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Exploring the Educational Journeys of African American Honors Alumni(nae)

Sammie Marie Burton

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EXPLORING THE EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS OF

AFRICAN AMERICAN HONORS ALUMNI(NAE)

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SAMMIE M. BURTON

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my work to my children, Trinity Burton, Jordan Burton and Naphtalie Burton
and to my mom, dad and grandmother.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore and examine the experiences of African American students to and through collegiate honors programs. I aimed to provide another frame for understanding intellectuals by exploring the educational journeys of eight (8) African American, high-achieving alumni(nae). Through qualitative inquiry, this study gives an in-depth understanding to the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that helped students navigate challenging academic settings and evaluate the importance of honors education for students within the Black community. Guided by critical race theory (CRT), findings from this study will provide the research community with entry points to social justice practice in contemporary honors education.

PREFACE

My positionality on the topic of students and high academic achievement is structured by not only being an African American woman who teaches Honors English at a predominantly Black institution but most importantly, by being a mother. These characteristics of who I am offer something unique and dynamic to my epistemological stance in educational research.

As an English instructor of predominantly Black honor students on the south side of Chicago, I am amazed at the resiliency of undergraduate students who cross dangerous terrain to sit in my classes and debate the politics of pro-life vs. pro-choice legislation and discuss how the social welfare movement single-handedly dismantled the structure of the Black family during the 1970s. Students meet in class and create communal relationships among one another that extend well beyond my classroom. For these students, I am immensely grateful for the opportunity to educate.

As a mother, my love for my children drives this study. As I write, I am speaking to them because I am concerned with the social injustices enmeshed within school systems that continue to indoctrinate students of color into following the status quo of low academic expectations. I understand only a fraction of the world that my children will inherit when they leave my care and venture into their own endeavors, but I know all too well the importance of education—of knowledge of self and society. The task that my husband and I accepted when we started our family included educating our children to

become self-reliant and self-sufficient. As a Black mother, I advocate for raising expectations for Black students within schools.

I advocate for challenging Black students to aspire to college. I stand in support of students of color, who despite prejudiced and racialized stereotypes within classroom spaces, use the adversity and stigmas to propel themselves into excellence. In this research, I am on assignment to seek truths that dispel myths, fallacies and dysfunctional thinking around Black intellect. In this research, I seek the insights of African American students who have excelled within the highest ranks of academics to challenge narratives regarding the lack of motivation, intelligence, and educational attainment within the Black community. Representations of strength-based narratives within communities of color matter for students because schooling is replete with messages of academic incompetence, particularly concerning Black and Brown students.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The onset of education within the African American (AA) community was riddled

with problematic legislation that continues to resurface and perpetuate injustices within

American schooling systems. The "separate but equal" clause of *Plessy v. Ferguson*

(1896) would render segregation in public schools legal keeping Black students and

White students separated. Its repeal in the 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education,*

Topeka made school segregation based on race illegal in America. Today, racism and

segregation has implicitly resurfaced by way of social stratification[1] within educational

institutions. As educational institutions aspire to offer diverse and inclusive student

environments, schools have re-segregated students within classrooms as evidenced by

tracking practices (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014). Tracking practices, or ability grouping, in

education is a school-ranking system where students who perform at the highest levels of

academic proficiency are placed in high ability courses: the honors track, AP (Advanced

Placement) track, or IB (International Baccalaureate) track programs. These programs

aim to prepare students for college and career readiness (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014).

However, Black students have been, historically, tracked disproportionately in

lower performing courses (Leonardo & Grubb, 2014; Modica, 2015). The Civil Rights

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[1]*Social Stratification* refers to social groups relationally positioned in a hierarchy of unequal value. This ranking is used to justify the unequal distribution of resources among social groups (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

movement of the 1960s was known for questioning the underrepresentation of African

Americans in upper-ability level classes (Donelan, Neal & Jones,1994). Still today,

educational data from 2015 shows that 16% of Black students age 3-21 in the United

States received services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for

special education programs, the highest amongst all ethnic groups except Indian/Alaska

Natives who totaled 17% (United States Department of Education, 2017). In comparison,

data on Black students in Advanced Practice (AP) programs in 2013 shows that only 9%

of students participated and only 4% of those students successfully passed the AP Exam

to obtain college credit upon graduating high school (College Board, 2014). In other

words, African American students are overrepresented in special education programs and

underrepresented in honors programs. In this way, academic tracking has allowed schools

to maintain racially segregated classrooms based on race and ability.

Access to high-level courses and challenging curriculum are denied

disproportionately to students of color[2] (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Black and Latino

students "are only half as likely as White students to be placed in a class for the gifted"

even though they qualify (Nieto & Bode, 2007, p. 71). Meanwhile, African American

students who find themselves within AP and honors spaces are rigorously prepared for

college and pipelined into universities. Within this dissertation, I will focus on this

population of students to study their realities in successfully navigating through honors'

learning environments.

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[2]*Students of Color or Communities of Color* is used to describe people who are racialized based on phenotypical features such as hair texture, bone structure, and skin color (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Background of the Problem

Disproportionality in academic ability tracking is not happen stance and neither are the negative stigmas associated with the African American (AA) community. This next section will explain the history of how intelligence became a race-based dilemma in which AA students were characterized as intellectually incompetent.

Scientific Racism[3] and Intelligence

In order to understand the racialized ideals that are embedded within education today, it is essential to track scientific racism from years past. The intelligence testing movement led by Darwin, Galton and Binet created negative stereotypes about race and human ability. The conversation of Black intellectual capabilities is situated within controversial debates on human intelligence that reach back as far as 1859 with Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. His theory of human evolution pioneered scientific study pertaining to mankind's advanced intelligence. Darwin's cousin, Sir Francis Galton, would add that intelligence was inherited through family lineage. In 1905, French psychologist, Alfred Binet developed questions to test intelligence based on a person's "ability to reason, draw analogies, and identify patterns" (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 2). By 1904, British Army Officer Charles Spearman and Karl Pearson established quantitative methods to measure intelligence in a more advanced way by using the correlation coefficient to examine existing relationships between variables of study. Shortly after, Intelligence Quotient, or IQ, became the way in which social and behavioral scientists measured one's ability to complete complex mental tasks

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[3]Refers to science that has been used as an acceptable reason to present, project, and enact racist social policies (Dennis, 1995).

(Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). By 1969, educational psychologist, Arthur Jensen, from the University of California at Berkeley made a disheartening claim about intelligence and race. Jenson asserted that Blacks were a population of people with low IQs.

> Asked by the *Review's* editors to consider why compensatory and remedial education programs begun with such high hopes during the War on Poverty had yielded such disappointing results, Jensen concluded that the programs were bound to have little success because they were aimed at populations of youngsters with relatively low IQs, and success in school depended to a considerable degree on IQ. IQ had a large heritable component…The article further disclosed that the youngsters in the targeted populations were disproportionately black and that historically blacks as a population had exhibited average IQs substantially below those of whites. (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 9)

By 1971, Harvard Professor Dr. Richard Herrnstein, began a serious debate on IQ, race, and class structure.

> …because IQ was substantially heritable, because economic success in life depends in part on the talents measured by IQ tests, and because social standing depends in part on economic success, it follows that social standing is bound to be based to some extent on inherited differences. (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 10)

This collection of thought from Eurocentric scholars was used to construct stereotypes around African American intelligence. Darwin's theory on human evolution was used by pro-slavery advocates to justify holding Blacks in slavery with the thought that Blacks did not have the intellectual competence to survive in a free society; and whether Darwin refuted this idea, or not, his work framed this ideology (Desmond &

Moore, 2009). Intelligent Quotient (IQ) tests from Binet, Spearman and Pearson discredited the intelligence of African Americans despite the tests being culturally misaligned with this population of students (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Hatt, 2012), and today statewide mandated tests continue this cycle.

Despite an abundance of scholars who discredited the research of *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, a prejudice and discriminatory American society held too strongly to the beliefs presented in *The Bell Curve* (1994) that because a portion of African Americans occupy the lower quadrants of IQ tests, because many also disproportionately occupy the lower quadrants of financial stability and family stability--that their circumstances in American society are a direct measure of inherited mental incapability (Jacoby & Glauberman, 1995).

These narratives from scientists in the academy have not only stigmatized Black students but most students of color in American schools. As a result, these narratives were, and should still be, continuously countered by those in the Black community who add more depth to understanding intelligence and academic excellence.

Statement of the Problem

The United States Census Bureau (2018) estimates that median earnings in 2017 for individuals 25 years and older were highest for people with degrees: Bachelor's $50,000+; Master's $70,000+; Doctorate $90,000+ (United States Census Bureau, 2018). As of 2019, the Black[4] population in the United States reached approximately 43 million

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[4]*Black or African American (AA)* refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (U.S. Census, 2019). For this research, Black or African American will be used interchangeably.

people, making us the second largest racial/ethnic group in the states at 13% (United

States Census Bureau, 2019). While current educational trends show that African

American (AA) students' high school dropout rates consistently declined from 2010 to

2016 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017), the AA community has

consistently held the highest rates for families battling through poverty.[5] Based on these

findings, a study that explores the school to college pipeline is needed.

Successful college completion equates to forms of social, cultural and economic

power. According to Bourdieu (1986), social, cultural, and economic capital buys a

higher social position in western societies. Furthermore, cultural capital in schools is

linked to intelligence or "smartness" (Hatt, 2012). Some researchers defined intelligence

based on students' academic abilities of reasoning and communication skills (Hatt, 2012;

Herrnstein & Murray, 1995). Other researchers have attempted to redefine intelligence

outside of students' academic abilities (Gardner, 2000; 2006). Intelligence, for the sake of

this research, is an academic and cultural tool utilized to acquire status in schools,

universities and society at large.

Furthermore, AA students who have successfully journeyed through honors at the

post-secondary level, offer unique perspectives to the educational dialogue. Their life

stories offer a different view of student achievement. In a similar way, honors education

offers possible avenues to increased educational, economic and social opportunities.

African Americans have worked hard at improving their social and economic stance in

America, but exclusionary educational policies and practices that cater to the status quo

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[5]The Census Bureau (2019) uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size. If the total income for a family falls below the relevant poverty line, then the family is considered in *poverty*.

of low expectations for African American students have obstructed progress within the community.

The Importance of Honors and African American Participation

"Education provides students with the opportunity for an honors education that allows them the opportunity to move into careers with higher income expectations and greater social mobility" (Mead, 2018, p. 26). To be competitive in the 21st century, African American students will need to develop sophisticated skillsets that will allow them to be productive members of a global society. These transferable skillsets include critical problem-solving, fluid intelligence, teamwork, achievement/innovation and communication skills (Burrus, Jackson, Xi & Steinberg, 2013). Honors curricula are designed to foster these skillsets. The purpose of honors is to provide students with the necessary skills to thrive in a fast-paced world (Haas, 2015) which is vital for the 21st century and important for students within communities of color.

While the goals of honors programs are to parallel the objectives of Social Justice Education (SJE) by helping students examine enduring questions and teaching students the skills needed for leadership and engaged citizenship (Cargas, 2018), most honors learning environments lack student diversity. Low levels of minority participation in honors could point to the census data which shows that the Black population in America is smaller than Whites and Hispanics, but it is also attributed to disparities associated with inaccurately sorting students into classroom hierarchies based on race rather than skill.

There are a range of other possible barriers such as highly selective admissions' criteria and the lack of economic and social supports needed for program completion

(Badenhausen, 2010; Dudley 2010; Mead, 2018). Important to note, approximately 24%

percent of college students are first-generation[6] and come from families below the

threshold of income for their family size (Mead, 2018). Resilient individuals, however,

"defy the stereotype that economic hardships impede strong academic performance and

demonstrate that students from low-income backgrounds can learn at the highest levels"

(Herbert, 2018, p. 96). A reported 3.4 million students who are high achievers are from

families who live below poverty threshold and working-class neighborhoods (Herbert,

2018). It is important to increase our understanding of the supports needed for high-

ability students from economically vulnerable families to remove financial barriers from

collegiate honors education as these students move on to colleges and universities

(Herbert, 2018) because the earning potential of individuals with a college degree

increases with each degree conferred.

Purpose of the Study

Given the underrepresentation of African American students within honors and

advanced education programs, the purpose of this study was to explore the educational

journeys of African American students who have navigated beyond the K-12 schooling

experience to and through collegiate honors. This research seeks to expand on the body

of knowledge that asserts the importance of the school to college pipeline among students

of color by providing an alternative frame to explore-- honors programs. Through

narrative inquiry, this research offers educational researchers insight into to the lived

experiences of African American Honors Alumni(nae) from four-year public and private

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[6]The term first-generation applies to students in which neither parent has a baccalaureate degree
(Mead, 2018).

universities. Narratives from this research will expand the education community's understanding of the factors that helped to shape students' academic performance and offer more insight on the value of the honors' designation within the context of the Black community.

Research Questions

I considered the following research questions:

1. From the perspective of African American Honors Alumni(nae), what intrinsic and extrinsic factors shape academic success?

2. From the narratives of African American Honor Alumni(nae), what value does the honors' designation offer students within the Black community?

Significance and Contributions to the Field

Underrepresented students within accelerated programs--whether first-generation or continuing generation--offer valuable context on successful educational attainment evidenced by degree completion. This study employed a qualitative research approach to gather a more detailed understanding of the relationship between African American students and honors. Through narrative inquiry, my research gives a comprehensive view of students' experiences within honors education programs to and through the post-secondary level. With students' test scores, high school GPA and class rank being the most common predictors of college success (Cognard-Black, Smith & Dove, 2017), understanding the factors that intellectuals employ to cultivate themselves as such is a necessity. In essence, this study aims to produce not only valuable insight on the value of honors but also valuable insight into the contributing factors that help students track their way into honors.

Research Delimitations

This research will use a narrative qualitative approach to provide in-depth narratives regarding African American students' academic achievements. Furthermore, narrative inquiry will examine students' past and present schooling experiences to uncover how students' experiences within honors education unfold over time and to understand future possibilities that this research can lead to beyond this study. I do not necessarily contend that this research will open access for more African American students' participation into honors education or to increase retention in honors education, but instead, that this research will offer pathways to opportunities that encourage participation and retention.

Organization of Dissertation

Here in Chapter I, I discussed how educational tracking has helped to resurface discriminatory practices in education, presented the context in which stigmas and stereotypes mis-conceptualized African American ability. I also highlighted the importance of the school to college pipeline. Chapter II contains a review of the literature and an explanation of the theoretical framework that supports this study. The Literature Review will survey the nuances of honors education and Black students' experiences within it. The theoretical framework that drives this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). With its roots in activism, CRT created a strong foundation for observing the power dynamics between advanced levels of education and race. In Chapter III, I discuss the qualitative research methodology chosen for this study which will include the method of in-depth narratives, followed by a description of the participants, setting, data generation and data analysis procedures. In Chapter IV, I discuss the major findings of

the study based on transcribed interview data from a purposeful sample of participants. In light of the literature review, research questions and theoretical framework, Chapter V concludes with my discussion and recommendations for further research.

Within this proposal, I will use terms interchangeably. Those terms are,

1. Black/African American (AA)

2. High performance/High ability/High-achieving

3. Students of Color/Communities of Color

4. Honors Programs/Collegiate Honors/Honors College

5. Advanced Practice (AP) programs/High School Honors programs

6. Honors/Honors Education (to include the overarching community)

7. Intelligence/Intellect

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to aptly study the perspective of African American honor students, this Literature Review will discuss what has been presented thus far surrounding AA students within colleges' and universities' honors programs. Literature within this section explains (1) Access to honors education at the secondary and post-secondary level, specifically focusing on how high school data is used as predictors of college success for student entry into collegiate honors programs, (2) the experiences of AA students who participate within honors programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and (3) the experiences of AA students who participate within honors programs at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The most salient research approach used in studies pertaining to honors education was quantitative, where egression models were used to forecast students' success.

An analysis of my theoretical framework for this study will follow the literature review. I will explain how Critical Race Theory (CRT) frames my research. CRT is particularly important for my study in that it offers counter-narratives that shift the trend of in social science research from the mainstream narrative of AA student underachievement to AA student overachievement (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Access: High School Honors Admission

Honors education at the secondary level is designed for students who are considered gifted (Chancey & Butts, 2018). According to Chancey and Butts, the "operational definition of "gifted" is a student who has been identified as such by their school district" (p. 34). At district level, Advanced Placement (AP) courses serve as pathways to earning college credit while in high school. AP courses "allow high-achieving students to study challenging material with other high-achieving students" (Barnard-Brak, McGaha-Garnett & Burley, 2011, p. 166). Essentially, these courses allow high school students the opportunity to receive college credit for a number of courses by taking comprehensive examinations at the end of the school year. Illustrated in Table 1, exam scores range from 1 to 5 with 5 being the highest score on could attain and 3 being the cut-off score for passing (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011; Davis, Davis & Mobley, 2014).

Table 1

Overview of Advanced Practice (AP) Exam Scores

AP Exam Score	Recommendation	College Course Grade Equivalent
5	Extremely well qualified	A+ or A
4	Very well qualified	A-, B+ or B
3	Qualified	B-, C+ or C
2	Possibly qualified	
1	No recommendation	

Note: This table give an overview of college recommendations based on AP Exam Scores. The college course grade equivalent is included for comparison. Source: Collegeboard AP (2020)

According to Shaw, Marini, and Mattern (2012), college admission weighs heavily on AP course grades. AP course grades are factored into high school GPA and

high school GPA is a strong predictor of first year GPA college success. The AP

program objective is to prepare students for college and to provide them with college

credit towards their degree (Barnard-Brak et al., 2011). However, the authors found that

persistent barriers such as funding necessary for AP course examinations, student and

parent lack of awareness of AP programs, qualified students who choose not to

participate for fear of selling out, and a lack of encouragement from school personnel and

parents prevent students from participating in AP and honors at the district level

(Barnard-Brak et al., 2011).

Furthermore, honors education encompasses in-class and extracurricular activities

that are broader, deeper and multifaceted than comparable learning experiences typical of

general education courses, such as study abroad opportunities (National Collegiate

Honors Council, 2019). Student access to these learning experiences lay in the hands of

educators and school administrators. Ford, Harris III, Tyson and Trotman (2002) state

that it is the deficit-thinking approach that "hinders the ability and willingness of

educators to recognize the strengths of African American students. Statistics from the

National Center of Educational Statistics (2017) show a bleak picture of African

American students' abilities in academics--

- Mathematic scale scores for 12th grade black students were consistently lower
  than those of other groups in 2005, 2013 and 2015. Asian students lead all
  groups in 2013 and 2015 while White students scores followed Asian
  students' scores.

- In 2015, the average reading score for African American 12th graders was
  considerably lower than their peers, 266 on a scale of 500. White students'

scores averaged 295 out 500 and Hispanic students' scores averaged 276 out 500.

- The percentage of students with disabilities who received services for an intellectual disability during 2013-2014 was highest for Black students (10%); the percentages for students of other races ranged between 5 and 7 percent.

The data shows a constructed, not factual, account of Black students' abilities. The social construction created by the data conceptualizes group deficits related to underachievement within educational spaces. Even more, AA students who measure at low-proficiency in subjects of reading and math gain the "at risk" label" (para. 1). The "at risk" label is counter-productive to college admissions' criterion.

Therefore, teachers' perceptions have profound effects on student outcomes (Burris & Garrity, 2008). Teacher recommendations can determine students' placement in AP courses in high school which place students within the college pipeline, and more so, on the honors track for college (Burris & Garrity, 2008). Furthermore, high school counselors are the "gatekeepers" to honors and AP programs (Davis et al., 2014). According to Davis et al., "school counselors are in a unique position to reverse institutional barriers and challenge the deficit-thinking that propagates the AP equity and excellence gaps for African American students" (p. 33). In 2013, College Board research shows that 14% of high school students in the United States who took AP courses were African American. A total of 9% were tested, but only 4% of African American students successfully passed their AP Exams (College Board, 2014). AP track high school students are prime students admitted into colleges and universities; however, the data suggests that 10% of students do not successfully complete the AP track.

Access: Collegiate Honors Admission

Collegiate honor students are students enrolled in the Honors College. The collegiate institution dictates the admission and program requirements for student participation (Chancey & Butts, 2018). Scott and Frana (2008) assert that honors is a selective place. Therefore, honor students should be competitive and expect to engage deeply in the learning process to succeed in their academics.

Research shows that there is a consensus in the collegiate honors community that SAT and ACT test scores act as barriers for students' participation in honors programs (Murray, 2017; Rhea, 2017; McKay, 2009). Governor State University (GSU), a high minority population institution with 70% of the student body being students of color and 80% of students qualifying for Pell, used an indexed admission process whereby high school GPA and the number of Honors and AP classes taken were the criteria for entry to allow for more student access to participation in collegiate honors (Rhea, 2017). Rhea examined, through regression analysis, high school variables that predict first-semester college GPA for honors students. Findings indicated that three predictor variables— Honors GPA, ACT English, and college readiness of the student's high school— explained the variance among first-semester grades earned by students. One predictor model, specifically pertaining to African American honors students, suggested that GSU Honors GPA and ACT English scores were the best predictors of success in the honors program.

Additionally, McKay (2009), through a logit regression model, examined the effectiveness of traditional admissions criteria—high school grades and standardized test scores—to better understand honor students and their success in the program at the

University of North Florida. While Rhea (2017) informs that ACT/SAT scores are relevant to admissions, McKay found that SAT scores are not useful predictors of students' completion of the collegiate honors. For McKay (2009), high school GPA was the best predictor of Honors program completion indicating that some honors programs are more concerned with the average of all grades accumulated over time and not one major assessment score of college readiness.

Murray (2017) discusses a proposal made at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) to remove criteria for entry into an honors program, to allow entry to any student who had completed a three-year undergraduate degree. The author examined through regression models, how the impact of lowering the entry requirements into the honors program in South Africa created the possibility of selection bias (Murray, 2017). Essentially, college admissions administrators feared that lowering the admission requirements would result in students not performing as well as those who were admitted when the admission requirements were more stringent (Murray, 2017). These findings suggest that highly selective admissions criterion is important to honors programs to uphold the value of the honors' designation.

Furthermore, Frana and Rice (2017) stipulate that even when students attempt to transfer between intercollegiate honors programs, from two-year institutions to four-year institutions, they experience obstacles to their transition--obstacles pertaining to the structure of the honors-to-honors program agreement. Scholars found that there are three main reasons students fail to transfer from two-year to four-year honors programs (Frana & Rice, 2017).

1. Transfer agreements and transfer relationships between program directors.

2. Inadequate marketing.

3. Misalignment between programs and/or difficult transferability of credits.

None of the problems, scholars assert, have to do with sub-standard academic preparation on behalf of the students.

AA Male Representation

The experiences of African American males in honors programs uncovers another angle of the literature. Henfield (2012) provides a brief introduction to Black-male masculinity-identity where the author conceptualized the stigmas associated with Black males, most notably the common perceptions of Black males as unintelligent, oversexualized individuals prone to violence. The author called for educators to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Black males. Using phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), Henfield posits that Black males should not be the sole focus of intervention programs because they continue to perpetuate myths concerning Black males and ability (Henfield, 2012). To add, the author advises that educators and school counselors be at the forefront of understanding the Black male experience and create strategizes within school systems to better recognize how Black males perceive themselves in relationship to society.

Ford and Moore (2013) also tap into dispelling the stereotypes associated with Black males in urban schools. Understanding the significance of achievement gaps and group deficits and the way in which males are conceptualized in urban settings, the authors conclude that there is pressing need for aggressive efforts that address consistent social, educational, cultural and familial factors. Furthermore, developing comprehensive strategies for urban Black males will help to bridge the gap from low achievement to high

achievement with the belief that underachievement can be prevented and corrected

(Grantham, 2013). Strategies recommended by Grantham (2013) include but are not

limited to: (a) respecting Black males' individuality and support them in building a strong

sense of identity; (b) reject cultural assumptions; (c) recognize the importance of the

early years; (d) encourage the continued process of Black males as creatives; (e) do not

limit Black males potentialities; (f) offer creative and problem-solving programs for

Black male development; (g) hire well-trained educational specialists; and (h)

acknowledge and utilize culturally different environmental features in homes, schools

and communities to help support Black male development.

Moreover, research from Howard University contends that there is a bias toward

AA male students with disabilities in honors classes (Toldson, 2011). Black males have a

greater chance of being diagnosed with a disability than White or Hispanic males and

consequently, Black males are more likely to be suspended, retained a grade or placed in

special education programs (Toldson, 2011). Furthermore, institutions that perceive

disability and emotional adjustment difficulties as problems that need to be permanently

segregated from other students, jeopardize positive student academic growth and

development (Toldson, 2011). Instead, Toldson asserts that learning disorders may be

more aptly described as an alternative learning style and mastering that learning style can

offer these students a competitive edge in the honors classroom. For instance, students

with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) shift the learning environment to

stimulate their insatiable nervous system while others use their high energy to impact the

lesson. Either way, these characteristics further expand opportunities for optimal teaching

and learning (Toldson, 2011) and not reasons to separate Black males from advanced levels of education.

So far, I have explored the requirements for student admissions to honors programs and discussed research concerning Black males and education. In the following two sections, I discuss how the campus climate affects the experiences of AA students who satisfy admission standards to participate in the honors college.

AA Honor Students' Experiences and HBCUs' Honors Programs

Davis and Montgomery (2011) examined, through surveys, the core values, best practices and unique challenges of Historically Black Colleges' and Universities' (HBCUs) Honors programs, particularly in relationship to how these environments shape and cultivate human development in the African American community. These universities were designed with this purpose.

> …between 1850 and 1856 fewer than 5% of Blacks out of a population of 4.5 million could read or write…Black people were not formally educated in traditional learning environments; they simply passed on the knowledge they acquired to other Black people. Only twenty-eight acknowledged Black students had graduated with baccalaureate degrees from American colleges by 1860…As the Civil War approached, African Americans still had many racist issues to hurdle. This period was notably marked by the exclusion of African American students from higher education…Many Blacks, realizing that educational opportunities existed on a limited basis for Black students, had reached the conclusion that their best chance for higher education lay in establishing their own educational institutions. (Davis & Montgomery, 2011, p. 75)

The task of educating Black students became the job of the Black community and stark abolitionists. Cheyney University (1837), Lincoln University (1854), Wilberforce University (1856) and Fisk University (1866) were among the first institutions of higher education established for African American students (Davis & Montgomery, 2011). Furthermore, Frank Aydelotte is credited with starting the Honors education trend in American colleges and universities, but there was little to no evidence of when honors education began to expand to HBCUs. That is, until Dula (2016) found archival data that points to Joseph Cohen and the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (ICSS). Together, Cohen and ICSS actively supported Black colleges in creating college honors education (Dula, 2016). Attitudes around African American honors students were dismissive of the group's academic capabilities, and by the 1950s, HBCU honors programs began to collect data on what was then termed "accelerated" programs (Dula, 2016, p. 52).

Current data from HBCUs offer a unique understanding of African American students in honors programs. Nelson Laird, Williams, Bridges, Holmes and Morelon-Quaino (2007) state that African American students at HBCUs are more engaged and have a sense that they gain more from college than their counterparts at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs). There is more room for effective collaborative learning between African American (AA) students and faculty at HBCUs than Black students and their faculty members at PWIs. Practice and relationship building were two factors found that lead to desirable educational outcomes for Black honor students (Nelson Laird et al., 2007).

Likewise, Mitchell (2002) asserts that honors programs at HBCUs play a major role in the education of outstanding AA students. Mitchell states that high ability African American honor students are those who have excellent scores on the SAT, the ACT and a high-grade point average. The author places emphasis on a well-rounded honors program which includes preparation for graduate school, fellowship and scholarship opportunities, travel and study abroad programs, and last, opportunities for community service.

Furthermore HBCUs, such as Shaw University, prides itself on strengthening and expanding students' life skills through what is termed the "five wells"—well-balanced, well-dressed, well-read, well-spoken, and well-traveled—of honors education (Dubroy, 2015). Dubroy also boasts of Shaw's natural linkage to African American students' heritage being the place where the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded in 1960. This organization was front and center in the civil rights movement. Additionally, honor students at Shaw are extended opportunities for graduate and professional school, for internships and for the job market. Even more so, Dubroy discusses the leadership and excellence exhibited through graduating honor students at the university informing that students' professional vocations extend to the likes of 2nd Lieutenant in the United States Air Force, surgical assistants, practicing attorneys and PhD recipients in physics and mathematics. Dubroy asserts that students' "trajectory of excellence was cultivated in honors college and by a dedicated faculty and staff" (p. 124).

Regarding African American students at HBCUs, "…honors programs are cited as positively affecting their college success, creating substantial gains in self-esteem and interests, and increasing their likelihood to persist and continue on to graduate and professional degrees" (Austin, 1984, as cited in Gasman, Fluker, Commodore & Peterkin,

2014, p. 551). Findings from Davis and Montgomery (2011) which suggest that students have positive associations with learning and honors program participation at HBCUs spurred Gasman et al. (2014) to survey honor students at various HBCUs. Research found that students' experiences with administrators are important in honors programs because students look to administrators as support systems. Another aspect of an effective honors program among students at HBCUs was an honors' curriculum developed collaboratively with honors students for honor students.

Conversely, study abroad options are said to be limited at HBCUs. Although many HBCU programs encourage students to study abroad, scholarships for study abroad options are scarce (Gasman et al., 2014). Additionally, while many honor programs receive institutional funding, HBCUs honors programs "face significant financial limitations" (p. 561). Honors programs are known to pay students' cost to attend the university and some students rely heavily on these programs to fund their education (Gasman et al. 2014).

While there are mostly positive reviews from Black honor students at HBCUs, the reviews from students' experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) are different. This difference constitutes a different aspect of growth and development of African American intellect. It specifically speaks to W.E.B. Dubois' (1903) concept of "double-consciousness" where Black students in white arenas are "gifted with a second-sight" -- that one is Black first and then American (p. 3). This speaks to the unique sensibilities associated with navigating different learning environments. The following section will explore this dynamic in more detail.

AA Honor Students' Experiences and Predominantly

White Institutions' (PWIs) Honors Programs

Frank Aydelotte, a Rhodes Scholar who attended Oxford University, is credited with starting the first successful collegiate honors education program in the United States (Rinn, 2003). As the president of Swarthmore College, Aydelotte believed that democracy in education meant that "everyone should be given an equal opportunity for education, everyone should also be given an opportunity to fulfill his or her own capabilities" (The Swarthmore College Faculty, 1941 as cited in Rinn, 2003, p. 33).

The first honors program was announced in 1922 with programs starting in English Literature and the Social Sciences and expanding throughout the 1920s to include honors programs in French, German, Mathematics, Physics, Electrical Engineering, Greek and Latin, Education and Chemistry (Rinn, 2003). By 1939, 636 students had graduated with honors. In 1924, Aydelotte wrote *Honors Courses in American Colleges and Universities* and the report sparked the growth of honors programs across the country (Rinn, 2003).

From a historical perspective, African American (AA) students in honors programs at PWIs have had to manage culture-specific circumstances. Reddick et al. (2017) documented the experiences of the first African American graduates in the Plan II-Honors degree program at the University of Texas in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Reddick et al. focused on the historical significance of Black honors students who broke educational barriers. Students had to balance rigorous curriculum as well as the challenge of being racial minorities in higher education. The authors used this research as a call to action for higher education practitioners, scholars, and policymakers wanting to increase

their enrollment of students of color on campus climates that still are not always welcoming to racial diversity. The shared experiences between AA students were identified as tokenism/isolation and the importance of finding kinship with other AA students, faculty, and staff (Reddick et al., 2017). The authors state that students, faculty, administrators and alumni, who do not identify as AA, need to hear these stories because they are a part of the fabric of AA students' experiences. AA students need individuals of all races who are able "to help them in a way that demonstrates connection rather than paternalism" (p. 97). Moreover, Reddick et al. contend that faculty and staff who advocate for AA students are critical to the success and persistence of Black students.

In addition to the need for faculty and administration cultural competence, the authors also assert that underrepresented students need a campus environment that offers them opportunities to succeed personally and professional--one that allows them to shape a new and better world (Reddick et al., 2017). The article articulates that Black honor students have unique needs which encompass the role of mentorship where pioneering underrepresented groups serve as role models for others like them. In the Plan II-Honors Program, AA faculty members served as role models and under the context of racism and segregation, students were resilient in their educational pursuits.

The experiences of African Americans in honors at PWIs contrast the experiences at HBCUs. Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) concluded that despite their participation in the honors program and their high degree of academic ability, AA high achievers sensed that they were judged based on prevalent social stereotypes regarding the academic abilities of AA students. These external perceptions pushed students to engage in certain behaviors to actively resist stereotypes inside and outside of the classroom. AA honor

students were ignored by both Black and White students at the university level (Fries-Britt, 1998, as cited in Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). Furthermore, "a hostile campus that is racially charged adversely impacts the achievement, integration, and retention of high-achieving AAs at Predominantly White institutions" (PWIs) (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, p. 510). Stereotypical views tend to add additional problems to AA high-achievers who are struggling to define their identities; and, doubts of the academic abilities and talents of AA students have been found to be particularly damaging to their achievement and self-esteem (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Steele, 1997; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

Scott (2017) echoes this sentiment. Scott autobiographically explained his honors experience at a PWI as a multi-faceted, intellectual journey that pushed him academically, professionally, and personally. Scott contends that being an African American honors student in this environment made him feel alienated from his AA peers and gave him the perceived responsibility of correcting his white peers' sense of privilege. Furthermore, Scott proclaims that this experience was self-awakening and created a career path in law and education. By way of Black millennials,[1] Scott culturally defines a specific genre of intellectual curiosity as "Black Excellence" which is exhibited through the struggle and resilience of those who are within the Black community and who uphold a level of academic excellence. Scotts' purpose for the autobiographical article was to provide foundational support for effectively fostering Black Excellence in honors colleges and programs.

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[1]Black Americans who reached adulthood more or less around the millennium (2000). This includes those between the ages of 18 and 34. This generation are known for the tech-savviness and their social and political engagement (Scott, 2017).

Findings from Scott (2017) concludes that "self-emancipation from social pressures and intellectual restraints is what honors must foster, promote, and support for Black millennials" (p. 111). Scott's findings are anchored in scholarship from Simmons, Lowery-Hart, Wahl and McBride (2013) that suggests that there are three internal conflicts that African-American students experience due to their underrepresentation at PWIs.

- Blackness-Whiteness which is indicative by a conflict with students' cultural identity and their pride in their Blackness within White arenas that forces them to assimilate into acting white through their thinking, communication style, and their mannerisms.

- Talking-Silence which is indicative by a student's struggle to speak up and engage in dialogue about their culture or to represent their culture.

- Past-Future which is indicative by a students' conflict between remembering and staying true to their past while embracing their future goals and aspirations.

With respect to the conflicts listed by Simmons et al. (2013), Marsh, Chaney and Jones (2012) used narrative and survey data from high-achieving AA students in a highly selective honors program to examine the emotions experienced by AA students. Research revealed that students displayed resilience by working through feelings of apprehension upon entering a racially diverse school-setting, and students established racial and gender solidarity through social clubs (Marsh et al., 2012). The scope of this study pertained to a highly selective honors high school, however, it offers valuable context to the conversation of Black students' experiences in honors programs,

particularly the importance of Black honor students having the space and opportunity to support one another in such settings. Equally important, Marsh et al. assert that students' abilities to possess strong initiative and motivation, to be goal-orientated, and to experience having agency over self "positively influences the academic performance of Black youth" (p. 39).

The cultural context established by teachers within the academy is important to students' experiences in honors programs as noted by the literature covered thus far between HBCUs and PWIs. The literature suggests that HBCUs were more likely to succeed in connecting students' home culture with their school culture, in connecting with students' heritage, and in connecting student-faculty-peer relationships, all of which play a major role in students' success. The next section, discusses this connection in detail by way of Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) to uncover the crucial role this dynamic plays in educating Black students. Additionally, the lack of connection experienced between students' home culture and school culture as noted among PWIs will also be discussed as evidence of a process that Claude Steele (1997) calls, *stereotype threat*.

If racial stereotypes can influence intellectual functioning and academic identity development among individuals within certain groups (Steele, 1997), then a critical exploration of AA honor students' experiences is needed to further support alternative frames of academics within communities of color. Research within the highest levels of academic attainment among the Black community can open new avenues of understanding among educational practitioners and teachers, and culturally affirming representation can have lasting effects in supporting African American students in

educational spaces. With this in mind, the next section of this chapter discusses the

critical framework that will guide this research, Critical Race Theory.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is utilized as my theoretical framework to address

stereotypes and misconceptions connected to African American students and academic

ability. CRT shares the voices of Black honor students who add understanding to the

phenomenon of intelligence and academic achievement (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Through this framework, this research counters narratives of low-student achievement

and group deficits among students of color while also attending to the power dynamics

within educational hierarchies.

Critical Race Theory History and Background

Critical Race Theory, or CRT, originates from critical legal studies (CLS) and has

been applied to political theory, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology (Schwandt,

2007). Schwandt defines CRT as a theoretical and methodological framework that starts

with the

> …assumption that race and racism are at the very center of social and institutional
>
> life and uses stories, narrative inquiries, and other forms of both quantitative and
>
> qualitative study, to challenge existing assumptions about the social construction
>
> of race in society. (p. 53)

America, in the 1970s and 1980s, saw an outgrowth of critical thinking scholarship along

racial lines and tributes, Harvard law professor, Derrick Bell as the founding figure of the

critical race approach in legal studies when he began to question the reason white jurists

and leaders gave support to the Civil Rights movement (Parker, 2011). He contended

that the *Brown v Board* decision was not with people of color but grounded in white interests instead. American had been receiving global scrutiny in way in which they treated ethnic minority groups. Furthermore, CRT began to grow in Western societies when legislation began to change to accommodate social movements that were intent on challenging mainstream society and its social theories (Paul, 2004).

More recently, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) drew from critical legal studies (CLS) concerning *Brown v Board* (1954) to situate critical race theory into education. The authors highlighted that, years later, the law managed to negate fair schooling for African Americans and Latinos which results in low academic achievement among Black and Brown students. To this end, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) contend that critical race theory in education is an extreme critique of the status quo in education and of the reforms that follow it. There are three basic tenets of CRT: (1) racism is an embedded structure within society, and therefore, counter stories are needed to confront the validity of racialized myths and stereotypes held by mainstream society; (2) because racism is common in educational contexts, affluent-Whites are afforded more opportunities to quality education and economic opportunities than racialized minority groups; and (3) race is a product of social construction that can be invented and manipulated when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011).

How Critical Race Theory was Operationalized in Previous Studies

CRT is quintessential when challenging the historical connection of race and ability (Artiles, 2011). Guided by CRT, Artiles challenged "the complexities of justice in the context of race and ability differences, with a critical eye on the visions of justice" when analyzing disproportionality among racial minorities within special education (p.

158). The hierarchy that schools subscribe to are in direct relation to disparities within special education as seen by the unequal numbers of students from low-socioeconomic status and racialized minorities placed in these classrooms (Artiles, 2011).

Comeaux, Chapman, and Contreras (2020) examined AA students' college section choice using the CRT lens to interpret why AA students were admitted in the University of California (UC), but chose to enroll elsewhere. The authors also found that some students were qualified to attend UC but were denied access. The concluding argument was that colleges and universities were established as the property of Whites which speaks to Delgado's and Stefancic's (2011) assertion of Whiteness – as – property in which the benefits of access to colleges and universities have consistently been enjoyed by White Americans more so than Black Americans. Furthermore, Comeaux et al. (2020) assert that Whiteness has been and continues to be the norm that AA students have to contend with on college campuses.

Furthermore, Harper, Smith, and Davis (2018) used the tenets of CRT to discuss Black students' lack of success in an urban post-secondary institution. The authors' findings suggest that Black students' success is a complicated subject, specifically when white interest's convergence takes place at a university. Within this study, students were admitted to an urban commuter institution, but left before degree completion. The authors assert that while the school was open to access for AA students, its interests was more grounded in financial gains from students than the actual success of the students, prompting more AA students to leave the university in debt.

How CRT Informs My Research

Essentially, this framework offers my research, first, the opportunity to counter-narratives to the bleak statistics and low-student achievement among students of color. CRT allows me to historically track the ways in which high achievement among students of color was first conceptualized and expand on how high achievement is now conceptualized. It creates space for in-depth interviews to capture the realities of collegiate honor students within the academy, and the analysis and interpretation section of my research findings under CRT will examine the power dynamics that surround students directly connected to the phenomenon of high academic achievement. Select tenets of CRT help to understand how hierarchies built into education influence students of color and how students of color use their high-achieving status to navigate the honors learning environments.

Philosophies Connected to CRT Around AA Students' Experiences

Research on HBCUs suggests that when students' race is the norm on college campuses, students are likely to perform better academically. Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) adds an explanation for this assertion in that educational outcomes are shown to be influenced by students who feel valued within educational spaces. A derivative of critical race theory, CRP proposes that the education community seek ways to connect with students' communities to promote better academic success among students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; Paris & Alim, 2014). Ladson-Billings' (1995) work suggests that educators should focus on cultural congruency so that interactions between students and educators subscribe to students' home culture and bring a more enriching experience to the learning environment. This

way of learning helps to improve student academic performance (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as evidenced by Black students' learning experiences in HBCUs' honors programs (Davis & Montgomery, 2011; Nelson Laird et al., 2007). It is plausible that because race and ethnicity are not distracting variables for African American students at HBCUs, students' intellectual growth and development progresses without the added responsibility of defending their racial identity and resisting racial stereotypes.

Furthermore, Claude Steele's exemplary work on stereotype threat brings to light a phenomenon that explains how societal perceptions can be detrimental to students' psyche and self-esteem. According to Steele (1997):

> It is the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies. This predicament threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypically, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype. Called *stereotype threat*, it is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists. (p. 614)

Under further examination, Steele's argument provides an understanding of what some Black students experience on predominantly white campuses. Per the literature on Black honor students at PWIs, it is apparent that students had to contend with racial stereotypes and macroaggressions in addition to navigating through rigorous course work (Scott, 2017; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Simmons et al., 2013).

Overall, critical race theory frames this study from the research questions, to data collection methods, to which participants are central to this study and why. In Chapter V,

I will categorize data gathered from AA students' narratives within select tenets of CRT to answer my research questions:

1. From the perspective of African American Honors Alumni(nae), what intrinsic and extrinsic factors shape academic success?

2. From the narratives of African American Honors Alumni(nae), what value does the Honors' designation offer students?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

To uncover the experiences of African American (AA) honor students in the academy, this qualitative research will use narrative inquiry to explore students' journeys to develop understanding. Narrative inquiry relies on words instead of numbers to conceptualize the experiences of students within honors. In this segment, I will discuss more about the method of narrative inquiry, the participants for the study, the setting, data collection and data analysis procedures. In the last sections of this chapter, I will also explain how I addressed validity, the limitations of this study and my role as the researcher.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the pattern of inquiry for its study…. Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2; as cited in Clandinin, 2006, p. 45)

Narrative inquiry is a methodological response to positivist and post-positivist paradigms designed to give ways of thinking about people's lived experiences (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative inquiry refers to the retelling of a story using narrated text for scientific inquiry. Additionally, narrative research "contains a descriptive account of

the systematic nature of doing the research," where the method of study becomes the variable of study (McNiff, 2007, p. 308). Narrative research is beyond the scope of this current study as I am not looking to investigate the methodological approach itself, but use the method as a means of answering my research questions; therefore, narrative inquiry helped to answer the research questions presented in this research by re-telling the stories of participants (Kim, 2016). In this research, narrative inquiry will help to co-construct meaning centered on academic success within advanced education. As a method, narrative interviews of experiences within honor programs will be collected to capture students' realities within learning environments that tend to be exclusionary towards AA students.

Language is a fundamental feature of the narrative methodological approach, and it acts as a direct route to making meaning with a phenomenon (Riessman, 2005). The retelling of stories through narratives allows for a thematic approach to social science research. Finding common themes across research participants and the events they retell brings attention to a cultural snapshot of high academic achievement and success among African American students (Riessman, 2005).

Moreover, narrative inquiry moves away from starting research within a social justice problem area (Caine et al., 2018). Instead, narrative inquiry seeks to begin with understanding the experiences as a developing story that expands on how research-practitioners come to know a subject, and instead of situating the narrative within a prescriptive problem, the narratives, as a collective, tell where the issues reside. Narrative scholars argue that "identifying problems without attending to lives first can

result in silencing the experiences of participants" (p. 139), which is counterproductive to the goal of my research—to share the voices of those least heard in educational research.

In order to capture the storied lives and experiences of African American students in honors programs, I adopted Seidman's (1998) interviewing technique for qualitative research in the social sciences. One of the most distinguishing qualities of this model of interviewing is that it encompasses a three-interview series that will explore participants' experiences within honors programs. Although Seidman's approach to interviewing is based on phenomenological inquiry, I adopted this style of in-depth interviewing for my narrative inquiry research because of its comprehensive nature. Through open-ended, in-depth inquiry,

> The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second interview allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experiences within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experiences holds for them. (Seidman, 1998, p. 11)

This process offered the best way to fully understand the similarities and nuances of the experiences of African American students in honors programs. The interviews for this study focused on the "what" and "how" of students learning experiences within honors programs placing these experiences within the context of their life stories (Seidman, 1998). Seidman's model pairs well with my theoretical framework in that it shares students' voices within the academy and helps to discuss their perspectives as counter-narratives to mainstreamed ideologies pertaining the status quo that continues to exclude African Americans from accelerated learning programs. Finally, using a critical

approach to narrative inquiry will help to uncover any hidden complexities experienced within honors programs.

Participants

For this study, I collected narratives from African American students who graduated from four-year, public or private, collegiate honors programs. I conducted two (2) in-depth interviews to help build the narratives of AA Honors Alumni who graduated within the last 10 years (May 2010-May 2019) and who self-identified as Black/African American. As lead investigator, I initiated the recruitment process of students who qualified for the study by contacting both the Honors College and the Alumni Association at four-year colleges and universities. University staff and faculty were contacted via phone and email and encouraged to share the advertisement for the study with possible participants. Recruitment from PWIs were particularly challenging. I found HBCUs to be especially helpful in locating possible participants. Over 25 possible participants responded to recruitment efforts from multiple HBCUs. In all, eight (8) participants were selected: two (2) from PWIs and six (6) from HBCUs.

Because narrative interviews are long and in-depth, I aimed to interview 6-10 baccalaureate alumni(nae) who self-identified as Black or African American and graduated from a four-year, public or private, university. Data saturation is reached when new data presents no new themes, no new coding and the study is replicable by other researchers (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that saturation may be obtained by as little as six interviews. Eight (8) participants participated in this study which meets Guest et al.'s guidelines for data saturation. I aimed to acquire narratives that give rich and thick data for analysis—rich meaning

quality and thick meaning quantity (Fusch & Ness, 2015). My loyalty in research resided in establishing quality research; therefore, I sacrificed large amounts of data for more intricate, detailed accounts of data that spoke to the purpose of this study.

I used purposeful sampling which is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). I sought graduates of honors baccalaureate programs because these students have completed the program in its entirety and therefore exemplify successful completion of collegiate honors and academic success within the academy. For this research study, it was necessary to attain the graduate record of each participant. This information provided proof of successful completion of the baccalaureate degree with the honors' designation.

Setting

In summer of 2019, I found very little success in recruiting students in the Chicago area which prompted me to open the research study to students across the nation who attended four-year universities' and colleges' honors programs. Responses came from various individuals in various places, so all interviews took place on-line via Zoom videoconferencing to make meeting and interviewing possible. Participants were interviewed individually at dates and times of the participants' choosing. Interviews began in late July and ended in late October 2019.

Data Gathering

My data collection method came from the three-interview model of Seidman (1998). While Seidman recommends three separate 90-minute interviews with participants, he asserts that alternative structures and procedures can be adopted if the

researcher maintains a structure that allows participants to recreate and reflect on educational experiences within the current context of their lives. To respect participants' time, two 60-minute interviews with each participant included all three steps in the interview model provided by Seidman and participants were allowed to complete the interviews in one sitting. These narrative interviews were audio recorded to capture the dialogue verbatim and to preserve the data for data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell (2016). To ensure ethical guidelines of human subject research, I obtained informed consent from each participant to use their interview transcripts for research purposes, and each participant chose a pseudonym, a fictitious name, to be used on all recordings and write-ups to ensure privacy and confidentiality throughout data generation and data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Narrative interviews were the main method of data generation. In interview 1, participants reconstructed their early learning experiences with schooling and achievement paying special attention to external (people, programs) and internal (motivation, esteem) factors that lead them to pursue collegiate honors (Seidman, 1998). In the second interview, participants described specific details of their educational journeys as collegiate honor students and made meaning with how their journeys through honors education impacted their career pathways going forward (Seidman, 1998). One Follow-up meeting was conducted with participants where they were given the chance to read over their narratives to ensure clarity of previously generated data. At the end of data generation, participants had a detailed educational transcript of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis and data generation happened simultaneously. After transcribing each narrative interview, I used codes to construct the initial categories of themes presented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Clandinin (2007) warns that narrative inquiry data should remain open for multiple interpretations and not forced into set boundaries. Therefore, themes that expanded beyond the theoretical framework of CRT were highlighted and welcomed as new, emerging ways of knowing about the phenomenon of academic success and honors education within the AA community (Clandnin & Rosiek, 2007, as cited in Clandinin, 2007).

Validity

To ensure internal and external validity I employed useful strategies for research credibility. I relied on Seidman's (1998) three-interview process to conduct follow-up meetings to confirm that what was stated within the data was the truth of each participant. Member checking, or respondent validation, helped to ensure that participants' words were placed in the proper context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Respondent validation was also used as an error reduction method for the raw data generated through interviews. Finally, data was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim as not to misrepresent the information disseminated (p. 245).

Limitations

The limitations of this study lie in its small sample size. Due to the number of participants in my research, findings will not be generalizable to society at large. Also, I examined a specific group of learners, Black collegiate honors students. To this effect, findings and conclusions may not represent implications for all Black students or students

at all levels of ability. Additionally, honors education programs vary at various

institutions. Therefore, findings and implication may differ from other colleges' and

universities' honors programs.

Researcher's Role

"Narrative inquirers begin their inquiries either by engaging with participants

through telling stories or through coming alongside participants in the living out of

stories" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). My role in this study was to allow the space and

opportunity for participants to share their experiences and to explore these lived

experiences with them. As researcher, I was the prime means of data collection and data

analysis. As so, I played an important role in the construction of knowledge. Narrative

inquiry expands one's epistemological understanding of a phenomenon by "taking

accurate description of the world as its primary objective" (p. 49). I served as interviewer

and transcriber in data collection and analysis.

Additionally, the intersection of critical race theory and narrative inquiry

expanded my responsibilities to a form of story-telling that expels false consciousness

(Clandinin, 2007). Within this research, I am offering sources of insight that will add to

social science research by capturing the lived experiences of honors' alumni(nae). Paul

(2004) argues that CRT empowers the researcher to look deeper at research, to scan for

issues of essentialism, and to create a space for subjects to speak and change

mainstreamed narratives that reproduce stereotypes and racial oppression within school

spaces. CRT is the driving force of my study. I researched, extensively, the history of

how negative stereotypes of Black students' intellectual abilities were introduced by

noted psychologists and behavioral scientists form ivy-league institutions. I have

surveyed the educational statistics that continue to perpetuate a dismal view of Black

educational proficiency. I have also explained how deficit-thinking among gatekeepers

prevents Black students from having access to high-end education. My task now,

through CRT and narrative inquiry, is to expand the dialogue on intellect and academic

success within advanced learning environments by navigating through AA students'

stories of successful college completion.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of my study was to examine the narratives of students who were able to navigate beyond the K-12 schooling experience through collegiate honors education to capture their realities and to understand this pathway to opportunities for students within the African American community. The purpose of this chapter is to survey the data derived from participants' responses. Piloted under CRT, my research questions considered: What intrinsic and extrinsic factors shape students' academic success? And what value does the honors' designation offer students within the African American community? I used the qualitative research approach of narrative inquiry to explore students' educational journeys. Within this chapter, the reader will view participants' responses to in-depth interview questions that helped to illuminate key experiences and insights.

Participants' Characteristics

In all, eight (8) African American Honors Alumni and Alumnae were selected to participate in this study. Each participant gave an account of his or her educational journey to and through collegiate honors education. Each participant is a graduate of the honors college at a four-year degree-granting, post-secondary institution. All participants

self-identified as African American and graduated within the last ten (10) years. Table 2

offers a list of participants and the degree awarded.

Table 2

List of Honors Alumni(nae)

Participant	Degree Awarded	Major	Institution
Adam	Bachelor of Science	Psychology	PWI
Alexis	Bachelor of Science	Biochemistry/Chemistry	HBCU
Brianna	Bachelor of Science	Biology	PWI
Elle	Bachelor of Arts	Psychology	HBCU
Katrina	Bachelor of Arts	Philosophy	HBCU
Olivia	Bachelor of Science	Mathematics	HBCU
Samantha	Bachelor of Arts	Comparative Women's Studies	HBCU
Veronica	Bachelor of Arts	Sociology	HBCU

Note. This table introduces each participant, the baccalaureate degree earned, participants' degree concentrations, and type of institution attended.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

I audio-recorded and transcribed the narrative interviews via transcription

software. Transcriptions were then uploaded into NVivo 12 Pro data analysis software.

NVivo software was used to establish the data into manageable codes. With my research

questions driven by my theoretical framework, my coding methods consisted of labeling

key words and phrases presented within each transcript that helped to answer my research

questions. From here, NVivo generated reference frequencies which are numbers based

on the popularity of responses within specific codes. Codes were then grouped into larger

categories to find relationship amongst participants' responses. Responses were then

synthesized to find the underlying meaning within each category. The underlined

meaning of each category illuminated major themes that emerged to address my research

questions and theoretical framework. Table 3 gives an example of this process.

Table 3

The Coding Process

Code	>>>	Category	>>>	Theme
Interview Data	Identified Code	Grouped by Frequency	Categories	Major Theme
"parents would help me with homework"	Support	All 8 participants/ 16 examples from data	Parent Enrichment	External Support (Research Question 1)

Note. Example of coding process used to create major theme.

Major Themes within Data

There were three major themes that emerged from the data: external supports, the

regulation of self, and the value of an honors education. Housed under each theme are

sub-themes, or frames, that help to add more context in responding to my research

questions presented in Chapter I. In the next section, I will discuss each major theme

presented in participants' educational journeys in more detail.

PreK-College: External Supports that Shape Academic Success

Anchored onto research question 1 that asked about the extrinsic factors of

academic success, I found several external supports that shaped students' academic

success. External supports included parent enrichment, teacher support, relationships

with peers, and learning spaces.

"Both my parents are teachers, so they would help me with homework, give me

different lessons to do with them after school and things like that to help reinforce

what we were learning." - Elle

Parent enrichment. Parent enrichment refers to the activities and actions taken

on behalf of the family that had lasting effects on expanding students' learning and

enhancing students' skills. All eight participants responded to interview questions

pertaining to family support during their early school years and specifically named their

parents as instrumental people who laid the foundation for their academic development.

Five of eight participants informed that the attended private schools as early as pre-

Kindergarten and acknowledged their parents financial sacrifice. Likewise, through a

conversation on family support, Adam, a recent graduate of psychology shared that his

parents not only sacrificed their time and money to help him in his academics but also

added what he called a "unique component" of academic support through early academic

mentoring from a caregiver. In speaking about the role of the caregiver, Adam stated,

> *She kind of filled in for them when they were busy. So, she would also pick me up*
>
> *and drop me off from grade school and pre-school. You know, she taught me how*
>
> *to take taxis with her, how to recite my address. They would buy workbooks and*
>
> *flashcards and have her review them with me on a regular basis as well as make*
>
> *sure that I not only got that kind of education of like math, science, writing,*
>
> *reading type stuff but also through the arts. She took me to many museums. I was*
>
> *in the park and farmers' markets. Summer camp focused on art education and*
>
> *some sports. So, you know, in addition to their, again, time and financial*
>
> *contributions, they also brung this other person in my life who became almost like*

a dear relative that really helped to facilitate my early stages of education as

well.

Likewise, Katrina added notable insight into the extent with which her parents shaped her academic development into a high achieving student by challenging her and her siblings with academically enriching experiences in reading.

So my parents would read to us at night. And we also read to them. Certain books that we read, when we turned to the back, they had words. Not only site words, but vocabulary words. So they would ask us to read the words as a review from the story and to define the words.

Additionally, she explained that her parents introduced her to fun ways of learning through learning games. These learning games were "intentional" as they helped her with reading, grammar and math. She expressed that learning became fun. She was having fun learning about past-tense verbs and semi-aquatic animals. She was required to work in workbooks that were a grade higher than her actual grade level in school and to work through complex math computations.

My parents and my godfather would really like extend my learning in the classroom. So if I'm learning five times six, they're going to give me, What's 52 times 67? If I'm learning, you know, 10 times 11, then they're going to say, oh, what is 1000 times 567. So, they pushed whatever was going on in the classroom because they were like, if you already know this, there's no point of you keep practicing it. Let's extend your learning.

Moreover, Alexis, Elle and Veronica shared that their parents were educators who placed major emphasis on the importance of education. Veronica's parents were both college

graduates and her father taught high school math. In fact, she stated that her dad was her first pre-school teacher. Within this frame, parental support became a leading factor in building academic success.

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I remember I would be in school... I think I was either in kindergarten or first grade and I

remember my teacher would say, do you want to read to the rest of the class? And I

would read to the rest of the class. And I remember like in fourth grade, we had this thing

called the A.R. test or whatever. And I would always take the A.R test and they would be

like, oh you're on the 13th reading level. And I was like, there's no such thing as a 13th

grade, but whatever! So on from then, they had me in gifted classes in elementary school.

I remembered that. - Alexis

Teacher support and recognition. Seven out of eight participants acknowledged the importance of teacher recognition in their journeys. This frame attends to the teachers who advocated for advanced learning after recognizing the academic potential of the participant. These individuals were also credited with using instructional methods that helped to accelerate learning. In the quote below, Brianna gave a clear demonstration of teacher support and recognition when she responded to questions about her earliest recollection of being seen as gifted,

> *My earliest memory of being noticed was first grade. We had a writing*
>
> *competition where you could submit a story, and I remember I wrote one. I got*
>
> *extra time to work on it. My teacher was like this was just kind of supposed to be*
>
> *a whatever assignment, but I did really well on it. It was about a nursery rhyme,*
>
> *and I enhanced the story line. And I remember my teacher told my parents this is*

really good, and I think she should submit for this writing competition--that I

ended up winning as a first grader. So, I definitely have memories of like my

teachers telling my parents like oh she's a good writer or she's good at this.

From another angle on teachers, Katrina alluded to her middle school teacher as helpful in cultivating her academic abilities within middle school honors,

I had a teacher in middle school who…she was a treat. She was an older White

lady and she was my Honors Literature teacher. She was very strict, but she was

very kind. She always asked us to do readings with novels, write about those

novels--and poetry, writing our own poems... Everything was, "look at this, now

create it." And that's freaking awesome! I'm thinking about it now. So, like we

were always creating like poetry units or creating like our own short stories or

creating all these things. But we also had to read the curriculum, of course, all

these varieties of authors from Edgar Allan Poe to, you know, Mark Twain or

Charles Dickens or whoever else. So, she stands out because she also helped me

with public speaking.

What became a prominent sentiment among participants was that teachers would notice that these students were "bored" in the classroom and were then forced to create more challenging work for them. Both Katrina and Veronica, alluded to early experiences in class jumping, where their teachers allowed them to attend fifth grade classrooms for reading enrichment as a first and third grader, respectively. Reading with the upper grades was a common response among participants to interview questions pertaining to being recognized as a gifted student. Participants stated that their skillsets and abilities

were recognized and enhanced at some point during their primary school years, not only by their parents but also by their teachers.

_____

As an individual from a smaller group of North siders, I was able to flow in

between and create friendships with people from different tiers--whether it was

Honors, College Prep, different neighborhoods, different backgrounds. And that

was something that, because that was so successful, that helped to add to my

confidence in the classroom and out and really made high school a very eye-

opening and positive, you know, confidence-building, identity-building period.

-Adam

Friend/Peer support. This frame focused on the relationships developed between participants and their peers who became a valued support system for students. Six out of eight alumni(nae) pointed to having allies within the classroom who they could share experiences with and who could offer encouragement inside and outside of the academic setting. When he talked about going into high school honors, Adam stated,

It was something that I looked at as a new opportunity to engage with people who

were different from me who grew up with different experiences. And we took the

opportunity to learn from each other, and I realized that I have skills and

experiences that I can share with others just as they can do the same with me.

Whether it was through academics or through social skills, it was something that

really helped to boost my connections and relationships with people in high

school to the point where I would feel comfortable speaking.

Here, Adam showed that peer comradery had an impact on his development as a student because he was able to not only socialize with other students but also learn from them and vice versa. When giving a look at her unique tracking experiences during middle and high school, Veronica added,

> *I had a cohort of people who were with me through seventh and eighth grades where we all helped each other out. And we all were able to succeed together in these classes together and stick together. It was just as much about fellowship as it was like the academic portion. I met some of my best friends and we kind of pushed each other to stay on task because we shared like goals with each other in terms of people who wanted to pledge or people who wanted to join certain organization. So, we pushed each other to achieve goals.*

This trend of building friendships and community continued within collegiate honors for Samantha who reflected on how extracurricular activities outside of Honors College helped her build relationships inside the class which added, again, a certain measure of comfort for her to navigate through school.

> *They (extra curriculars) helped in so much that I could see my classmates outside of class. Like I could develop a non-purely, academic relationship with them... I think that was really helpful to just get outside of the classroom and still see people and have relationships with them and understand what's going on in their life and to be more comfortable when we're in class.*

> _____

> *I didn't really like to study that much in my room. I mean, I would use my desk when I needed to, but I liked going out and even that walk back, you know, once*

you finished...That felt good! You're like, I got my work done and your like

walking across campus and it's gorgeous. Like, I love that feeling! - Olivia

Learning spaces. Six out of eight participants contested to actively using learning spaces such as open classrooms, science labs and study rooms for preparing for tests and studying academic materials, specifically during the college years. Upon reflection, Alexis pointed to going to office hours to meet with professors as a way of staying abreast in her college studies. She stated that the library was also a space she would use to study. She wasn't alone in this regard. Likewise, Samantha explained,

When we were studying, I would go to the library and I would go there because I

would always run into a friend from there and I would try to rent out a room like

a private room and just tell everyone that I'm going to be there all day and just

have people come through.

When the library wasn't employed, participants acknowledged other spaces that helped them to focus on their studies. Olivia pointed to the quiet places on campus as instrumental areas for learning and sharpening academic skills.

I would love going to like a quiet place. So like the dorm, you know. You can go

to the library sometimes and that was fun. But it was social hour a lot of times,

which was great. Sometimes you need that. But I think as I got older and wiser, as

I went on, I would just go to like the Science Center. And the nice thing was all

the classrooms were open. So, I could just go sit there and work in the computer

lab. I would just find a quiet place.

_____

PreK-College: The Regulation of Self

These factors explore the embedded behaviors and attitudes that participants alluded to within their narratives. Anchored onto my research question that asked about the intrinsic factors of academic success, several innate qualities were presented in the data. In order to give a comprehensive understanding of these qualities, they were linked in relationship to one another as they often overlapped. Among these qualities were the relationship between discipline and developing habits, between self-doubt and self-confidence, between autonomy and vision, and the relationship between perfectionism and pride.

_____

I managed my time well, but it was more of a discipline thing. It was like, you know you gotta get it done… It wasn't like I couldn't get it done. I just had to have the discipline to get it done. Everything was a discipline thing. -Veronica

Discipline and developing habits. All eight participants spoke to the importance of discipline in developing study habits. Discipline refers to a code of behavior whereby a student establishes the ability to plan and control how one spends his or her time in a day to effectively accomplish one's academic goals. This section explores how participants juggled the demands of school, work, and leisure. Adam's narrative spoke sternly about this topic when he was asked about his ability to manage his time. During his interview, he spoke about the clear distinction between the rigor of honors and the rigor of being pre-med, simultaneously. In all, his response below shows how students may battle with being disciplined.

So, I'd say freshman year was not a bad balance. Sophomore year and Junior as

my coursework became a little bit more strenuous in my other courses outside of

honors, it became a bit harder to find that balance. And sometimes there would be

some slip ups between social life and school life and other times you'd be in a

library for like 14 hours straight, then you know, you have to stop and ask

yourself is it because of the coursework or was it because I'm behind and I need

to do the 14 hours in order to get stuff done that I could have done in 3-hour

increments over the past two weeks? I don't know. That's here and gone.

Here, Adam illustrates that self-accountability is necessary when there is a lack of self-discipline. Furthermore, when reflecting on the demands of college and their many involvements on campus, Katrina and Samantha illustrated that discipline is all about knowing one's self and setting limits. Their narratives showed that they had the ability to discern what was feasible versus what was not to refrain from over exhausting themselves. On the contrary, there is something to be learned from participants who believed they did not manage their time well. Although tasks were completed, sometimes assignments and responsibilities took priority over self-care as Brianna explained.

I was pretty organized timewise, but I was definitely really exhausted. I was

always tired. I was the one who got sick a lot because I was just like putting way

too much on myself because I was like I don't want to get bad grades. I really

wanted to show up for my involvements, and show up for the Honors College, and

be a RA... So for me, I did a lot of showing up for other people, but not really

showing up for myself...My time-management was like, can I fit in my academics

and my involvement all in one day? So I did have good time-management, but I

didn't include all the things that I needed to include in my time management like

self-care. Self-care wasn't part of it at all.

For Alexis, focusing on school responsibilities was fairly easy because her schoolwork was an escape.

I grew up very, very poor. And so, I didn't have other distractions. For a while… I

will say this, I was homeless for lots of my childhood. So to me, there was no

other distractions. Like, you don't have cable. You don't have Internet. All I have

is my work. So, I felt like that was the only thing I could do. I mean, I love my

work. But it was really the only thing I could do. And I just went to school and

that's how I sort of focused myself and tried to take my mind off of whatever was

happening at home. I think, really, just not having any distractions, and then just

having faith, like really, really helped me persevere.

While Alexis gravitated toward using school as a tool to escape her family's circumstances, Veronica was proud of her ability to escape school on occasions due to civic engagements and community service. She was heavily involved in organizing student events; however, she disclosed that, at times, it was all a little too much.

I dealt with really bad anxiety. I used to have panic attacks in high school as well.

But it was just because of the pressure that I put on myself and that I felt from

around me. But I always like came out on the other side as victorious. And that's

when I learned about the difference between depression and anxiety, because

most people who have anxiety pushed through. So externally, everybody thinks

they're okay, versus depression-- you kind of like give up on everything. So, yeah,

it was my first run into like mental health as well. But at the time I didn't know.

But of course, I grew to know what was going on with me.

While participants illustrated how effective --or ineffective-- they were at time-management, it was clear that they were disciplined enough to develop keen study habits when preparing for tests or learning academic materials. As participants reflected, certain study habits stood out among the rest; planning and organizing was mentioned the most. A noticeable aspect of participants' behavior was their ability to tailor their study habits as Alexis explained,

I pretty much would go to class every day, and for chemistry, it was simpler because like I felt like it was something I was sort of naturally good at, so it didn't really take as much study time as other courses. So that one was pretty simple, I guess. But for like other courses like calculus, I would do a lot of practice problems-- like any technical course or physical science-- I would do a lot of practice problems.

Likewise, Adam added,

My study habits needed to be adjusted from time to time. Especially coming right out of high school. You had to switch it up and it took maybe a few fall backs before you kind of got the kinks ironed out and knew what you were doing. That would also change per course especially in honors. You know you really had to tailor per semester, per professor and per course content. Some classes we had exams. Others we only had papers. Some times we had papers due every two weeks. And sometimes we had papers due three times a semester. So you know it

really varied. It was just part of that trying to stay organized and tailor your study

habits to the course that you're dealing with at that time really.

Essentially, discipline was necessary for developing study habits, but an imbalance in

habits diminished self-care.

_____

I'm here at this top university, and everybody else is like, hey, I'm from Duke. I'm

from Harvard. I'm from other institutions. So sometimes, it may seem like I don't

belong. I have to tell myself all the time, like you do belong here. And I think in

general, sometimes we just need to hear that. So, hopefully, if we have other

people interested in education, higher education or whatever, we may have to

always remind them that, you know, you may not look like anybody else, but I

promise you, you definitely do belong there. - Alexis

Imposter syndrome/Self-doubt mediated by self-confidence. Self-doubt and

self-confidence were discussed by six out of eight participants. This frame speaks to the

moments when participants struggled with building confidence in their abilities. While

there were expansive responses to interview questions regarding students' perceptions of

being considered smart, one of the most salient responses was the sentiment of self-doubt

or second guessing. Nonetheless, participants' responses revealed that the battle between

self-doubt and self-confidence was an important part of their academic development as an

honors student. For instance, when Brianna reflected on her journey from high school to

collegiate honors she stated,

At the time, I mean I didn't know about imposter syndrome. I didn't know what

that was at the time. But, while I was in the magnet program, I definitely was like

wow, I'm not as good as these other students. Even though I got really good

grades; I graduated with a 4.0. I was a good student. And I didn't feel like I was

good enough the majority of the time that I was there…I graduated like eighth in

my class, and I still was like, I don't know if I deserve to be here.

Upon applying to Honors College she added,

I actually almost didn't apply for the Honors College. It was a separate

application for the university I went to. I was like, what if I can't handle this? I

thought I was doing okay. Even though I had a 4.0, I was just doing okay. But I

was actually doing really great! And I thought I wouldn't be able to handle it… I

thought I had an okay S.A.T. score. I had a great S.A.T. score! I probably could

have applied to some other schools, but I just didn't think I could handle it even

though I was doing pretty well in school.

Brianna's responses casted a light on her battle against "imposter syndrome" where

students question their sense of belonging. She confronted this ideology when speaking

on her perception of being an honors student in her magnet program. Her initial

perception of honor students was "anyone can be an honors student if they work hard

enough"; however, she grew to resist this stance and began to understand that being in

honors' spaces can actually cause students to second guess their abilities even if they

work hard. In a similar way, Adam explained his college experience with significant

context,

There were several courses that I'd taken for my premed, prerequisites that were

just, I mean, some of the most stress.... Some of the most stress I've ever been

under. In my biochemistry course, my organic chemistry course, my cell biology

courses were three in particular that you just, you know, you just fall into a hole

so quick and then you just try to spend the rest of the semester digging yourself

out and that really did a number to my self-confidence in an academic setting that

I hadn't never experienced before. And now that you know something about my

academic past-- primary, high school-- now I'm finally facing that wall of

coursework that causes you to self-doubt your abilities, causes you to tend to want

to compare yourself to others and not in the best way because some of the kids by

nature in the premed programs were very competitive.

That was the case for biochem and that was the case for organic

chemistry. That was the case for cell bio. I did not end up where I wanted to be. I

ended up, okay. I ended up where I was not allowed to retake if I wanted to

because I had met that requirement. I passed…

But just did I pass!? Did I? Did I really? Because really coming from a

mindset with such self-confidence for academic achievement over these years and

now encountering these subjects where maybe you should have put more effort in.

Maybe I'm not cut out for this. Maybe, maybe, maybe… there are all these

different variables of self-reflection.

Adam indicated that even though he may have been confronted with self-doubt at times

of perceived academic-defeat, the academic-wins helped to build self-confidence.

I really had a strong sense of self and self-confidence during all those three or

four years that any time I doubted myself or doubted my ability or started to at

least feel, like, Oh my God, there's this independent research project that we have

to do junior year. We have to write a seven-page paper. You know, these big

projects that the older kids that I was closest with, would like gas up and then that

next year, thinking how am I ever going to get through AP calculus?

You know, that was before it actually happened. When I was going

through it, I just kind of went with it and just kind of took it piece by piece. One

step at a time. And then once I had established that firm approach to whatever

specific task it was, once I established that firm approach of confidence, I'd follow

it up with my educational ability. There would be certain times where I would get

it done and I would be satisfied with it, but then it would turn out to be one of the

best projects of the entire class. And for me, I certainly cared about it. So I put in

some effort. I don't want to detract from any of that, but I didn't put that much

weight into it, yet I still got out more than what I felt I even put in. And it was

good enough, if not better, and that was really encouraging. That was really

something that added to my confidence as an honors student to the point where I

reached that self-personalized motto of "if I could do that, I could do this."

What Adam and Brianna highlighted is that building self-confidence helps students to

overcome those self-destructing comparisons to their peers that is synonymous of self-

doubt. More so, Olivia offered another aspect to this topic when she spoke about the fear

of failure. To Olivia, the fear of failure was enough to inspire action.

I was running out of time. I had to do something. You know, there was a lot of

fear there. So, it was like, OK, the project is due to the honors program at this

time. Alright, that's my final deadline. Just get it in. I got it in...You know, it's kind

of like one of my friend says just hold your nose and do it. And I didn't like that

because I'm the opposite… When I'm learning and doing, I'm like, Oh, I love

knowledge, and this is wonderful. And now I'm like, Oh my God, I don't feel like

that with this right now. So, it kind of sucked.

"Academically, I was a perfectionist by nature. I had all A's, and I was pushing

myself to understand the material." - Katrina

Perfectionism and pride. Sentiments of perfectionism and pride were mentioned by five out of eight participants. This frame speaks to participants' competitive nature and refusal to want to accept any standard short of academic perfection. Katrina's sentiment above was echoed across the data. However, findings also revealed that perfectionism could also be considered a double-edged sword as revealed by Olivia.

Yeah, well, I guess one internalized expectation that I had was like this just

adherence to like perfection and always doing like excellent work to the point

where I didn't quite know how to handle it when I got my first B in third grade. I

was so upset, I was like, oh my gosh, it's not perfect! I remember I cried so hard. I

think that it was just like, oh, you've always done well, just keep doing great. And

not so much like, well if you don't do great then what?...Proud but kind of like, oh

yeah, that's Olivia. She just always does great.

In addition to students adhering to perfection, some mentioned that they also were not inclined to ask for help, even if they needed it. For example, Brianna stated,

I was definitely someone who did not ask for help when I felt like I needed it or

didn't really complain or like reach out to people. For me, if I'd felt like I needed

help, I didn't really seek it out.

Likewise, Olivia stated,

When I had trouble with like multiplying three digit numbers together, I just was

like, I don't know how to ask for help.

What Brianna and Olivia introduced was that there is pressure in being smart because the

assumption is that smart students will not need help. This assumption challenges the

identity of an honor student in that they are not allowed to be vulnerable in their

perfectionism.

_____

When I was in fourth grade, I had a science/social studies teacher, and I

remember we had to do a project on something with the solar system. And don't

ask me why, but my subject that I wanted to do was the Van Allen Belt. And he

looked at me like, what!?! People are doing it on Mercury and Venus, and you're

going to do something that no one's ever heard of. And I was like, well, I want to

do a Van Allen belt. That's what I'm gonna do. - Katrina

Autonomy and vision. Autonomy and vision were alluded to by four out of eight

participants. This frame emerged to describe participants' ability to self-govern

themselves and exercise a sense of independence over academic tasks. Participants were

comfortable with working independently, in fact, Brianna, Veronica and Katrina vividly

remembered preferring to work alone. Brianna stated, "when it came to my school, I just

kind of did my own thing." Academic freedom and independence were prized because

that sense of autonomy allowed students the space to be in their own creative world of

learning. Veronica spoke to the power of autonomy stating,

When it came to school, I made a lot of decisions for myself. It was more so like,

what would look good in the future? What looks good now?

Here, she shows her ability to exercise free will in creating her future in academics. This type of independent, self-reflection helped shape students into academic visionaries.

College: The Value of the Honors' Designation

This theme was anchored onto the second research question in this study that sought to understand the value of an honors education within communities of color. This theme pertained to how graduating from honors college affected students' and their career pathways. A few critical frames were presented in the data: the advanced study track as a pipeline to college and graduate school, the uniqueness of the Honors' College curriculum and courses, and the Honors' capstone projects.

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*The AP English students were the ones that everybody knew were gonna pass the high school exam. You know, they're going to have the top scores. So, I started taking those classes. I took both AP English classes. I took honors physics. I took all my environmental science in honors. The math classes were all honors. I took honors chemistry. I think the only thing I didn't take honors in was the languages. And that's just because it was French and I'm just not that crazy! - *Samantha

Advanced study track in K-12…College bound. Seven out of eight of the participants' responses suggested that the rigor of a K- 8 honors education, of magnet programs, and of selective high schools were highly desired. Students were diligently seeking opportunities for advanced study courses prior to college. For example, Brianna mentioned that she took the initiative to apply to her high school's magnet program while she was in middle school. The application process mirrored that of college admission

criteria in that the program evaluated her based on her middle school GPA, math tests scores and a written essay. Once in the program, Brianna took honors and advanced study courses.

Similarly, Veronica's narrative explained that she began honors and advanced study during middle school.

Basically, it was this thing called Academic Center. It is a seventh and eighth grade high school program. They had it in my district. And some of the more prestigious, most prestigious high schools in Chicago, they have this program. And basically, you test into the program and you go to school and you start taking a high school class as a seventh grader. So, I was taking Spanish I and Freshman Algebra in the seventh grade and also Freshman English. I had three high school classes as a seventh grader.

She continued,

I also did dual enrollment at the university. So, I took college classes my senior year of high school. And all through high school, I took AP, honors, and I took a few of the IB classes too.

As seen by Veronica, rigor and academic competence during the primary grades established her for high school honors, and high school honors prepared her for collegiate honors. While some alumni(nae) mentioned that it was hard initially to adjust going from high school to college, that adjustment was short lived for Alexis. Alexis, who also was an honors student throughout her K-12 academic years, reflected on the adjustment from high school to college saying,

At first, I didn't adjust too well because since I had taken all those college courses (in high school), I was in upper level courses as a (college) freshman. So it was a little harder. But by mid semester, I eventually got everything down and for the most part, like I had great grades the first semester.

Additionally, Brianna concluded,

I think I adjusted well to the academic parts of studying, doing homework, and taking tests, especially because I was in a magnet program. I do think that was a big component that I was mostly taking AP courses and accelerated courses for high school whereas like some of my peers didn't.

Here, participants show that taking advanced study courses before college is what helped to set the stage for success in college.

For me, honors always went really well. Honors was a break from the sciences. Honors was a chance for me to meet other people outside of the premed program. - Adam

The Honors College Curricula and Courses

This frame speaks to the structure of the honors curricula in college and to the content of the courses that participants cherished. Within this frame, six of the eight Alumni(nae) were more than happy to reflect on what they learned throughout college and how their college courses brought a unique and fresh approach to earning their degrees. For instance, Adam alluded to the advantage of being in the Honors College by stating,

I feel like being premed and being honors was beneficial because no more than psychology you get a chance to work with the humanities. You get a chance to talk

about socio-political issues. You get a chance to focus on art and music and media and stuff that if you aspire to be a physician, like I do, will come back to be beneficial when you're dealing with patients--patient care and relating to a person and approaching them and treating them as a human being and not just another case, not just another symptom. So, the honors program really helped to reinforce that--continuing to let me grow with that mindset--and had I not taken it and been solely premed I think it would have been harder for me to maintain… It would've been harder to continue to enrich that had I stayed bio/premed all the way through.

Adam's response says that the honors' curriculum and courses bring balance to students who are in the sciences to which, Alexis also attested to as a biochemistry/chemistry graduate.

In addition to reflecting on the curriculum, participants were asked to reflect on college honors courses that stood out the most. The courses that students found most interesting were subjects that stemmed from the humanities. Samantha, a women's studies graduate, mentioned the impact of a great instructor that delivered great course content.

It was one professor--I was like this is an amazing professor-- and I wanted to take whatever she was teaching. So, I had a class on capitalism, like global capitalism, but not from an economic view, but more like the social impacts of capitalism. And I really enjoyed that class. Then we had another class about girlhood and how, the idea of being a girl is a constructed idea and how girls are usually constructed as white girls and anything that's not a white girl is now

deemed a little different and is highly surveilled and regulated. I really liked

taking classes with this one professor because it made me think about the world a

little bit differently. And it made me a little bit more critical with my analysis.

While the some participants mentioned specific honors courses, Katrina added that her

most influential classes were not honors courses, but were listed by the honors program

as classes that would count towards her degree in philosophy.

I was literally about to say some of my influential classes were not honors. We

had a class. It was one of my humanities classes, and it was a humanities class

that focused on the contemporary arts. But it was a class that brought us into

meditation, journaling, painting, the arts, breathing. It was like a whole class

of...when I thought of the arts, I didn't think of that, but the class was amazing. I

looked forward to that class because I knew, I can get my meditation out the way,

and I can learn with others... That class was on point.. Amazing! Exclamation

Point!

Additionally, Elle who was a psychology graduate added,

I would say one class for sure that was really influential to me was.. I took an

honors literature and terrorism class. So, looking at different pieces of literature

having to do with terrorism in different parts of the world. I also took a black

psychology class my senior year. I was really happy to take that class. It was

really, really great for me because as I said, I'm a psychology major and

something that's really important to me is potentially creating more culturally

sound intervention techniques. And so learning about psychology from the black

perspective and learning about the different traumas that African-Americans face

that have come from slavery and just breaking all of these different manifestations

down was just really, really interesting for me and something that I really took a

lot away from also.

Given the degree of rigor and the challenge that alumni(nae) were used to in the K-12

sector, the Honors College at four-year universities provided the space and opportunity

for students to experience courses and subject matter within the humanities and arts,

courses that focused on cultural relevancy and courses that challenged how they viewed

the world. These courses that were included within the honors college helped students to

further develop their socialization skills; and, in the case of Katrina, even helped her

maintain her love for spiritual balance through meditation.

My senior honors project was probably the most daunting task that I had to complete.

Just because it was such a huge undertaking, and I kind of ended up doing most of it in a

two-week period, which probably wasn't the best as far as doing that project. But I spent

a lot of time on it.

I also really cared about it. So, I think that also has something to do with it…. When you

really care about the assignment you're working on, you really want to, I guess, do it

justice, and really present yourself well. So, I really put a lot of pressure on myself to do

my best on that assignment and to really make sure that it was good quality... My Honors

Senior Project. - Elle

Honors' Capstone Projects

Honors capstone projects were mentioned by five out eight of the participants as

one of the most challenging aspects of collegiate honors and also the most rewarding.

Importantly, these projects began to pave the way for career paths. Alexis, now an ivy-league medical student, stated that her honors thesis was a huge undertaking that created opportunities for publications within the field of chemistry.

> *For honors you had to do like a honors thesis. And for me, I had to write a paper. I was also working on a publication. Getting my chemistry work published. So it was hard. But like my mentor at the time was very serious about publications. So, I think it was just like making sure I was writing. Writing and editing my publication and my thesis was a lot of work.*

Furthermore, Katrina stated,

> *My philosophy thesis was a little challenging. I did the metaphysics of the mind, body, spirit and soul. Mine looked at the comparatives of the Eastern philosophy and Western philosophy and comparing their ideologies. It was an abstract piece. I read it in 2017 again and I said this is why I chose that; because it deals a lot with what I do now.*

Finally, Samantha added,

> *I remember my thesis being a really big deal because I had studied abroad to get data. So I did some craziness. I started off after my sophomore year, I went to Peru for the summer and then I went to Brazil for a semester…I went to South Africa to volunteer at a school. I came back to school and went to Germany for the summer. And then I remember flying from Germany back to school to start senior year. When I was in Germany, I was looking through archives. I was getting data. I was meeting with professors, trying to figure out what my thesis was going to be. And then when I got back that senior year, I was presenting at*

conferences. And I was really excited because I got to present at Princeton and

that was a bit of a dream of mine. I got to present at a couple other universities.

And all the time, I was working on my thesis while presenting at all of these

conferences.

Honors Alumni(nae) used their honors' capstone projects to propel themselves further

into their current career fields. Essentially, these projects afforded them the time and

resources needed to strategically craft pathways to opportunities.

Summary

In all, the purpose of this dissertation was to utilize personal narratives from

honors alumni(nae) within the African American community to capture their realities as

honor students navigating honors education. The purpose of this chapter was to examine

the findings from my data. Major themes that emerged from the data pertained to the

extrinsic factors associated with students' support systems, the intrinsic factors that

regulate the academic-self, and the significant curricular experiences afforded through the

honors' designation. In the following chapter, I will analyze and interpret how these

findings addressed my research questions, literature review, and theoretical framework.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Overview of Study

My objective in this dissertation was to examine the experiences of African

American Honors Alumni(nae) to discuss factors that shaped academic success, and to

discover the value of honors education within communities of color. In this chapter, I

will synthesize the major findings in light of the literature review from chapter II. Then, I

will interpret the findings based on the theoretical framework, Critical Race Theory

(CRT). Finally, I will cover implications for practice and recommendations for future

research.

Discussion: Contributions to Existing Literature

Access: High School Level

Participants within this study were considered gifted early in their academic

careers. All participants reflected on being tested or considered for gifted classes as early

as the primary grades. Katrina, Olivia and Alexis were tested in first grade and placed in

the gifted program in second grade. Veronica, Samantha and Adam were recognized as

early advanced readers in elementary school. To add, Brianna was considered advanced

in creative writing and Elle was considered artistically gifted by fifth grade. Nonetheless,

Participants were tracked into highly selective high schools and AP/honors programs

essentially being grouped with other students of the same ability as mentioned by Barnard-Brak et al. (2011).

Findings from this current research question Shaw et al.'s (2012) list of barriers that prevent students from participating in gifted education at the district level. Within this study, participants' and their parents took the initiative in pursuing advanced learning opportunities which does not support Shaw et al.'s findings of (1) student and parent lack of awareness, and (2) lack of encouragement from parents as preventive barriers to access. For example, Brianna took the initiative to apply to her high school's magna program while she was in middle school. Heavily influenced by her mom's academic excellence, Elle attended a college prep high school to follow in her mom's footsteps, and Veronica's parents initiated her process of attending one of the most prestigious high schools on the south side of Chicago while she was in middle school. Participants and parents took active agency over learning opportunities very early on by starting the application process and completing AP examinations for college credit. Also, findings in my study allude to the recognition and encouragement of teachers in the process of accessing AP and advance learning opportunities for students.

Honors: Post-Secondary--Access to Collegiate Honors Admission

Shaw et al. (2012) discussed a lack of encouragement from school personnel as a barrier to entry into high school honors and AP, but this was not mentioned by participants discussing their K-12 experiences; however, participants did acknowledge a lack of recruitment efforts on behalf of college personnel. Katrina and Brianna felt that they had to seek out the honors college themselves for entry.

Furthermore, existing literature on Honors College admissions used quantitative analysis to identify qualifying variables for success in honors programs to which SAT/ACT tests scores and G.P.A were two predictor variables for success. However, little emphasis was devoted to explaining how students acquired high tests scores and high GPAs as catalyst to academic progression. McKay's (2009) findings suggested that high school GPA was the best predictor of honors program completion because the programs are more interested in the average of all grades accumulated over time. As expected, all participants in this study meet the entry criteria for their collegiate honors program. In fact, in alignment with McKay, the current study shows that, for example, Alexis entered the honors college a semester or two ahead because of her high GPA from advanced practice exams and dual credit courses she attended in high school. Essentially, gaining college credit in high school did prepare students for success in college.

No data surfaced that mentioned tests as a hindrance for entrance into collegiate honors' programs (Murray, 2017; Rhea; 2017). In fact, Adam had practiced taking the PSATs as a middle schooler in addition to the, yearly, Terra Nova test given to private schoolers, so he was well versed in test taking. Furthermore, Brianna mentioned that the combination of her GPA and SAT score could have gained her entry into ivy-league schools had she applied to those institutions. Participants' responses mostly spoke of G.P.A requirements--which they all meet—and a writing sample. The writing sample was one of the only threats to participation for Veronica who admitted to not being the strongest writer and maneuvering away from these criteria for entry into her honors program. Adam shared that the process and requirements for applying to college honors was not a barrier for him, but that it was a barrier among his peers who qualified for

honors but chose not to apply. Honors applications are an additional step in the college admission process, so participants within this study had to adhere to two processes. Findings derived from regression models offer a top-down approach to predicting success. From narrative inquiry, I can add that the best predictors of success in college lie in early childhood education and family support.

Furthermore, Murray (2017) asserted that the highly selective nature of honors programs is important in upholding the value of the honors' designation. To avoid selection bias, where favoritism and discrimination could reform, I concur. In fact, alumni preferred the exclusivity of honors and the perks of the honors programs such as early registration, internship opportunities and research opportunities. The honors' designation created an identity within students that encouraged them to uphold a standard of learning. Students are enticed by the prestige and exclusivity of the honors designation as seen by Veronica who stated her motivation for entry and completion of honors was a "rank" thing. She spoke to the differences between an "honors" A and an "IB" A. Both are As, but in high school, IB As rank higher than the other--so higher rank brings more opportunities. Furthermore, Adam recognized the significance of being an honors student when he was encouraged by his high school counselor to "hit the ground running" in his classes. In effect, the title of "honors" made him view himself as an honors student who, in his own words, "had a need for" and who could "accomplish subject matters with high achievement and accomplishment."

Frana and Rice (2017) informed of the conflict of transferability of credits between intercollegiate honors programs. Data from this current study aligns with this notion; however, my findings underscore a discrepancy in transferability of credits from

high school honors to collegiate honors. A few participants who entered college with college credit graduated with a surplus of credits that transferred but did not necessarily count towards graduation, illustrating wasted time, money and effort.

Black Honor Students' Experiences and HBCU Honors Programs

Previous research on African American honor students at HBCU's asserted that this environment was more supportive and engaging for students, and that programs within HBCUs give room for effective learning and collaboration between African American students and faculty (Davis & Montgomery, 2011; Dula, 2016; Nelson Laird et al., 2007). This current research aligns with this notion. Students who attended a HBCU reported, unanimously, of the relationships they were able to build with faculty and advisors on campus. Katrina reported that many of the advisors at her school were like "little mothers in a way," because they were there for her academically, socially and emotionally. Olivia and Veronica incited that they were comfortable on campus and felt valued as students. Participants at HBCUs spoke highly of the open-door policy at their schools which had an impact on the campus climate and students' feelings of acceptance and identity development.

Dubroy (2015) acknowledged the HBCU stance of developing students into well-balanced, well-rounded individuals of which participants echoed in their narrative responses. Faculty and courses were instrumental in exposing students to a wealth of content around prolific political issues in American culture. In addition to course content, students were also shaped by the stipulations placed on extra-curricular activities--from community service engagements, academic clubs and teaching opportunities, to arts'

societies, the honors student association and religious organizations and affiliations. Students were encouraged and supported in becoming well-rounded scholars.

Furthermore, I found alignment with research concerning HBCU honor students and professional vocations (Dubroy, 2015). Dubroy contributed this connection to dedicated faculty and administrators at the universities. Olivia and Alexis incited that faculty and mentors wrote recommendations letters for them. Samantha explained how her program in women's studies offered her ample opportunities to study abroad. These actions on behalf of the faculty and staff spearheaded the careers of their students. Most of the HBCU participants within this study continued on to earn graduate degrees, one has completed a doctorate degree, another is a Fulbright scholar, and another is building a career in government. Additionally, HBCUs' natural linkage to AA students' heritage was also key in shaping students' identity development.

Participants who attended HBCUs expressed appreciation for the level of intentionality placed on courses steeped in AA history. Students were happy that the curriculum not only acknowledged their heritage but also taught them extensively about their heritage from Ancient African topics--taught by an array of African American/Afro-Latina(o) instructors and lecturers--to classes devoted specifically to the discussion and analysis of W.E.B. DuBois' concept of "two-ness." Likewise, participants were more than happy to have teachers in front of them that looked like them and who they could look to as an example.

Unlike previous works listed in my literature review, this research found that discipline bias was mentioned in regard to professors who saw students based on their academic majors—within the humanities and sciences—suggesting that college

instructors' perceptions of students hold value and if not confronted, can create distance. In other words, students did not want to feel that because they were majors in the humanities that they were unable to grasp the sciences, or that because they were in the sciences that they could not critically think and write like a humanities major. Another acknowledgement was that HBCUs should place more emphasis on promoting PhDs, specifically in a variety of fields. A final drawback that participants from HBCUs discussed concerns when students leave these cultural institutions and find that other spaces—graduate schools, professional work environments—are not as welcoming. Some participants within this study went on to PWIs for graduate school and professional studies and discussed the difference in the campus climate.

There were mixed reviews between participants concerning the financial limitations of study abroad programs at HBCUs (Gasman et al., 2014). Samantha was a stark proponent of her study abroad program at her institution, but Elle shared that study abroad was not highly publicized at her HBCU institution. Also important to note, the financial contributions that the honors college provided for students' tuition and fees were stark motivators for program completion.

Black Honor Students' Experiences and PWI Honors Programs

Reddick et al. (2017) discussed the cultural-specific circumstance that African American students faced during the 1960s and 1970s in honors education. Educational scholars have been able to pinpoint how the learning environment in honors can cause internal conflicts within African American students, particularly pertaining to their academic abilities and social perceptions (Marsh et al., 2012; Scott, 2017; Simmons et al., 2013; Steele, 1997). My research supports this claim. Participants who attended PWIs,

either during K-12 or at post-secondary institutions reported the difficulties of having to navigate these predominantly White spaces, and the injustices encountered.

Brianna explained the conflict of being treated as the "token Black person" in the Honors college at her college institution. She spoke in terms of being invited to participate on panels, to be a part of brochures for the campus and attending different events but struggling to build relationships with faculty and advisors. Essentially, she was being encouraged to participate in events but later realized that she was being used by the university to promote diversity. She struggled with professors to be included in research projects and to get into certain labs that would benefit her academically. She had little to no mentorship except by way of a female African American Dean on campus and one of her best friends who she located on a separate floor in her dorm building.

Additionally, being the "only Black" person within classrooms was difficult as well because she felt she had the constant responsibility of correcting her peers and faculty who would retort anti-black messages within classroom discussions. She echoes (Scott, 2017). Her encounters in the classroom were difficult ones.

> We talked about like community development in one of my honors courses and one of the days we talked about like whether or not the Black Student Union builds community on campus. And I was the only black person in the class. And like the class consensus was that the Black Student Union doesn't builds community on campus but that they like to divide campus more. And I remember leaving that class like almost in tears.

This example was one of many that she offered to show the cultural disconnect between her and her institution. Her experiences, particularly with White women

Instructors were strained. She believed topics she covered on assignments pertaining to

Black women's experience was not welcomed and neither was her perspective in class

discussions. Her experiences as an honors student within these spaces inspired her to

embark on a career where she could advocate for changing the system for African

American students in higher education. Her examples are characteristic of Simmons et

al.'s concepts associated with the internal conflict students who attend PWIs

experiences—Blackness-Whiteness, Talking-Silence, and Past-Future—and Scott's

(2017) sentiment of isolation and alienation.

Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) concluded that despite AA students high-academic

ability, they subject to judgement based on prevalent social stereotypes regarding their

academic abilities that would have to be actively resisted inside and outside of the

classroom. Katrina reflection on contending with a teacher's bias in grading in high

school. She worked on a group project with one of her (White) classmates and received

the grade of a C on the project, whereas the classmate received an A on the project. Both

girls turned in the same project but received two different grades. Katrina would have to

confront the teacher with a hard copy of both projects to prove that the teacher mis-

graded her assignment to receive her A. Katrina not only actively resisted her teacher's

low expectation of her academic intelligence but also constructively challenged the

teacher's perception of her as a student.

Adam, too, would remember his grade school experience in a very homogenous,

white environment as a bi-racial child who was beginning to discover his identity within

Hip-Hop culture—music and graffiti art—and was shunned by his teachers and peers.

However, as he moved to a more diverse school in high school, he remembered how

refreshing it was to make connections with his fellow classmates within the African American community and how welcomed they made him feel to be himself. Within his narrative where he speaks on college, there were no mentions of tokenism or racial awkwardness between him and his environment. In fact, he spoke of his experience at his institution as one that was fairly rewarding and most memorable.

The rewards of attending PWIs based on participants' narratives are found in these institutions' ability to fund students' education. This is the one commonality found between both types of institutions, PWIs and HBCUs. However, findings suggest that predominantly white institutions have to acknowledge ways to control for racism, student alienation and microaggressions within these arenas. What is rewarding in examining AA students within these spaces is that, to add to Fries-Britt's and Griffin's (2007) conclusion, students actively found ways to resist the damage of racialized discrimination to continue to grow academically into their higher selves.

Discussion: Effects of Critical Race Theory on the Research

Situated within critical race theory, this research grounds and crafts AA students' academic identity within the parameters of exceptionalism in an American society that tends to marginalize their academic achievements. I was concerned with understanding and addressing the power dynamics between American elitism and its subordination of African Americans, particularly in an educational context. American elitism and the subordination of Black intelligence is not new to CRT's criticism. In fact, Bell's 1995 lecture on this exact topic openly criticized the fallacies composed within *The Bell Curve* and asserted that

The Bell Curve captured the nation's fascination precisely because it laid out in

scientific jargon what many Whites believe, need desperately to believe, but dare

not reveal in public or even to their private selves. The critical race theory

perspective offers Blacks and their White allies' insight, spiked with humor, as a

balm for this latest insult, and enables them to gird themselves for those certain to

follow. (Taylor, Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2016, p. 34)

Likewise, this research operated under the structure of critical race theory to "reverse the

racial composition" that constructs deficit thinking around AA students in education

(Bell, 1995, as cited in Taylor et al., 2016, p. 34).

According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), critical race theorists must

understand societal trends that purposely place education as a property right instead of a

human right and understand the intersection of race and property in order to understand

inequality. The sections below help to unpack these features of CRT as they relate to my

findings.

Counter Storytelling: Reshaping Perceptions of AA Students

Research question 1 presented in this study asked, what intrinsic and extrinsic

factors shape academic success? To understand how racism works in school context, this

research question helped to counter the rhetoric that insists on blaming students and their

home environments as reasons for school failures and low academic achievement

(Valencia, 2010). Deficit thinking was created from this ideology and mobilized as a

mainstream narrative projected onto the AA community. My findings suggested that

parents, teachers, peers, and learning spaces were leading external factors attributed to

academic success. Additionally, the intrinsic factors that emerged from the data spoke to

how students used their internal compose to navigate through the honors education system to completion. In analyzing across the data, I found that certain extrinsic factors served as the foundation for cultivating intrinsic qualities-- discipline and developing habits, self-doubt and self-confidence, autonomy and vision, and perfectionism and pride. For example, parent enrichment played a dynamic role in building students' self-confidence and autonomy. Parental influence and investments were motivating forces that set the groundwork for building students' discipline by extending learning opportunities in the home, helping students navigate through challenging work, and seeking opportunities to inspire students to continuously raise the bar on their learning.

This current research posits to re-conceptualize academic achievement among students of color. The general conceptualization of African American students years ago was that there was a serious lack of intellect among AA students (Bingham, 1946; Herrnstein & Murray, 1995; Journal of Education, 1930). Prior scholarship is engrossed with deficit models to academic attainment among students of color, but through the years scholars have been instrumental in appreciating and shifting attention on the inherent skills and gifts within African American students (Ford, 1995; Harris & Ford, 1991; Madhere, 1991; Valencia, 2010).

The approach taken in this study, magnifies these notions. Within this text, academic success in honors education confronts the perceptions of African American students as chronic underachievers. It readjusts the focus of educational inquiry on African American students from the status quo of underachievement and opportunity gaps, group deficits, and factors that hinder academic progress. Within this study lies African American students who enjoyed learning, who were early advanced readers, and

who tested for gifted education as early as first-grade. They reported that school was easy

for them. I aimed to illuminate a part of American society where African American

students held full AP course loads and GPAs as high as a 4.5 despite economic

challenges associated with homelessness. Within this text lies valedictorians and

salutatorians of their graduating classes, people who were Gates Scholars and Fulbright

Scholars, people who graduated summa cum laude and magna cum laude.

Furthermore, participants' high academic achievements point to a necessary re-

conceptualization of smarts and intelligence that speaks to both 'book smarts and street

smarts" as alluded to by Veronica. Participants' narratives called attention to aspects of

emotional intelligence where they could read the environment around them and adjust

their actions for the betterment of themselves and others. Adam and Veronica spoke of

being talkative students during their K-12 school years, but still having the ability to

excel within their studies. Adam, specifically spoke of recognizing how his talkative

behavior was a distraction to others that he had to learned to correct. This research

acknowledges the keen sense of awareness and dedicated work ethic that students

displayed through their educational journeys in some of the most academically rigorous

learning environments.

Family and Community

Parent and family contributions have been documented as the most influential

aspect of participants' journeys. Some parents were educators who paved the path for

student success, but even for parents who weren't educators, their contributions to their

child(ren)'s education should not go unacknowledged. Adams' parents entrusted their son

to a babysitter who could advance his knowledge in their absence. Family influence

inspired each participant to excel which brings to notice the importance of community and family values that have been noted to have a positive influence on student academic performance (Sanders, 1998). Samantha, specifically, stated that she enjoyed learning within a community of students at the library, and likewise, Adam also spoke of the group writing sessions in the basement of the dorm that he and his honors classmates would have for academic support.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) suggest that inequalities are "logical and predictable" in a racialized society that negates the stories from students within communities of color (p. 48). This study sought culturally affirming insights into the representation of African American students' experiences and needs in order to understand "how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but transform it for the better" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3).

Whiteness as Property: Honors Education

Aside from looking at the internal and external influences of students' success within honors, the second research question sought to discover the value of honors' education for students within the African American community. Because educational hierarchies were built based on racialized assumptions of intelligence, the idea behind this research question was to understand what the classification of "honors" meant for students within the African American community who chose to follow this pathway.

My findings suggest that the honors' designation is a systemic approach to quality education for students of color. The honors' designation holds value in that students are given access to curriculum that is challenging, classes that build important skills such as critical thinking skills and socialization skills, and expansive learning opportunities with

viable career paths. Collegiate honors' courses served as places for students to explore curriculum outside of their majors and gain knowledge of the arts and important political issues around the globe.

To this end, educational trends in America show that highly impactful education systems have been treated as the property of affluent- and European-Americans giving the impression that high academic attainment and achievement occurs predominantly in White affluent communities (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In CRT fashion, this research addresses this misrepresentation and situates AA students within the discussion. Furthermore, Hatt (2012) warns that "Smartness operates as symbolic capital, and schools have become institutions largely concerned with perpetuating the raced and classed symbolic capital of smartness" (p. 457). In conducting this research, I had the chance to rethink my own notions of smartness and culture to speculate that although race is a common factor in American society, certain factors that shape academic success, intrinsic and extrinsic, transcend race.

Philosophies Connected to CRT Around AA Students' Experiences

One of the most notable aspects of this research is that it shines a light on AA students' experiences in different learning environments. It shows that environment matters. As I examined participants who studied at HBCUs, I found that when race is controlled for, learning and engagement can flourish. Learning in these spaces, made these spaces part of the success of students at HBCUs because they were being cultivated in racially healthier environments than when participants spoke of their learning experiences at PWIs.

Claude Steele's (1997) idea of stereotype threat speaks to the effect that mainstream communities have on communities of color who have been negatively stereotyped and so are treated stereotypically. Stereotypes can threaten how students evaluate themselves, which can then alter academic identity and intellectual performance.

Adam spoke of a time when being in rigorous science courses caused him to doubt his academic abilities. This threatened his identity as an academic who can handle rigor with ease, but he did not mention feeling the pressure of being stereotyped as academically inferior. His result of passing these classes, instead of failing due to the pressure is worth noting. Perhaps, overcoming stereotype threat, then, becomes the job of the internal self. The internal self relies on past experiences of overcoming difficulties to move one through a difficult process as seen by Adam's self-personalized motto of *"if I could do that, I could do this."*

Furthermore, Gloria Ladson-Billings' ground-breaking work on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) became a prominent avenue of exploration within this work. It helped to locate another stark difference between students at HBCUs and PWIs. Ladson-Billings' (1995) concept which calls educators to teach in a way that engages learners who would traditionally be excluded in mainstream education—to value the assets of what each student brings into class and to take advantage of the richness of students' cultures by incorporating them into the learning. Participants were asked about courses that made lasting impressions on them within collegiate honors programs. Participants mentioned courses that (1) focused on aspects of the Black community, and (2) that were taught my Black instructors. Participants acknowledged that teachers who looked like them brought a refreshing approach to class and added a sense of authenticity to the subject matter.

Even if courses were not taught by Black instructors, if the course content shined a light on issues important to the Black community, they were mentioned and appreciated.

Upon notice, Gay's (2000) assertion that culturally responsive teaching makes positive changes to the classroom climate and to student-teacher relationships holds true. African American teachers from the States and teachers from the African diaspora made lasting impressions on students, some of which turned into valuable mentoring relationships to this day. Furthermore, Paris and Alim's (2014) concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy speaks to this dynamic as well. Instructors from the Black community seemed to have been able to craft learning in a way that showed how much the culture has evolved from Ancient Africa, to U.S. enslavement, to contemporary society. Instructors were establishing within their students a sense of cultural identity that participants deemed necessary for navigating the world.

Implications

The practical implications of this study center on expanding opportunities for high academic achievement among communities of color and exploring the school to college pipeline (Mayer, 2008). High academic achievement is a precursor to academic success. As evidenced by the findings contained herein, African American students tend to be a smaller group of students in most honors and advanced courses, so it is easy to see these students as an anomaly within these programs—particularly at PWIs. Acquiring narratives that speak to factors of success help to change the conversation regarding African Americans in academia. Findings within my study show that students who are cultivated in becoming academically proficient start the journey to college even before high school. The pathway begins in the primary grades and leads up to college.

Promoting pathways to opportunities is important in continuing the school to college pipeline. In order to continue to build more culturally responsive learning environments that promote high academic achievement within communities of color, recommendations for practice and research follow.

Recommendations for K-12th Grade

Students who show an affinity for learning need support. Teachers and school leaders must offer opportunities for parent-teacher collaboration. These relationships offer students leverage within honors education (Grantham & Henfield, 2011; Leenders, de Jong, Monfrance & Haelermans, 2019). As reported in the findings, parents and teachers are instrumental to students' success through advocacy and enrichment. Continuous support for community-building between teachers and parents help to not only promote high-academic achievement but to also sustain high-academic achievement.

Furthermore, access to professional development and workshop opportunities for K-12 teachers and academic department leaders is required to help them gain a deeper understanding of how to observe and document African American students who are potentially prepared for honors education (Harradine, Coleman & Winn, 2014). Professional development and workshops should also detail how to support AA students within honors and advanced practice programs.

School teachers and educational leaders are external supports within the school who have a unique opportunity to build community among students within honors and advanced practice courses. Sustaining efforts to organize academic clubs where students feel comfortable becoming peer leaders within schools and building peer-relationships around schools are needed to shape their academic identity.

Recommendations for Colleges and Universities

At the post-secondary level, it is important to direct recruitment efforts that aim to introduce students to factors in honors education that are important to them, specifically for AA males. During this study, some participants only considered colleges and universities that offered ample scholarship money. Also, outreach programs at the post-secondary level that recruit students based on to students' choice of honors' perks—that include but are not limited to early registration, lower class sizes and monetary contributions—have shown to have lasting effects on where students decide to attend college (Bergerson, 2009). Brianna and Katrina spoke briefly of not feeling recruited by their institutions and having to seek out the Honors College for consideration.

Students who attend PWIs may be vulnerable to alienation and may be sensitive to racial conflicts on campus. Similar to K-12 educators and leaders, post-secondary educators and department leaders should consider professional development and workshop opportunities to expand their understanding around culturally relevant practices within the Honors College. Professional dispositions among faculty are crucial to the retention of African American honor students at PWIs. Workshops could offer tremendous support for post-secondary teacher- student relationships, specifically in building community within honors programs for students of color.

Finally, college campuses must ensure that academic learning spaces are of top priority on campus as these areas add communal spaces for African American academics to expand their learning and sharpen their skills (Montgomery, 2014). Library professionals are integral parts of the learning community within the library who can advocate for the learning needs of students on campus. Libraries, themselves, are ideal

places for students to explore the scholarship and the technology necessary for student success. Additionally, the importance of writing centers for post-secondary students should also be mentioned and researched further to explore more avenues of optimal success in students looking to strengthen their writing skills in honors education (Archer & Parker, 2016).

Recommendations for Curriculum Design

Recommendations for curriculum design, at both the K-12 and post-secondary setting, include learning materials and instructional practices that help promote student autonomy in academic assignments and career planning. Curriculum committees that build on culturally relevant content and practices (Gay, 2000; 2013) are needed to offer a mixture of courses on diverse topics lead by well-read instructors. Curriculum design should also encompass supports for building holistic health within the Honors College. Meditation practices and yoga are plausible stress management tools to embed within the honors education curriculum (Sun, 2019).

Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation study sought to explore and examine the lived experiences of African American collegiate honor students. To further explore this topic, attention should be also directed to Hispanic students within honors education to discover commonalities amongst high-achieving Black and Brown students. Noticeably, this study focused on inter-cultural conversations on intellect, race and high achievement within honors programs. Cross-cultural conversation on intellect, race and high achievement within honors programs would offer valuable context on honors as a learning community. Furthermore, three African American males inquired about

participating in this study, but only one African American male could participate. Gender studies within honors education is another angle of research that could offer substantial insights on the school to college pipeline for African American and Hispanic males whose voices are rarely heard in conversations pertaining to high-academic achievement and success.

Moreover, research on building pathways to opportunities should also seek to formulate research instruments that help to further illuminate variables of success within high-achieving students of color. A mixed-methods approach to the current study would offer further analysis into the nuances of academic success within the African American community.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter focused on analyzing the narratives of African American honors alumni(nae). The research questions for this study were answered and answers were further interpreted through the CRT lens. The lived experiences of AA students within honors programs challenged notions of school failure and low academic outcomes by offering representations of Black students and academic excellence, and furthermore, understanding how to support AA students to and through honors education. Within the data, key aspects of eight participants' educational journeys informed that academic success within honors education thrives on specific factors. People, places, and things constitute external factors that promote academic success and high-academic achievement. Even more, the behaviors and habits that regulate students' actions inside and outside of the classroom are multi-dimensional and intricate in nature. Overall, this

research aimed to capture students' realities as African American honor students while also attending to the factors credited for their academic accomplishments.

APPENDIX A

NARRATIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

INTERVIEW I Life History	60 minutes
Research Question I	**Questions** 1. Where are you from? 2. Are you an only child? 3. How, if at all, did your family support your learning during your early school years? 4. What, if any, were their expectations of you during those early school years? 5. What, if any, values did they stress about education? 6. What is your earliest recollection of being labeled as a gifted/honors student? 7. How old were you? 8. What grade were you in at this time? 9. Who initiated the process? 10. Who were your biggest motivators to pursue honors education at this time? 11. What were your beliefs at the time about gifted/Honors student? 12. What were your beliefs about your ability to manage honors education responsibilities? 13. What factors influenced your decision to pursue _____ Honors Program?
INTERVIEW II Meaning-Making	
	60 minutes
Research Question II	**Questions** 1. What was the process like applying to _____'s honors program? 2. Once in the program, how well did you adjust to your classes? 3. How well did you adjust to your instructors? 4. Were there courses that stood out as more influential than others in the honors program at _____? If so, which ones and why? 5. Where you involved in activities or sports on campus? If so, which ones? 6. How did your involvement in _____ help or hinder your performance in your courses? 7. What were your study habits like in the program? 8. How well did you do at time management between course work and leisure time? 9. Which academic tasks presented the hardest challenge to complete? Why?

	10. How did you manage to overcome, or complete, those tasks despite their difficulty? 11. Who were the most influential people in your life during this time who encouraged you to keep going? How so? 12. What was your biggest motivation for completing your degree in the honors program? 13. Has graduating with an honors degree from _____ had an impact on your career choices? If yes, how so?

APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Exploring the Educational Journeys of African American Honors Alumni(nae)

Researcher: Sammie Burton, Doctoral Candidate, Ed.D in Curriculum and Instruction and Dra. Aurora Chang

Introduction:
This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dra. Aurora Chang. You are being asked to take part in a research study directed by Sammie Burton, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago (LUC). You are being asked to participate because you identify as an African American honor alumni from a 4-year university honors program and you graduated within the last 10 years (May 2010-May 2019). Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to explore African American/Black alumni lived experiences related to honors education. The researcher will explore how alumni were able to navigate their educational experiences as honor students within the academy. The researcher will collect and analyze students' learning experiences from K-12 through collegiate honors. Furthermore, the researcher will examine the possibilities and implications of how students' experiences with honors' success can be replicated among others who desire to excel in academic pursuits. Finally, this research offers students a chance to voice their experiences as counter-narratives to pervasive stereotypes regarding students of color and education.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in two (2) narrative interviews that focus on your educational journey through honors education. During the interview, you will be asked to share your experience and ideas about honors education at both the high school (if applicable) and college level. Furthermore, you will be asked to explain your experiences in chronological order so that a story/narrative will emerge in its completed form. Graduation records will be obtained from each participant. Participants who agree to participate will need to email either a copy of (1) their graduate degree with proof of honors designation or (2) a copy of their unofficial transcript that shows proof of degree completion with honors designation. These records will be kept in an electronic folder on a password safe computer and deleted after the study is complete. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, unless specified otherwise. The interviews can occur in person at a site of choosing within the Chicago area or online through Skype or Zoom videoconference software. The interviews will last approximately 60 minutes each at times and dates of your choosing. In the section below, please indicate how you would like to record your responses during the interview.

- ☐ Yes, I agree to be audio recorded.
  or
- ☐ No, I do not agree to be audio recorded; I prefer to type my responses to the interview questions.

Risk/Benefits:
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but your participation will be a great resource to help others.

Confidentiality:
All participant names will be "masked" in publications and presentations. Participants will be asked to provide information about their racial/ethnic identity and educational status but only for the purpose of participating in the study. The interviews will be audio-taped, unless specified otherwise by the participant. Once transcribed and checked, audio files will be deleted. Once research is complete, all transcriptions will be deleted.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
If you are receiving services from Loyola University Chicago, your decision to participate, or not, will have no effect on your current relationship or the services you are currently receiving.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have any questions, concerns or comments about this research study, please feel free to contact Sammie Burton at sburton@luc.edu, *708-769-8450* or Dra. Aurora Chang at achang2@luc.edu, *312-915-6856*.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_____
Participant's Signature

_____
Date

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VITA

Sammie M. Burton is a native of the city of Chicago where she resided until the age of three. Her family relocated to the south suburbs of Chicago where Sammie attended elementary, middle and high school. After a ten-year hiatus from attending college, Sammie returned to complete her post-secondary education at Chicago State University where she earned her Bachelors of Arts in English in 2012 and her Masters of Arts in English in 2015. During this time, she also began to teach English in the Honors College at Chicago State University to incoming college freshman in Honors Composition I and Honors Composition II, a position she currently holds. Sammie serves on the Honors College Faculty Committee where she collaborates on projects related to honors curriculum planning and program implementation.

Sammie attended Loyola University Chicago's doctoral program in fall of 2015. She enrolled in the School of Education's Curriculum and Instruction program to shift her focus from English content to educational practices. While at Loyola University Chicago, Sammie received valuable experiences as an adjunct professor in Loyola's teacher preparation program where she taught courses focused on culturally responsive pedagogy and school climate. Her work as a research assistant within the School of Education helped her to develop her skills as a research-practitioner and conduct research devoted to students' success and high academic achievement.

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

The Dissertation submitted by Sammie M. Burton has been read and approved by the following committee:

Aurora Chang, Ph.D., Director
Associate Professor, Higher Education
Loyola University Chicago

Seungho Moon, Ed.D.
Associate Professor, Teaching and Learning
Loyola University Chicago

Kelly Ferguson, Ed.D.
Clinical Assistant Professor, Teaching and Learning
Loyola University Chicago