and observations that spoke to common themes. She also made a separate list, reserved for divergent themes that may have only applied to participant.

In the third phase, the researcher attempts to construct a cohesive narrative that includes all of the themes revealed through the first two phases. In doing this, the researcher also noted some of the solitary themes that emerged within the sample. After that she returned to the literature review and looked at the main themes that she discovered in this review. She then compared these literature review themes, and the conclusions that they suggested, to the themes revealed by the sample. Finally, she identified themes revealed in the sample that had not been discussed in the literature. These new themes suggest areas of study for future research.

### **Strengths and limitations of the methods**

The greatest strength of this study was that the semi-structured interview format gave participants the opportunity to tell their unique stories in rich detail, revealing themes not previously seen in the literature on the African American male achievement gap. One of the primary aims of the study was to develop and pilot a methodology for examining what factors academically successful African American men view as key to their ability to achieve

academic success. The methodology that was piloted in this study was based on a review of relevant literature, which pointed to certain themes such as the effect of school support and family support on this population.

The greatest limitation of this research method was that the findings lack generalizability due to the small sample size and type of recruitment. Participants chosen through snowball sampling are not likely to be representative of the study population. This is in large part due to the potential selection bias of each participant or informant. Although it is impossible to know the nature of the biases, it is important to acknowledge this phenomenon. The researcher also exhibited selection bias. For instance, her decision of where to advertise the study was informed in large part by her biases about the areas that a college educated, Black male would frequent. While engaging in on-street recruiting, she initiated conversations with Black men using a semi-conscious method that was particular to her biases concerning the appearance of a college educated Black man. It is also necessary to note that she engaged men who seemed friendly, which may have influenced the results of the study.

Another limitation of the research method was that most participants were introduced to the study through the researcher's network of family, friends, classmates and other associates, possibly creating concerns about anonymity. Participants, insofar as they were aware of this threat to anonymity, may have consciously or unconsciously altered aspects of their responses. The research design attempted to mitigate this form of bias by clarifying in the informed consent and survey instructions that the survey was anonymous. Specifically, the informed consent stated that neither the names nor other personally identifiable information would be documented during or after the research process.

Researcher bias was an additional limitation of the study. The researcher brought to each interview her own biases about African American males and education, based upon her personal experiences and observations. As a former student in academically reputable New York City public schools, the researcher understands that the contact she had with Black male students has been particular to this environment, and that she may have made inappropriate generalizations during interviews that did not acknowledge the diversity of her participants' lived experiences. Another fact driving some of these assumptions may have been her having grown up with three older, African American brothers, and the potential for their experiences and ideas to have colored her current conception of the African American male experience. In addition, her identity as a biracial woman, who identifies primarily as Black, may have led to assumptions about participants based on a perceived cultural sameness that may or may not have been warranted in any particular case. Throughout the research process, the researcher attempted to remain mindful of her assumptions about participants in order to minimize the influence of these assumptions on the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore what factors academically successful African American men view as having contributed to their academic achievements. This chapter contains findings based on 13 semi-structured interviews with college-educated African American men, ages 18 to 40. Interviews were conducted in person or via video chat and were audio recorded. Recordings were reviewed and analyzed using grounded theory. This chapter presents key findings in the following major categories: themes identified in the literature review and new themes discovered through the interview process.

#### Protective Factors Discussed in the Literature

**Family support.** Under the broad category of support, several themes emerged. Mothers were named as the most important source of both academic and emotional support by most participants (n=9). Fathers, aunts and uncles, older siblings, and grandparents were also named as sources of support. Parents provided encouragement and praise as well as rewards and punishments based on school performance. Parents also provided financial support, paying for private school tuition, books and supplies. Participants from lower income families were keenly aware of the sacrifices their parents made to put them through school. Older siblings provided encouragement and help with homework. Two participants also mentioned having received support from the larger community. One participant spoke of “community fathers and mothers” who urged him to stay in school, calling this the “typical

urban story.” Another participant reported similar experiences in the following quote:

“Everyone in my neighborhood thought of me as the one who would probably make it out.

They knew I was in school, so they were all morally supportive of me.”

Most participants (n=9) reported that one or both of their parents stressed the importance of education. Some families held students to higher standards than others. Some participants (n=3) were expected to earn a high school diploma and then either go to college or find full time employment, while others (n=8) were expected to attend college. Two participants reported that they went to college specifically at the insistence of their mothers. When the interviewer asked one participant, “When did you know you were going to college?” the participant responded, “when I told my mother I wasn’t going, and she told me I *was* going. That’s when I knew I was going to college. And to be honest I’m happy that she was the catalyst for that.” Parents who encouraged their children to go to college often spoke of education as the key to success. Some pointed out to their children that generations before them had not had access to education. One participant recalled his mother telling him about the importance of education: “Education is everything. As an African American, you are defined by education. It’s the only way to move up in the world.”

**School Support.** Participants reported a wide range of experiences. Seven out of thirteen participants found most of their teachers to be supportive. Others experienced their teachers as jaded—lacking in passion for education and genuine concern for students. Two participants reported that their academic performance suffered when they had teachers that they perceived as unsupportive. One of the two recounted a story of having his teacher assume he was in the wrong class on his first day of AP Calculus. As a result of this incident he reported feeling disengaged in this teacher’s class. His grades suffered as a result of this



disengagement. Some participants (n=6) felt that they were treated differently due to their race. Others felt that their race did not affect their interactions with teachers and other school officials. Most (n=8) could name specific incidents of racism within the school context, sometimes involving teachers and other school officials. Two participants mentioned a highly supportive and influential guidance counselor who motivated them to work hard and succeed. One participant told the story of a critical incident with a teacher, which caused him to take his education more seriously.

One teacher in JHS did give me tough love though. He grew up in a “White ghetto.” He had to push himself to become a teacher. A lot of people he knew were in jail, dead, addicts, etc. Talking to him opened my eyes to the fact that there are White people who face the same kinds of obstacles that I have. Anyway, it got physical between us one day. He sent me out in the hallway and was lecturing me. He put his finger in my face—intimidation—like a cop. I pushed his finger out of my face, and we started pushing back and forth. Then he started to calm down, so I calmed down. He asked me to talk to him in another room. He said, “You’re just like me when I was your age. You’re at a critical point in your life. You have to make a choice. It’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Once you go down the wrong path it’s hard to come back. Take advantage of the opportunities you have—of how hard your parents are working for you.”

Although varied, the data from participants reflects a general sentiment that school support helped them to achieve academically. Still, some participants (n=3) mentioned that they were self-motivated and did not need support from teachers in order to succeed. In fact, these students were motivated by a feeling of having something to prove to those who doubted their abilities.

**Faith.** All 13 participants came from a Christian tradition. Eleven out of thirteen participants attended church with some regularity at some point during their childhood and/or adolescent years. Nearly all of them (n=10) said that they were not particularly religious, and experienced church primarily as a family tradition, or sometimes, a family obligation. One participant states, “I was Christian in that my parents were Christian. I was actively involved because I had to be. When you’re a kid you do what your parents do. You don’t have a say in your life.” Most participants (n=10) initially reported no connection between their church life and school life, and felt that their religious beliefs and practices did not contribute to their academic success. Some of them (n=3), upon further reflection, came to say that there *was* an indirect connection. One participant said the following:

My mother and grandfather are Unitarian. I don’t know if it affected me. I don’t think so—maybe tangentially. It wasn’t about my faith, though. What it did was it gave me access to a larger pool of adults from a wide range of classes. It allowed me to play certain roles and be perceived a certain way. I facilitated some sessions. I became a leader. It wasn’t much about prayer or God getting me through.

Later in the interview the same participant reflected a different sentiment:

I’d like to alter my previous answer. Faith *did* play a role. I was being a little flippant before. I *did* have faith as a kid. I felt a spiritual connection. I gained support from that. It helped me at times...it gave me this conviction that I was supposed to do certain things in the world—especially when I was little—regardless of circumstances.

One Nigerian-American student who lived and attended public school in a White suburban neighborhood, described finding comfort in attending an all-Black African Baptist Church every Sunday:

Church was an outlet. They looked like me and were from where I'm from. We could talk about race-related things. They understood how something made you feel as a Black person. It was easy to understand each other because it was a homogenous community. It was easy to connect. I never really got that outside of church.

This sense of belonging and connection over race-related matters that he found at church helped him to cope with the alienation that he sometimes felt as a Black student at a White school.

One participant identified as religious, and found his faith to be central to his success in academia. In fact, he attributed all of his successes to the will of God.

I believe that all this story I told you about—the reason it happened the way it did—the reason I am where I am now—the reason I can talk about it the way I can now—is because of God. Meaning, even though I went through all those things academically—cheating the way I did—all those friends selling and all that and ending up in jail—all that—because I could have gone down the same road as them because I hung with them. But I believe my faith—believing in God—He saw something in me that He made sure that even though I was hanging with these guys—He made sure that I was the one who was covered. I'm not saying He doesn't love all of his children, but I really believe in my heart that He made sure that even though I was exposed to all of these things, that I wasn't in it—like it didn't happen to me. So, that's why I really believe that I was able to get out because of Him—something that He saw in me. Now I'm not sure what He saw, but He made sure that if there was one particular kid, *he* gon' be that one that's gon' make it out. I really believe that to this day because there's no way—the group I hung around with—they went to jail, got

killed, you know? Didn't finish school, you know? Some of them work. Some of them not working.

Although most participants did not cite faith as a strong factor in their academic success, some benefited from the social aspects of organized religion, or from a personal relationship with God.

**Peer attitudes about education.** Participants of higher socioeconomic status, or those who attended private or public schools in predominantly White districts, reported that most of their friends, who were usually White, cared about education and assumed that they would all go to college. In contrast, some students (n=5) who attended public schools in low-income, Black neighborhoods reported that their peers were not interested in education and did not have plans to attend college. These participants reported that their peers generally were more focused on finding employment after high school. Both participants from the South mentioned that in their region, finishing high school and finding secure, skilled labor employment was considered success.

Some participants did report having Black peers who positively influenced their decision to go to college. One participant described the importance of having a peer mentor who helped him throughout the process of transitioning to college:

My family didn't know how to help me with that (applying to college). My best friend's older brother was a mentor to me. He went to Howard. He would say, "This is what you need to do." He encouraged me to find internships and gave me money for books and stuff when I first started out in college.

Two participants reported being part of an all Black, all male circle of friends who supported each other academically. One explained that he and his friends saw education as "the way to

the promised land.” These young men felt morally compelled to achieve academically, as they were aware that their parents and grandparents had not had the same educational opportunities.

Most participants spoke of having multiple friend groups, including friends who valued education and friends who did not. It was important for them to find like-minded students to help keep them motivated, but they were also able to connect with those who were not focused on education:

Kids I grew up with always thought I was smart *and* a class clown. My friends never really talked about school. We just hung out there and then hung out on the block. As I got older I was very selective about who I let on my court. We never talked too much about school. I never pried about how well they did in school. I just got to know them as people. It didn't matter to me what friends thought about me as a student.

One participant reported social pressure to underperform academically in order to avoid being teased by his peers who called him “White” or “nerd.”

In eighth grade...I got made fun of me for being smart and always knowing the answer. It felt more important to be cool than to be smart, so I participated less in class. I took this attitude with me to high school...Eventually I found the popular *and* smart kids.

Twelve out of thirteen participants reported that they did not feel pressure to underperform academically. Their peers had either neutral or positive responses to their academic ambitions.

I never tried not to do well on purpose to avoid being called a nerd. That wasn't the way it was. A lot of people had their foot in both worlds. They did well in school and they were considered cool. I didn't feel any pressure to underperform to maintain group status.

Three participants reported that even friends and acquaintances that chose the "wrong path" encouraged them and were proud of their academic successes.

When I graduated from middle school I had friends who went in another direction. Some of them ended up in gangs, drug dealing, became pimps. Even they, when I bump into them and I tell them what I'm doing, they say, "Good for you man!" No one has ever said to me, "What? You're going to college? You punk!" That's never happened, never. With another Black friend who didn't get to the point that I have, the most they'll ever say is "Well, that wasn't the path for me." Even "bad people"—people who went to jail—will say, "Good for you, man."

One participant who grew up with a low socioeconomic status and attended neighborhood public schools said that he felt social pressure to attend college from his Black, male peers, most of whom attended college. "Most of friends were older. They all went to college while I was still in high school...I couldn't be the loser who didn't go to school!"

**Sports.** Six out of thirteen participants had been student athletes at some point during middle and/or high school. Of these six participants, three spoke on the relationship between their participation in sports and their academics. One reported that being on a team was time consuming, and distracted him from his schoolwork. The other two explained how the skills they learned as athletes benefitted them academically. "Sports added to my general motivation and competitiveness in life," said one of these two participants. "I know how to

work as a team. I'm like the gel." The other participant credited his desire to play basketball in college with motivating him to take academics seriously.

What I mean is as hard as I worked at basketball—even though I wasn't the brightest kid as far as, you know, like studying. . . like getting a 3.5 GPA. . . I wasn't like that at all, but what I *did* have was a good work ethic—so I used the basketball stuff that I learned—working hard, you know, perseverance— If I had to get up early to study or to write a paper or something like that, I'd do that. What I was able to do was take all of the stuff I learned from basketball and transfer it over academically.

**Afrocentrism.** Participants were asked the following question: Do you consider yourself to be Afrocentric? Ten out of thirteen participants said that they did not identify as Afrocentric. One of the ten had never heard of the term, and did not understand its meaning. Three of the ten expressed regret, saying that they would like to be more Afrocentric than they were. Of the three participants who did not explicitly reject an Afrocentric identity, one participant answered “yes and no,” explaining that his Afrocentricism was situational and dependent upon the social environment in which he found himself. Another participant, whose parents are Panamanian immigrants, explained that, although he did consider himself to be somewhat Afrocentric, he identified more with Latin culture than with African American or African culture. Finally, one participant answered, “Absolutely!” and seemed to light up, recalling childhood memories of celebrating Kwanzaa with his family and attending performances at the Black National Theatre in Harlem.

As noted above, some participants who rejected an Afrocentric identity had complex relationships with the concept. One participant spoke about his deviating from his family's relationship with Afrocentrism:

My family is Afrocentric. Both of my parents went to HBCUs. They tried to make me ethnocentric —wanted me to be a Black all star—a Black billionaire. I think it's more important to be a conscious human being and embrace all the different aspects of life. That's what I like to do.

Another participant remarked on the complexity of defining and exercising Afrocentric ideals:

Probably would say I'm not. At times I'd like to be there, but I think it takes a lot of unlearning of certain things, and also some active work. Not exactly sure what that means. If I'm Afrocentric, do I dress a certain way? Do I support certain things? Do I have a specific ideology? Would there be any conflict between being Afrocentric and being gay?"

**Other Factors.** When asked about other factors that helped them to achieve academic success, participants' responses were particularly varied and pointed to both internal and environmental resources. One participant said, "I was a smart kid. Both my parents are really smart. My sisters are smart. We have good genes I think." Along these lines, another participant remarked, "I'm superhumanly motivated. I don't have the normal person's motivation and drive." Lastly, one participant said, "educational TV! Bill Nye, The Magic School Bus, the History Channel turned me on to the idea of learning all the time—science and the history of science—that's my jam."

## **New Findings**



**Externalizing racism.** Twelve out of thirteen participants addressed the importance of externalizing racist messages that they received from personal and societal sources. This theme generally emerged as participants answered the following question: How central is your racial identity to how you see yourself as a student? In answering this question, participants frequently (n=10) described having a dual relationship with their racial identity. One aspect of this dual relationship involved a personal identification with one's race, while the other aspect reflected an awareness of society's perception of their race. One participant stated, "it's not central at all to how I see myself; it's central to how others perceive me." Some participants noted their frustration with this dual relationship. "I know it's essential," said one participant, "but I try not to make it a part of it...It shouldn't be so interesting that I am an educated Black man with a good job. It should be normal." Another participant spoke on the drive that his frustration provided, saying, "It's definitely a motivator. It's primarily about education, but it's also about proving people wrong about who I am and who I want to be."

Three participants explained that the importance of their racial identity was not fixed, but was dynamic and situational. Their racial identity was stronger in environments in which Black men were scarce. The following quote illustrates this phenomenon. "Since grad school I've become more aware of my identity because my program is totally White." Another participant described a similar experience within a professional context. "It is central, especially in corporate America. I'm often one of few, if not the only Black man in the office." Finally, one participant made reference to the hardship associated with his racial identity. "It was stronger when I was a student. I stood out as Black in the schools I attended. I sometimes wished I could be rid of the burden." Two participants went further by

problematizing the very idea of race as a central component of identity. One stated, “I don’t like to think in terms of Black and White. I think it puts a filter on life that doesn’t need to be there.” Another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

Race has always been an interesting concept for me because I’ve always believed that race was just an idea. It’s not actually who we are. It’s not actually who I am. It’s just a mechanism of categorization that people pay for.

Finally, one participant explicitly cautioned African American males not to internalize racist messages. “My advice for the kids? Not to internalize things. The world wants you to interpret your failures as personal failures, when really, you’ve been failed by society.”

**Strength from struggle.** Another major theme that emerged across interviews was participants’ ability to reframe difficult experiences, as motivating or character building. “If anything,” said one participant, “my parents’ addiction helped. It motivated me to do well at school. School became an outlet.” He went on to say that “being gay and Black was harder to navigate. School and academics gave me a feeling of I matter. I’m valuable.”

Another participant also motivated by his family struggles:

My brother had a lot of trouble in school. I needed to be the kid that made my mom proud. My brother had problems that required meds and counseling. Africans are not attuned to mental health. My mom needed to know that she did well as a parent, but these things are not all under our control.

One participant used his experiences with racism as a foundation for his work ethic:

I never fully adjusted to Catholic school. There was a lot of racial tension there. I was kind of a class clown, and one time I got in trouble and got sent to the principal’s

office. The principal said, “I know your kind. You should be out of here by next year.” That drove me harder to try to finish, while still maintaining the balance of being myself.

Finally, one participant discussed how his racialized experiences facilitated greater compassion for others, saying, “Being Black, I can relate more to people who have struggled or people who are different. It has helped me keep an open mind. It’s helped me to be accepting.”

**Positive experiences with White people.** Multiple participants (n=5) detailed a meaningful experience with a White person that they reported as having helped them to develop more trust in or understanding of White people. These experiences helped them to navigate their way through a White world. Participants who found themselves in predominantly White spaces for the first time in boarding school or college noted that there was an important adjustment period. They reported that part of their success involved connecting with certain White people, and feeling hopeful that certain White people could care for them and understand that racism was a real force that affected their daily lives.

Contrasting his experiences with those of his mother, one participant said:

My mom was all about Black Power. I grew up playing hockey and traveling around the world and making friends with all kinds of people of different ethnicities, so I knew that not all White people are the same. She didn’t have a chance to explore the way I did. When I was able to start making meaning the way I wanted to, life started making sense.

Another student spoke about a positive experience with a White adult in his life:

The head basketball coach's wife was Canadian. She made the best banana bread! She ran the school store. I used to go in there and we would have long conversations about race and identity. I really appreciated the time she chose to spend with me talking about this. It showed me that there are people of other races who really care. And it's important because it's so easy to think, "you're all the same." It took courage on the part of both parties to talk about these things.

Another participant recalled his surprise at the solidarity displayed by a White classmate at his predominantly White boarding school:

One time, after there was another racial incident at my school this White kid stood up at assembly and said, "I will not eat until we come up with a community manifesto that addresses ignorance and racism in our community! I'll sit here in the school building until we come up with something." My mind was blown. Since when does some White kid hold a sit-in to protest racial injustices affecting Black folks in his community? I keep in touch with him to this day. It's about humanity moving forward together. It's not about Black and White.

Finally, one participant contrasted his experiences at a Midwestern college with the experiences he had growing up in the South:

It was totally different. It was a culture shock for me. I was nervous. I was scared, ready to go home, homesick, frightened all because I wasn't used to being around them (White people), so I didn't know how to act. The first six months were really rough because I'm in class, I look around, and I'm the only Black person in the room. Never been here before. Cause in the South we racist. We don't associate with them (White people) because they racist, you know? They don't like us, so we don't

interact with them. That has a lot to do with why I was the way I was. But after about six months I was like, “You know, White people, they okay. They not all that bad.” I was invited to people’s homes for Thanksgiving because I couldn’t afford to go home. That really made me feel welcome.

**Playing the game.** Many participants (n=10) reported that in order to survive and thrive in a White world, they needed to abide by certain social rules in academia or in the workplace. Among other things, such rules involved style of dress, speech, and conduct. However, these participants all acknowledged that the social rules were unfair, and that they did not wish to incorporate these rules into their character or value system. Here one participant discusses the importance of physical presentation in evading negative stereotypes of Black men:

I don’t even dress down on dress down Friday. If I wasn’t Black I would dress down, but I know the perception out there. My friends will make fun of the way I speak at work. We laugh about it, but as soon as you walk through the double doors you have to act a certain way, otherwise all of the stereotypes will persist. That perception is what gets people shot and killed. Those police officers are afraid. They have this image in their mind about people. There is absolutely no difference between them and the people I work with. The only difference is they have guns and the authority to use them.

Another participant echoed this belief in the importance of physical presentation:

If you don’t show up looking prepared, like you can handle things, you’re cast to the wayside. It’s important to dress for the job that you want, not the job that you have. When I’m not put together, I experience more microaggressions than at any other

time. Presentation can change what people expect from you. It's not fair, but that's how it is.

One participant articulated the necessity of code switching when in situations that might evoke racial stereotypes:

I try not to be an angry Black man. It's hard not to be an angry Black man, but I try really hard not to be. When I *am* angry, I try to make sure that I'm using the big words along with my loud voice.

One participant summarized the theme of "playing the game" quite bluntly. "To be successful in this world you need to learn to play their game, but rise above it." These findings, along with those under the previous theme headings will be interpreted in the following chapter.

**Other Impressions.** In addition to the themes explored above, several notable themes emerged from one or more interview participants. When asked about role models, three participants mentioned the importance of what one of them termed "reverse role models," that is, members of their community whose life choices informed participants' ideas of what not to do. Examples included absentee fathers, neighborhood drug dealers, and gang members. Finally, two participants in the study noted a shift in their academic priorities late in their schooling. These "late bloomers" reported not putting effort into their academic work until a guidance counselor encouraged and challenged them. For one participant, this occurred half way through high school, and for the other, halfway through college.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion and Conclusions

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore what factors academically successful African American men view as contributing to their academic success. The study consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews with college-educated African American men between the ages of 18 and 40. This chapter will discuss the findings presented in the previous chapter as they relate to the literature on the topic of the academic achievement gap. This chapter will also present the strengths and limitations of the study protocol, as well as recommendations for future research, and implications for social work practice.

#### Key Findings from Literature

**Family support.** Study participants identified mothers and other close family members as the most important source of emotional and academic support. This is in line with the literature on the achievement gap, which names family support as a protective factor for African American male students. This study also confirmed the idea of the “liberating potential of education” (Harper & Davis, 2012) as an ideal passed down through generations of African American families. All 13 participants made reference to this idea as a motivating factor that helped them to achieve academic success. Most of the participants explained that one or both of their parents endorsed this educational ideal.

**School support.** More than half of study participants reported racist incidents at school, involving other students and/or school officials. This is consistent with the literature

on the achievement gap that states that African American males often experience racial discrimination in school settings (Corprew & Cunningham, 2011; Noguera, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992). Noguera (2003) found that perceived teacher support was correlated with higher academic achievement. Interview participants generally confirmed this correlation, although some described themselves as self-motivated and undeterred by a lack of school support. In fact, some participants were reportedly motivated by racist incidents with school officials. This finding was not represented in the reviewed literature.

**Faith.** Although most participants initially stated that their church life had no effect on their academic life, it was apparent that for some, church attendance provided spiritual and/or social benefits. One participant made direct reference to the “social distribution of possibilities,” as described by Barrett (2009), saying that church gave him “access to a larger pool of adults from a wide range of classes.” This, he said, expanded his ideas of what success could look like. Although 11 out of 13 participants attended church during their childhood and adolescent years, interview participants almost universally described themselves as non-religious, and did not exhibit a “spiritual locus of control” (Harper, 2012). In fact, only one participant attributed his successes to the will of God. This is in contrast to Harper’s findings, in which nearly all participants viewed their academic success as part of God’s plan for their lives.

**Peer attitudes about education.** Only one participant reported social pressure to underperform academically. The remaining 12 participants reported that their peers had either neutral or positive reactions to their academic achievements. Multiple participants noted that even those peers who underperformed academically and were involved in drug dealing, gangs, and other aspects of “street life” generally encouraged their academic



pursuits. Two participants reported belonging to a friend group in which multiple high-achieving African American males pushed each other to accomplish their academic goals. These findings were not represented in the reviewed literature on the achievement gap, however, they mirror the findings of Horvat & Lewis (2003), which indicated that high-achieving African American female high school students were motivated to succeed by their peers, including African American girls who were not high achievers.

**Sports.** Of the six study participants who had been student athletes, three mentioned the connection between sports and academics. Two of these three felt that the skills they learned through participation in sports had made them better students. One participant reported that his desire to play college basketball was his primary reason for applying to college. He also believed that only by receiving a basketball scholarship would he be able to afford a college education. This finding confirms one aspect of the DeMeulenaere (2010) study: that participation in sports leads to college aspirations for African American males.

**Afrocentrism.** Most participants (n=10) denied an Afrocentric identity. Some had positive associations with the term, associating it with enlightenment and liberation, while others felt that it connoted a limiting worldview. These findings neither confirmed nor challenged the limited research regarding Afrocentrism and academic achievement in African American males, which suggests that a more Afrocentrism in schools may lead to better outcomes for African American male students.

### **New Findings**

**Externalizing racism.** Almost exclusively, participants rejected stereotypes of African American males, either implicitly or explicitly. Since they did not internalize these perceptions of themselves, they may have experienced less testing anxiety (Wasserberg,

2014) and less “disidentification” with academics (Osbourne, 1999). This may have lead to better outcomes.

**Strength from struggle.** One of the most inspirational themes to emerge from this study was participants’ ability to turn negative experiences including, but not limited to experiences of racism, into motivation for academic success. This was not discussed in the reviewed literature. Many of the participants who lived with or experienced risk factors in their environment responded by concentrating their attention on academics. Furthermore, participants reported a variety of relationships with these risk factors, which stands in contrast to the uniformly negative view that many have of risk factors affecting Black males.

**Positive experiences with White people.** Five out of thirteen participants recounted formative experiences with White people that fostered a sense of optimism in navigating a White world. This was an unexpected theme, which was not found in the literature, and was not directly solicited by the interview questions. Because these participants grew up in segregated Black neighborhoods and schools, they generally had limited exposure to White people. Therefore, positive interactions with White people were especially powerfully in upsetting participants’ ideas of White racism. Participants related these personal experiences to an increase in their openness to working with and among White people, both in academic and professional spheres.

**Playing the game.** This theme reflects participants’ ability to recognize, and then respond strategically, to racism. Participants communicated that because academic and professional codes of conduct were often Eurocentric in nature and/or discriminatory towards them, they generally performed these behaviors without valuing them or adopting them globally. Participants often derived a sense of pride and a certain pleasure from

demonstrating such savvy, while simultaneously maintaining their sense of self. In many ways, participants felt like they were doing the manipulating, rather than being manipulated.

### **Review of Protocol**

**Strengths.** The semi-structured interview format allowed participants to tell their stories in rich detail, enabling a deeper understanding of the many factors that converged to help them succeed in college. The open nature of this interview format created space for participants to freely associate with experiences that influenced their decision and ability to enter and complete college. For example, when asked to describe their academic journey, participants responded in a variety of ways that appeared to fit their concepts of what was noteworthy, rather than what they thought the researcher wanted to know. Some participants began their stories by speaking about the first time they felt inspired to go to college. Others spoke chronologically, beginning with elementary school. Frequent, open-ended solicitations by the researcher allowed participants to elaborate after answering more pointed questions. It was often during these times that participants offered more personal accounts, some of which contributed to new, emerging themes.

In addition, the researcher was explicit in communicating to each participant that he could take as much or as little time as he wanted to answer each question. This lack of time constraint allowed participants an emotional and logistical freedom in their conversations with the researcher. Furthermore, the use of in-person or video chat interview allowed the researcher access to affective information that informed her approach to information gathering.

The strengths-based nature of this interview format may have also provided a significant degree of comfort and security to the participants. This, in the end, may have resulted in more information being shared.

Finally, the researcher's being a Black woman may have been a strength of the study. Although unverifiable, it is possible that participants felt more comfortable talking about themes and experiences related to race and racism that they would not have felt comfortable discussing with a White or non-Black interviewer. Additionally, her being female may have allowed male interview participants to be more honest about their experiences of fear and vulnerability.

**Limitations.** With only 13 interviews, the findings of this study are not generalizable. In addition, the small sample size made it difficult to differentiate between key findings and less relevant findings, since the appearance of a particular theme in only one or two interviews could signal a phenomenon in the population at large.

In general, recruitment for an in-person interview was difficult; many potential participants reported being too busy for such a project. Multiple participants cancelled or rescheduled more than once. In addition, finding a location that was both convenient and public, yet afforded enough privacy, was a difficult task. Also, the technology involved in Skype interviews was not always reliable, with connections often being lost. Future research should explore more efficient ways of recruiting and retaining potential participants.

Finally, the interviewer's racial identity may have created certain challenges based on assumptions of sameness or shared experiences. For instance, the researcher assumed that participants had similar definitions of and associations with Afrocentrism; in reality, some of the participants were unfamiliar with the concept of Afrocentrism or had definitions that

were different from those of the interviewer. These differences had to be addressed, often unexpectedly in the moment, before a full conversation could be carried out.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

There is a general perception in society that African American males succeed academically *in spite of* their peers. However, this study indicated that, at least in some cases, academically successful African American males receive encouragement or positive reception from their peers. This value of education among African American males should be recognized, appreciated, and invested in. Specifically, schools should implement programs that foster mutual academic aid and exploration among Black male students in order to encourage a cultural value of education. Whenever possible, such programs should be headed by Black men.

In addition, there should be more research regarding the concept of a “social distribution of possibilities” that Church appears to offer Black youth. Such findings may indicate the need for schools and educational non-profits to expose young Black males to examples of Black academic and professional success. This might include guest speakers and presentations at schools, as well as community field trips that provide contact with successful Black men.

Regarding sports, it is unclear exactly how sports team membership impacts the academic achievement of African American male students. High school, student-athletes may benefit from more integration between teams and academic departments. Perhaps school coaches could be trained in leadership approaches that combine athletic goals with goals of scholarship. Coaches could then highlight the ways in which student athletes can take skills developed through participation in sports, and transfer them to the classroom.

One of the most important themes that emerged from this study was the externalization of racism. How can something so intangible be encouraged at an institutional level? As is encouraged in the literature, teachers, guidance counselors and other school officials should be trained in recognizing their own biases and discriminatory tendencies. Additionally, school curricula should include lessons and discussions about racism and discrimination in society, and on ways in which society could and should become more racially just. Moreover, students should be given opportunities to engage in activism and community engagement to address these social issues.

Regarding the concept of “playing the game,” this study has invaluable potential in teaching White people about the extent to which Black people view professional and academic codes of conduct as culturally biased and discriminatory. Knowing that for many Black people, successfully navigating academic and professional environments amounts to acting or putting on a persona, White people should begin to question the normativity of the dominant cultural aesthetics within which they operate.

Finally, the findings of this study have important implications for clinical social work practice. Even in the absence of proper social justice informed policy, social workers can use the findings of this study to inform their interventions with African American male students. For example, knowing the importance of externalizing racism, social workers may discuss stereotypes of African American males and the client’s relationship to such stereotypes. Social workers may also explore the extent to which a student’s experience with racism in the school may be used as a motivator in helping them achieve academic success. This technique, which relies on individual resilience over systemic reform, should be used only after other avenues addressing systemic racism have been exhausted. Finally, these findings

may provide a template for successful strengths-based dialogues between social workers and their clients.

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## Appendix A

### Human Subjects Review Committee Documents



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 11, 2015

Rebecca Ramer

Dear Rebecca,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Rebecca Mirick, Research Advisor



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 9, 2015

Rebecca Ramer

Dear Rebecca,

I have reviewed your amendments and they look fine. The amendments to your study are therefore approved. Thank you and best of luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.

Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Rebecca Mirick, Research Advisor



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

September 28, 2015

Rebecca Ramer

Dear Rebecca,

I have reviewed your amendments and they look fine. The amendments to your study are therefore approved. Thank you and best of luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.

Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Elizabeth Irvin, Research Advisor

## **Appendix B:**

Recruitment Materials (E-mail, Facebook Message, Flyer)

### **Recruitment Email**

Subject: Participants needed for study of academically successful African American men

Hello!

My name is Rebecca Ramer. I am a master's candidate at the Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, MA. I'm writing to you because I am conducting a study of academically successful Black men, and I need your voice. I will be conducting 45-90 minute interviews in person or via Skype in which participants will discuss their personal experiences and ideas on education.

We need more Black men to participate in the conversation about how to improve outcomes for Black males in our schools. Currently, there is a lot of research focusing on the problem of the achievement gap. What we lack is sufficient research that is solution-focused and sheds light on the educational gains that Black males have already made.

The interview process is intended to be a potentially therapeutic and empowering experience for those who choose to participate. It may also serve to benefit Black boys and young men going through the educational system now and in the future.

Qualified participant will meet the following criteria:

- 18-40 years of age
- Self- identify as African American or Black
- Attended K-12 in the US
- Completed a bachelor's degree or currently attending a four-year college

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Rebecca

## **Facebook Announcement**

Are you a young, academically successful African American man?

If so, I would like to talk with you.

**I am a Smith College Master's in Social Work (MSW) student seeking young African American men, to tell the story of how they achieved academic success.**

The study will consist of a 45 to 90 minute interview. Interviews will be confidential and identities will be protected. Each participant will be given a \$10 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

Qualified participants must meet the following criteria:

- 18-40 years of age
- Self- identify as African American or Black
- Attended K-12 in the US
- Completed a bachelor's degree or currently attending a four-year college

**Contact Rebecca Ramer at [rramer@smith.edu](mailto:rramer@smith.edu) for more information or to set up an interview. Be your brother's keeper! Make your voice heard!**

**Recruitment Flyer**

**ARE YOU A YOUNG ACADEMICALLY SUCCESSFUL  
AFRICAN AMERICAN MAN?**



**Smith College Master's in Social Work (MSW) student seeks participants to tell the story of how they achieved academic success.**

Add your personal experiences and insight to the discussion in academia about the best ways to help African American males achieve academic success.

**Qualified participants must meet the following criteria:**

18-40 years of age

Self- identify as African American or Black

Attended K-12 in the US

Completed a bachelor's degree or currently attending a 4 year college

45-90 minute confidential interview

\$10 Amazon gift card for participating in the study

**Contact Rebecca Ramer at [rramer@smith.edu](mailto:rramer@smith.edu) for more information or to set up an interview. Be your brother's keeper! Make your voice heard!**



**Appendix C:**

Informed Consent

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Smith College School for Social Work**

**Northampton, MA**

**Title of Study:** How I made it over: Young African American men tell the story of how they achieved academic success

**Investigator:** Rebecca Ramer, Smith College School for Social Work, 718-664-3317

.....

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of young, academically successful, African American men, and your ideas of what helped you to achieve that success. You were selected as a possible participant because as a young African American man who is either a college graduate or is currently enrolled in college, you meet this study's definition of "academic success." We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study:**

The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of young academically successful African American men in hopes of developing a better understanding of the factors that allowed them to become successful students. This study is being conducted as a research

requirement for my master's in social work degree. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Answer 15 to 20 questions about your life experiences at school, at home and in the community, with a focus on how they affected your academic success. The interview will last 45 to 90 minutes, depending on how much time you need to tell your story.

**Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study:**

Questions that you are asked may bring back unpleasant memories from your childhood and adolescence that may be uncomfortable or painful to discuss. This is not likely since this study is strengths-based, meaning that it focuses on the positive parts of your life experiences. If you do feel uncomfortable, you may skip any question, take a break, or stop the interview.

**Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Benefits to participants: Participating in this interview will give you an opportunity to add your personal experiences and insight to the discussion in academia about the best ways to help African American males achieve academic success. My hope is that this will be a potentially therapeutic and empowering experience for you.

The benefits to social work/society: Your participation may help researchers, therapists, educators, families and policy-makers to better understand what African American males go

through as students. This may eventually lead to new and better possibilities for African American males students.

**Confidentiality:**

Your participation will be kept confidential. You should know that while your responses to the interview questions will be shared with others, your identity will be kept confidential. Responses will be presented in aggregate, and if personal quotes are used, any identifying words or characteristics will be removed. The recording of this interview will be stored in my computer, which is secured with a password. It will never be uploaded or emailed to anyone. I will transcribe your answers into a document that will also remain stored only on my computer. The audio and word files will be saved using a pseudonym, instead of your real name. When my research is complete, I will transfer the files onto a USB drive and erase them from my computer. The USB drive will be stored in a locked box for 3 years, in accordance with federal regulations, and then destroyed. I will not include any of your personal information that could be used to identify you in any report that may be published. During the interview process itself, we will either meet together in a private space or I will speak to you via video chat in a private room in my home. I will not inform others of your participation in the study.

**Payments/gifts:**

As a token of my appreciation for your participation in the study, I will be giving you a \$10 Amazon gift card. You will receive this small gift at the very beginning of the interview, if we meet in person, and after the interview via mail, if we will be conducting the interview via video chat.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:**

Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary, so feel free to change your mind at any time before the interview date. During the interview, please let me know if you feel the need to take a break, skip a question or terminate the interview altogether. This will not result in any penalty of any kind, and you will still receive your Amazon gift card. If, after the interview, you decide that you do not want your responses to be shared as part of my research, you may inform me by phone or email before Friday, October 30<sup>th</sup>. After that date, your information, but not your identity will be part of my thesis.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns:**

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time, feel free to contact me, Rebecca Ramer at rramer86@gmail.com or by telephone at xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D:

### Demographic Questionnaire

#### Demographic Information

In order to get a better sense of who you are, I ask that you fill out the following questionnaire prior to our interview. Please understand that you may skip any question that you do not wish to answer.

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. How do you identify?
  - Black/ African American
  - Biracial/ Multiracial
  - Hispanic/ Latino
  - West Indian/ Caribbean
  - African
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
  -
  
3. What city/cities/towns did you primarily grow up in?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
4. What was the structure of your family of origin? (Please check all that apply)
  - single mother
  - single father
  - two-parent household
  - two-parent household with stepparent
  - raised by grandparent(s)
  - raised by other family member(s)
  - raised in foster family
  - Other (please describe)  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Did your mother (or female head of household) grow up in the US?  
 Yes       No

If not, what country did she grow up in?

---

If she grew up in the US, where in the US did she grow up?

---

6. Did your father (or male head of household) grow up in the US?

Yes       No

If no, what country did she grow up in?

---

If he grew up in the US, where in the US did he grow up?

---

7. How would you describe the socioeconomic status of your family of origin?

(Socioeconomic status may have changed over time. Please check all that apply.)

- poor
- working class
- blue collar
- lower-middle class
- middle class
- upper-middle class
- upper-class
- owning class

8. What is the highest education level of your mother (or female head of household) who raised you?

---

9. What is the highest education level of your father (or male head of household) who raised you?

---

10. What is your current education level? (Please check all that apply.)

- enrolled in college/ university
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- enrolled in graduate program
- graduate degree

11. What college(s) have you attended?

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12. What is/was your major?

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13. What is your current occupation?

(Note: You may answer full or part-time student or currently unemployed)

---



## **Appendix E:**

### Interview Guide

Thank you for meeting with me.

- Review and sign Informed Consent Form.
- Let's quickly go over your demographic information.  
[Review the demographic sheet with Skype participants, or complete the sheet with in-person group].
- I will start the audio recording now.  
[If the person refuses to be recorded, I will continue the interview, explaining to the participant that I will be taking notes to help me recall their answers.]

#### **Instructions:**

I am going to ask you a series of questions. There are no right or wrong answers. I hope to come away from this interview understanding your personal educational journey and the process that led to your enrolling in and completing college.

#### **General Questions:**

1. Let's start with a general question. Could you please tell me about your personal educational journey?

Follow-up: Start anywhere you would like.

Follow-up: When did you know that you wanted to go to college?

Did you ever encounter any problems or obstacles that interfered with your learning?

Follow-up: Were you able to overcome those obstacles? What helped?

Follow-up: Were there some obstacles that you couldn't overcome?

If so, how did you get back on track or keep on track with all of this going on?

2. Did anyone in your life support your academic pursuits?

If so, who? In what ways were they helpful?

6. I am going to switch gears a little bit. Did you have role models growing up? Who were they? What did you admire about them?
7. If you can remember, when you were a child/ adolescent, what did you want to be or do when you grew up?
8. Tell me about the neighborhood that you grew up in.  
Follow-up: Did you go to in school in your neighborhood?
9. Please describe the schools that you attended before college.
10. Did you like school? Why or why not?
11. Did you find your teachers to be supportive? If so, in what ways?
12. Please describe your family attitudes or views about education.  
Follow-up: What beliefs, values and expectations did they hold about education and higher education?
13. What about your friends? What were *their* attitudes about education?
14. Have you ever been part of a faith community?  
Follow up: What was your [church] like?  
Follow up: Did your involvement with your faith community effect your education?  
If so, in what ways?
15. How central is your racial identity to how you see yourself as a student?
16. Would you describe yourself as Afrocentric? In what ways?  
Follow up: Do you think this view affected you as a student? If so, what impact did it have?

17. Were there any other factors in your life that helped to foster your academic success?
18. Are there some things that might have been helpful to you as a student that you wish you had gotten from your schools, family or community? If so, what are they?
19. Is there any advice you would you give to families, educators, community members or policy-makers who want to help more African American males achieve academic success?
20. Is there any advice you would give to the students themselves?