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Racialization's Influence on African American Male University Attrition: Is it Culture Shock or Is There More to the Story

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RACIALIZATION'S INFLUENCE ON AFRICAN AMERICAN

MALE UNIVERSITY ATTRITION:

IS IT CULTURE SHOCK OR IS THERE MORE TO THE STORY?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the influence of racialization on the attrition rates of African American male students in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). The study examines whether these students experience cultural shock or face more profound systemic challenges. The research explores how African American men navigate and perceive their college environments by employing Critical Race Theory and DuBois' double consciousness. The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, demographic surveys, and document analysis to view these students' experiences comprehensively.

The study focuses on four religiously affiliated universities, highlighting the intersection of race, identity, and institutional culture and revealing patterns of isolation, resilience, and the pursuit of belonging. The findings indicate that systemic racism and cultural misunderstandings significantly marginalize African American male students, affecting their academic performance and overall college experience. This dissertation emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to address racial biases and foster more inclusive environments. By amplifying the voices of these students, the research aims to inspire actionable strategies to improve retention and success rates among African American male students in PWIs.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background/Context

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), for cohorts entering in

2010, 21.4% of African Americans graduated within 4 years of starting college. Meanwhile, for

the same cohort of Whites, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indian/Alaskan Natives,

percentages are 45.2, 31.7, 50, and 22.8, respectively. These graduation data points indicate that

issues are occurring that grossly impact African American students. Furthermore, the disparities

become even more striking when considering the graduation rates for African American men

(16.6%) versus African American women (25%). Academics have explained these disparities

through numerous theoretical frames, such as poor academic preparation (Bowles & Gintis,

1976; Cookson & Persell, 1991; Lareau, 1989/2000), cultural deficit (Bereiter & Engelmann,

1966; Deutsch & Deutsch, 1963; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Moynihan,

1965; Small et al., 2010; Wilson, 1978, 1987, 2009), and cultural shock (Feagin et al., 1996;

Fleming, 1984; Torres-Guzman, 2009). Nevertheless, a growing body of literature in the realm

of critical race theory (CRT) also combats many of these claims, giving birth to the notion that a

much more complex phenomenon occurs in the lives of African American men before entering

college and at higher education institutions (Brown 2003, Lozenski 2013, and Milner 2012).

Therefore, this dissertation study investigates the experiences of African American men entering

college, focusing on how they interact with their institutions and perceive the institutions

interacting with them. To understand the broader impact of their preparation on their educational journey.

Scope of the Research

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*, which developed the theory of double consciousness. This theoretical framework is essential to researching how African American men interact with institutions. It provides a counternarrative to the storyline of African Americans lacking academic preparedness, their experience of shock, or cultural deficits when entering college. Du Bois writes, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the [White] world" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). With this statement, Du Bois presents the notion of the division between the White and Black worlds, centering this juxtaposition as the primary cultural divide in this country. He then argues that African Americans feel "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of [Whites], of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 3). In short, Du Bois clarifies that African Americans are, from the time they are born in America, confronted with the reality of having to live in both a White and Black world and being acutely aware of the need to assimilate into White culture.

Moreover, James Baldwin, in his book *The Fire Next Time* (originally printed in 1924), confronts this issue. Baldwin puts it this way: "You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason" (Baldwin, 1993, p. 7). The positioning of Black men "has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as [Black men move] out of [their] place, heaven and earth are shaken to

their foundations" (Baldwin, 1993, p. 9). In short, Du Bois' (1903) work and Baldwin's (1993) words remind readers of the U.S.' most significant issue, "the problem of the color line." The double consciousness many students of color face is not new, as they grapple with existing in a White world from birth. Therefore, what happens to African American students when they enter college that causes them to have such disparaging outcomes? Is it shock or something more?

According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997), race scholars must start the examination of what is happening to these young men by examining race and racism, not the actions and ideas of individuals. Instead, race scholars must consider the *structural* and *institutional* factors that make race and its consequences real in the United States. Furthermore, race scholars must understand the repercussions of race and racism as they manifest within colleges and universities. To this end, race scholars must start by understanding modern higher educational spaces as White institutional spaces that "result in the white accumulation of economic and political power reaped from these institutions, [and] it also permit[s] an exclusively white construction of the norms, values, and ideological frameworks that organize these institutions," such as physical spaces and classroom dynamics (Moore, 2007, p. 27). Moreover, these spaces reproduce social and cultural norms, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) in their seminal work *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. By framing American colleges and universities as White spaces, race scholars can begin to accurately interrogate institutions' impact on the maturation of non-White, non-male, and non-cis groups entering the academy.

Knowles and Prewett (1969) assert that "institutions are fairly stable social arrangements and practices through which collective actions are taken" (p. 5); thus, they allow the reproduction of racism without the malice of intent on the part of the individual. Furthermore, "the white racial frame" structures society, according to Joe Feagin (2009). It allows people to operate

freely from the perspective that they are not actors within these systems and can rationalize the implications of their actions. Anderson (2015) highlights the physical, emotional, and psychological harm associated with African Americans inhabiting White spaces. Due to the role of race and racism in U.S. society upon the founding of modern higher education institutions, African American students find themselves in a precarious position as the education system forces them to navigate spaces where their White counterparts feel absolved of wrongdoing. The influence of White supremacist culture extends deeply into the fabric of educational institutions. It shapes the norms, values, and ideologies that dictate the operation of these spaces. This influence is not always overt but manifests in curriculum design, classroom dynamics, and institutional policies (Dancy et al. 2018 and Wilder 2013). By acknowledging and interrogating these aspects, one can understand how they impact African American men's development and educational experiences. The failure to acknowledge the consequences of colleges and universities as White spaces impedes one's ability to address what African American men face when entering higher education.

Along this theoretical arch, the work of scholars like Shaun Harper and Derrick Brooms further guides understanding of the harsh reality faced by African American men entering the college landscape. Harper, Brooms, and others previously mentioned leverage the tenets of CRT to create a counternarrative to the heavily used countercultural narrative surrounding the African American community (Anderson, 2015; Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Carter, 2006; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Feagin, 2009). CRT is a legal theory that names, analyzes, and challenges racism in law and society. Its tenets are often used as framing ideas to highlight how one might put CRT into action, allowing scholars to re-interrogate previously held discriminatory ideologies. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). These tenets recognize the need for a critique of liberalism, the need for

counter-storytelling, the need to disentangle the embedded racism in the fabric of the U.S., the belief that racism advances the goals of White supremacy, and the use of racialization to broker power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 6–9). Harper uses this framework to argue that Black men on college campuses nationwide have been victims of what he calls "niggering," whereby they are subjugated and underestimated at every turn (Harper, 2009, p. 699). In discussing the implications of his research, Harper argues for the need to create a counternarrative of the experiences of Black men.

Similarly, Brooms and Davis argue that "oftentimes after being rejected by or experiencing hostility from their White counterparts, in and out of class, many Black males experience denigration and may choose to disengage from the predominantly White campus community" (Brooms & Davis, 2017, p. 309). Their scholarship reinforces Harper's assertions that African American men are not struggling at the post-secondary level due to extensive cultural, social, and academic deficits. Instead, Black men are facing something far more sinister, in that people in power created American institutions of higher learning not to serve the needs of Black men. To this end, Brooms and Davis further Harper's assessment by asserting that future research should focus on places where African Americans have experienced success at the collegiate level (Brooms & Davis, 2017). By leveraging the work of scholars such as Harper, Brooms, and others, my research will advance the counternarrative developed through their scholarship.

Relevance of the Research

The following pages highlight three of the primary theoretical frames and research designs explored to understand why the graduation rates of African Americans are 23.8% lower than that of their White counterparts, while highlighting several vital factors these studies failed

to consider in their analysis (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). First, I discuss the achievement gap literature, how it has not always accounted for the elusiveness of White supremacist culture, and its ability to dictate social and cultural norms (Blumer 1958, Delbert S. Elliott et al 1996, and Kozol 2012). Achievement gap literature often attributes educational disparities to factors such as socioeconomic status, quality of education, and access to resources (Carter 2006, Delpit 2006, Gay 2002, and Ladson-Billings 1995). However, this view can be limited, as it fails to account for the deeper, systemic issues rooted in White supremacist culture. This culture implicitly dictates social and cultural norms within educational institutions, often leading to environments that are not conducive to the success of African American students. A critical re-examination of the achievement gap literature is necessary to understand how systems and structures that reproduce marginalization and antiblackness perpetuate these inequities.

Secondly, I review the cultural deficit research, closely examining the lack of a cohesive definition of culture or disaggregating the effects of schools, families, and communities on the socio-cultural maturation of students. Cultural deficit research has faced criticism for its tendency to pathologize African American culture, attributing educational underachievement to cultural differences (Apple, 1990; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Brooms, 2017; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1995). While attempting to account for disparities, this perspective often falls short in recognizing the rich, complex tapestry of African American socio-cultural experiences. It overlooks the resilience and adaptive strengths inherent in these communities. A more nuanced understanding that appreciates cultural diversity and examines the interplay of systemic factors impacting educational outcomes is needed.

Thirdly, I discuss how scholars who have written about culture shock, as defined by Pedersen (1995) as the emotional and psychological disorientation experienced when

encountering a different cultural environment, have not considered Du Bois' double-consciousness theory to look beyond cultural explanations for the low graduation rates of African American college students. Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness offers a valuable lens through which to view African American men's experiences in predominantly White institutions (PWIs). It highlights the internal conflict and negotiation of identity that these students experience, balancing their African American heritage with the dominant White cultural norms. This concept also provides a counterpoint to traditional notions of culture shock, suggesting that the challenges Black students face are not just about cultural adaptation but also about navigating a landscape shaped by racial inequalities (Jack 2014 and Torres 2009).

Finally, throughout the analysis, I discuss the inadequacy of these frameworks to confront the cost of the U.S.' history of racism in attempts to understand the role race and racism play in shaping the experiences on college and university campuses across the country. The current discourse often frames African American students in deficit-based terms, focusing on what they lack rather than their potential and capabilities (Lewis 1966 and Fordham and Ogbu 1986). There is a need to move beyond these limited perspectives and adopt a more holistic approach that considers the historical legacy of racism and its ongoing impact. This approach would involve a comprehensive analysis that includes institutional factors, societal structures, and the unique experiences of African American men. Therefore, current research is merely adding to the eerie outcomes for African American students by promoting the belief that Black men are somehow academically inferior. Through centering a CRT analytic framework, counternarratives that challenge the prevailing deficit-based models can be created. These narratives should highlight African American men's resilience, strengths, and diverse experiences in higher education. CRT not only names and challenges the overt and covert manifestations of racism but

also delves deeply into the structural aspects that shape our lived experiences. By focusing on these narratives, we can uncover the underlying systems, policies, and practices that perpetuate inequality and racism within higher education. For instance, Newton (2023) provides a compelling analysis of how Black women navigate the paradox of being hypervisible and yet invisible at Historically Predominantly White Institutions (HPWIs), highlighting the complex dynamics of race and visibility.

In a similar vein, the narratives of African American men in higher education should be centered around their resilience, strengths, and diverse experiences. These stories are not merely accounts of overcoming adversity but are also powerful testimonies that expose and critique the institutional barriers that they face. By foregrounding their resilience, we can see how African American men leverage their strengths to navigate and resist these hostile environments, turning what might be seen as deficits into sources of power and agency.

Moreover, these narratives should serve as a lens to scrutinize and challenge the unequal structures, policies, and practices within educational institutions. They reveal how systemic inequities are entrenched in the very fabric of these institutions, manifesting in various forms of discrimination and exclusion. By doing so, researchers can begin dismantling the systemic barriers African American men face and foster a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape; this is the goal of this work.

Research Question and Objective

By understanding how Black men make sense of their college experiences, my study contributes to the current body of scholarship, interrogating current understandings of college preparedness, White supremacist organizations, and culture shock to reimagine how African American males' college fitness is analyzed. This project seeks to understand if the public

education system adequately prepares African American men for college, how these students see themselves engaging with their institution, and how they perceive the institution interacting with them. Essential to understanding these realities is determining how Black men are reacting to majority-White institutions. Furthermore, I intend to further the scholarship of authors such as Derrick Brooms (2015, 2017, 2019), who argues that society forces Black men to reconcile their blackness within a White environment that assumes it is doing all it can to provide points of refuge for these students. In short, there is a dearth of research to account for the unique circumstances African American men face entering college.

This dissertation begins by introducing the central themes of my research, emphasizing the significance of examining African American men's experiences in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) beyond the initial culture shock. The introductory chapter sets the stage for a deeper investigation into the nuanced realities these students face, providing a foundation for understanding the broader context of their educational journeys. The guiding research question is then presented: "How do African American men perceive their interactions with college institutions, and how do these perceptions influence their success or failure?" This question aims to uncover the complex layers of the student-institution relationship, often oversimplified in traditional analyses.

Following the introduction, the literature review offers a comprehensive overview of existing scholarship, focusing on educational inequality, cultural perspectives on academic success, and the interplay between race, culture, and socioeconomic status. Key theories and previous studies are discussed to frame my research within the broader academic discourse. The theoretical framework chapter anchors the study in several critical theories, including W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness and Gloria Ladson-Billings' educational debt theory.

These frameworks help explore the internal conflicts African American men face in PWIs and the broader systemic issues contributing to educational disparities.

The methodology chapter details the qualitative approach employed in this study, utilizing interviews with African American men from four institutions to gain deep insights into their experiences. This method allows for a rich, detailed exploration of their perceptions and interactions within these educational settings. The findings reveal that culture shock is not merely about adjusting to a new environment but also involves dealing with persistent racialization and marginalization. Key themes include social-emotional isolation, the struggle for authenticity, and the necessity of navigating multiple identities. In the discussion section, I relate these findings to the theoretical frameworks and existing literature, examining systemic barriers such as racial biases and stereotypical expectations and their impact on the students' academic and social experiences. The dissertation concludes with a discussion on the implications of my findings for educational practice and policy, suggesting ways institutions can better support African American men by adopting a more inclusive and understanding approach to diversity in education. Finally, I propose areas for future research, including studies that further explore the nuances of racial dynamics in different academic disciplines and the impact of institutional policies on student experiences, thereby setting a comprehensive agenda for addressing the unique challenges faced by African American men in higher education.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In 1848, Horace Mann passionately declared, "education, then, beyond all other divides of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men – the balance wheel of the social machinery" (Cremin, 1961, p. 8). This opening statement sets the stage for understanding education's potential as a liberating force for oppressed people. As a pioneer of public education, Mann envisioned a system where knowledge would empower individuals, irrespective of their background. However, Baldwin's reflections serve as a reminder that the promise of education remains unfulfilled for many African Americans, whose experiences with systemic racism and social isolation profoundly shape their educational journey. These reflections provide a necessary context for examining how educational inequality persists today.

Moreover, Mann's vision was not without its contradictions. While advocating for equal educational opportunities, he lived in a society that systematically denied these opportunities to African Americans. This irony is stark, as the same education system intended to liberate was entangled with the institution of slavery. The impact of such a contradictory foundation is evident in the ongoing struggles for educational equity faced by African Americans. Thus, the historical context of Mann's time, coupled with contemporary experiences, underscores the complex relationship between education and social equity.

Furthermore, the promise of education as the great equalizer has been challenged by the persistent realities of racial injustice. As Baldwin eloquently points out, the dream of equality

remains unfulfilled as long as systemic barriers continue to exist. By examining these systemic barriers and their impact on African American educational experiences, one can better understand the challenges faced by African Americans in the education system. This analysis will also highlight the contributions of various scholars in framing these issues and proposing pathways toward educational equity.

To further explore these systemic barriers, this chapter delve into the historical, cultural, and psychological factors that contribute to educational disparities. By integrating insights from various scholars, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding African American education. Ultimately, this literature review seeks to shed light on the multifaceted nature of educational inequality and the ongoing struggle for equity and inclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Horace Mann's 1848 declaration of education as "a great equalizer of the conditions of men" envisioned a system where knowledge would empower all individuals, transcending their backgrounds. However, as Baldwin (1993) poignantly reflects, the promise of education remains largely unfulfilled for many African Americans, whose encounters with systemic racism and social isolation shape their educational experiences. This chapter examines how educational inequality persists, drawing on the rich theoretical frameworks provided by Du Bois (1903), Baldwin (1993), and Ladson-Billings (1995).

Du Bois's (1903) seminal work, introduces the concept of "double consciousness," capturing the inner conflict African Americans experience as they navigate a society that marginalizes their identity. This notion underscores the psychological and cultural barriers that

African American students face in educational settings, compelling them to reconcile their cultural heritage with the dominant societal norms imposed by PWIs.

Baldwin (1993) further elaborates on the systemic nature of racial inequality in America. His reflections, particularly in the letter to his nephew, highlight the pervasive and enduring impact of racism on the lives of African Americans. Baldwin's critique of the unfulfilled dream of equality provides a lens to examine the systemic barriers that African American students encounter in education, from microaggressions in the classroom to broader institutional biases that hinder their academic success and personal growth.

Ladson-Billings' (1995) theory of culturally relevant pedagogy offers a practical framework for addressing these systemic issues. Her work emphasizes the importance of teaching practices that recognize and value the cultural backgrounds of students, thereby fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment. By advocating for educational approaches that are responsive to the cultural contexts of African American students, Ladson-Billings (1995) provides a pathway toward mitigating the educational disparities highlighted by Du Bois (1903) and Baldwin (1993).

Integrating these theoretical perspectives, this chapter delves into the historical, cultural, and psychological factors contributing to educational disparities experienced by African American men. By synthesizing the insights of Du Bois (1903), Baldwin (1993), and Ladson-Billings (1995), the analysis aims to provide an understanding of the complexities surrounding African American education. This theoretical framework will guide the examination of my research, highlighting the nuanced nature of educational inequality and the ongoing struggle for equity and inclusion. Through this lens, the study seeks to illuminate pathways toward creating educational environments that support the success and well-being of African American students.

Racial Inequality and Education

Horace Mann's (1848) efforts to establish the modern public education system are often juxtaposed with the harsh realities of slavery. While Mann (1848) championed education as a societal equalizer, African Americans were subjected to dehumanizing conditions that starkly contradicted this ideal. This duality mirrors Baldwin's (1993) observations on the dichotomy of the American dream versus the Black experience. The historical development of American education reflects deep-seated conceptions of superiority (whiteness) and inferiority (the weight placed on African Americans in contrast to the White cultural framework).

Baldwin's (1993) highlight the inherent contradictions in American society, where ideals of equality and justice coexist with systemic oppression and racism. Baldwin's (1993) letter to his nephew poignantly addresses the emotional and psychological toll of growing up Black in America, emphasizing the need for recognition and respect for Black identity within educational contexts.

To understand how these historical injustices, continue to affect African Americans, Herbert Blumer's (1958) seminal work provides a sociological framework. Blumer (1958) argues that racial prejudice is not merely an individual attitude but a collective process that serves to reinforce group positions. This perspective is crucial in understanding how educational systems can perpetuate racial inequalities, as they are embedded within broader social structures that uphold White superiority. Hence, Blumer's (1958) insights are essential for contextualizing the systemic barriers that African Americans face in education today.

Ladson-Billings' (2006) theory of educational debt further illuminates these systemic barriers by framing racial disparities in education as an accumulation of historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debts owed to African Americans. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that

the persistent achievement gap is a reflection of this debt, underscoring the need for systemic change to address deep-rooted inequalities.

For decades, researchers have explored and expanded upon the notion of the "Negro Problem," a concept central to understanding persistent racial inequalities in American society. Du Bois' seminal work (1903), delves into this issue, highlighting the systemic challenges and dual consciousness experienced by African Americans. Myrdal's (1944) study, published over 80 years ago, provides a foundational analysis of the contradictions between American democratic ideals and the reality of racial inequality. His insights have profoundly influenced subsequent scholarship, advancing and challenging the core premises of his work.

Jonathan Kozol (2012) and Blumer (1958) are notable scholars who have extended Myrdal's insights. Kozol's investigations into educational disparities reveal how systemic inequalities perpetuate the "Negro Problem" by denying African American students' equal opportunities. Blumer's (1958) sociological perspective on race prejudice highlights how collective attitudes and institutional practices maintain racial hierarchies, emphasizing the structural nature of racial discrimination.

In contemporary discourse, scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997, 1999, 2004) and Omi Winant (1994 and 2002), provide critical frameworks for understanding modern racial dynamics. Bonilla-Silva's series of works (1997, 1999, 2004) elucidate the concept of racial stratification, exploring how racial hierarchies are constructed and sustained in contemporary society. His work on color-blind racism challenges the notion of a post-racial society, underscoring the persistent influence of racial categories on access to resources and opportunities, including education. Bonilla-Silva's theories offer a profound understanding of the

mechanisms that perpetuate educational disparities, presenting a critical lens for examining the

ongoing relevance of the "Negro Problem."

Omi and Winant's (1994, 2002) racial formation theory further advance the discussion by

arguing that race is a central axis of social relations, continuously shaped through political

struggle. Their dynamic and fluid understanding of race challenges static notions of racial

categories and emphasizes the role of institutional and ideological forces in maintaining racial

inequalities. This framework provides a nuanced perspective on how racial dynamics evolve and

persist, offering valuable insights for addressing educational inequities.

Gossett's (1965) historical exploration of racial thinking in America and Winant's (2000)

theoretical examination of race provide essential contexts for understanding the evolution of

racial ideas and their institutional manifestations. Gossett (1965) traces the development of racial

ideologies, elucidating how these ideas have historically shaped societal attitudes and policies.

Winant's (2000) examination of racial theory further illuminates the mechanisms through which

racial hierarchies are sustained and contested.

Moreover, scholars like Derrick Brooms (2017), Shaun Harper, and William Smith have

advanced these discussions within the context of higher education. Brooms (2015, 2017a, 2017b,

2019, and 2023) explores the experiences of Black male students in PWIs, highlighting the

systemic and interpersonal challenges they face. Harper (2009) and Smith et al (2016) delve into

the microaggressions and racial battle fatigue experienced by Black students, emphasizing the

ongoing struggle against antiblackness in educational environments (Combs 2022, Dancy et al

2018, and Evans and Moore 2015).

Integrating these perspectives allows for a comprehensive analysis of the historical and

contemporary contexts of educational inequalities. The engagement of Combs (2022) and Dancy

et al 2018 with Myrdal's work, alongside Gossett's (1958) historical insights, highlights the enduring nature of the "Negro Problem" and underscores the systemic barriers that African Americans face in education today. This continuum of scholarship provides a robust framework for examining and addressing the systemic factors that perpetuate educational disparities.

It is essential to consider how these theoretical insights inform the qualitative methodologies employed in this study. By leveraging these frameworks, this dissertation aims to provide a nuanced understanding of African American men's experiences in PWIs, illuminating the complex interplay of race, education, and systemic inequality. This approach not only enriches our understanding of the issues at hand but also sets the stage for developing strategies to foster more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

From Cultural Explanations to Culture Shock

Revisiting cultural explanations for educational disparities allows one to understand how cultural identity and flexibility impact academic performance. Carter's (2006, 2010) research on cultural flexibility and identity explores how African American students navigate their cultural identities within different educational contexts. She argues that students who can adapt their cultural expressions to fit various social environments are more likely to succeed academically. This perspective highlights the importance of cultural flexibility in educational attainment, a theme echoed in Baldwin's reflections on the need for African Americans to navigate a society that often devalues their culture.

Montagu's (1962) and Emerson and Smith's (2000) further explore the complexities of racial identity and its impact on educational experiences. Montagu (1962) challenges the biological basis of race, emphasizing that race is a social construct with significant cultural implications. Emerson and Smith (2000) examine how religious and social contexts shape racial

identities and contribute to racial segregation and inequality. These works underscore the need to consider the cultural and social dynamics that influence educational outcomes, aligning with Du Bois' (1903) idea of double consciousness, where African Americans must reconcile their cultural identity with societal expectations.

Rodriguez's (2000) and Torres-Guzman's (2009) provide additional insights into the fluidity of racial and ethnic identities and the role of language in shaping cultural identities. Rodriguez (2000) explores the evolving concept of race among Latinos in the U.S., highlighting the complexities of racial and ethnic identity. Torres-Guzman (2009) examines the importance of language in professional and intellectual development, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive educational practices. These perspectives are particularly relevant in addressing the unique experiences of African American students, who often face systemic barriers and cultural isolation.

Early Black scholars have long explored the complexities of African American identity and the systemic barriers within educational institutions. Specifically, Baldwin's (1993) writings about having to live in an environment that was never designed to support African American men and Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness offer powerful anchors for understanding the cultural challenges faced by African American students at PWIs. Baldwin's (1993) reflections on the devaluation of Black culture and the struggle for recognition resonate with Du Bois' (1903) concept of living with a divided identity. Both authors highlight the need for educational practices that recognize and value diverse cultural backgrounds, promoting inclusivity and respect for all students. By revisiting cultural explanations, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to educational disparities and the strategies needed to address them.

The cultural deficit theory, which suggests that cultural differences contribute to academic underachievement, has been widely criticized for its simplistic and deterministic view of culture. Scholars such as Delpit (2006) and Gay (2002) argue that this theory fails to account for the broader social and economic contexts that shape educational experiences. Delpit (2006) and Gay (2002) emphasize the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices that recognize and value the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, promoting equity and inclusion in educational settings. This critique aligns with Baldwin's (1993) reflections on the societal devaluation of Black culture and Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness, where African Americans must constantly navigate a society that marginalizes their identity.

Moore's (2007) and Carter's (2006, 2010) research on cultural flexibility provide further insights into the limitations of the cultural deficit theory. Moore explores how educational institutions perpetuate racial inequalities through policies and practices that marginalize minority students. Carter (2006, 2010) examines how African American students navigate their cultural identities within different educational contexts, arguing that cultural flexibility is crucial for academic success. These perspectives highlight the need for educational practices that recognize and value the diverse cultural backgrounds of students, promoting inclusivity and respect for all learners.

Baldwin's (1993) and Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness offers powerful critiques of the cultural deficit theory. Baldwin's reflections on the devaluation of Black culture and the struggle for recognition resonate with Du Bois' concept of living with a divided identity. Both authors highlight the psychological and emotional toll of systemic racism and the need for educational practices that promote equity and inclusion. By recognizing the limitations of

cultural deficit theory, one can develop more comprehensive strategies to support the academic and emotional well-being of African American students.

Baudrillard and Poster (1988) and Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) provide additional theoretical perspectives on the cultural mechanisms that perpetuate educational inequalities. Baudrillard and Poster (1988) explore the role of media and culture in shaping societal norms and values, while Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) critique the culture industry's role in maintaining the status quo. These perspectives underscore the importance of understanding the broader cultural and ideological contexts that influence educational practices. By integrating these insights, one can develop more effective strategies to address the root causes of educational disparities and promote equity in education.

Transitioning to the role of culture and identity, the intersection of these factors plays a significant role in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. Scholars such as Baldwin (1993), Carter (2006, 2010), Montagu (1962), Emerson and Smith (2000), Rodriguez (2000), and Torres-Guzman (2009) have explored the complexities of cultural identity and its impact on education. These texts provide valuable insights into how cultural flexibility and identity struggles affect academic performance and highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse cultural backgrounds in educational settings.

Moreover, Baldwin's (1993) offers a poignant reflection on the struggles of African Americans in a society that devalues their existence. His reflections on the societal devaluation of Black lives resonate with the experiences of African American students, who often face cultural conflicts and identity struggles in the educational system. Recognizing the psychological and emotional toll of systemic racism enables educators to develop strategies that support the

academic and emotional well-being of African American students. Thus, Baldwin's insights are essential for understanding the impact of cultural identity on educational outcomes.

In addition, Carter's (2006, 2010) research on cultural flexibility and identity explores how African American students navigate their cultural identities within different educational contexts. She argues that students who can adapt their cultural expressions to fit different social environments are more likely to succeed academically. This perspective highlights the importance of cultural flexibility in educational attainment and underscores the need for educators to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. Consequently, Carter's (2006, 2010) work provides a deeper understanding of the role of cultural identity in academic success.

Furthermore, Montagu's (1962) and Emerson and Smith's (2000) further explore the complexities of racial identity and its impact on social interactions and educational experiences. Montagu challenges the biological basis of race, emphasizing that race is a social construct with significant cultural implications. Emerson and Smith examine how religious and social contexts shape racial identities and contribute to racial segregation and inequality. Integrating these perspectives enhances our understanding of the cultural and social dynamics that shape educational outcomes for African American students. Therefore, these insights increase understanding of the cultural dimensions of educational disparities.

Additionally, Rodriguez (2000) and Torres-Guzman (2009) offer further perspectives on the fluidity of racial identities and the role of language in shaping cultural identities. Rodriguez (2000) explores the evolving concept of race among Latinos in the U.S., highlighting the complexities of racial and ethnic identity. Torres-Guzman (2009) examines the importance of language in professional and intellectual development, emphasizing the need for culturally

responsive educational practices. These perspectives are particularly relevant in addressing the unique experiences of African American students, who often face systemic barriers and cultural isolation. Thus, integrating these insights provides a comprehensive understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of educational disparities.

Incorporating the theoretical frameworks of Baldwin (1993), Du Bois (1903), and Ladson-Billings (2006) into an analysis of culture shock experienced by African American men in higher education institutions allows for a nuanced exploration of their challenges. Baldwin's (1993) reflections on the Black experience in America underscore the psychological and emotional struggles faced by African American students, highlighting the profound impact of cultural alienation and systemic racism. Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness elucidates the internal conflict African American students experience as they navigate PWIs that often marginalize their cultural identities. Ladson-Billings' (2006) theory of educational debt frames these experiences within the broader context of historical and systemic inequalities, emphasizing the need for structural changes to address the accumulated disadvantages faced by African Americans.

The literature reveals that African American men at PWIs frequently encounter significant cultural shock, characterized by feelings of alienation, marginalization, and identity conflict. For example, Abrica, Garcia-Louis, and Gallaway (2020) examine the antiblackness experienced by Black male students at Hispanic-serving community colleges, revealing how these students navigate environments not designed for their success. Similarly, Combs (2022) explores the concept of "bodies out of place," highlighting how Black individuals often feel out of place within predominantly white spaces, exacerbating their sense of cultural dislocation.

Dancy, Edwards, and Davis (2018) discuss the persistence of plantation politics in historically white universities, arguing that these institutions continue to perpetuate systemic racism and exclusionary practices. This perpetuation of racism creates an environment where African American students must constantly navigate and resist cultural alienation. These insights are aligned with Baldwin's (1993) reflections on the pervasive devaluation of Black identity and the continuous struggle for recognition and respect within a predominantly white society.

The phenomenon of culture shock is further examined through the lens of classroom belongingness. Booker (2007) discusses how African American college students often perceive a lack of belonging in academic settings, which impacts their academic performance and overall well-being. Griffin and Cummins (2012) highlight the strategic embrace of Black male counterstories as a means of navigating educational spaces that frequently fail to support their cultural identities. These experiences of culture shock underscore the need for educational practices that recognize and value diverse cultural backgrounds, promoting inclusivity and respect for all students.

Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade's (2009) call for hope in educational settings resonates with the need for supportive environments that acknowledge the unique challenges faced by African American students. His emphasis on cultivating hope in the face of adversity aligns with Ladson-Billings' (2006) notion of educational debt, which stresses the importance of addressing historical injustices and systemic inequalities in education. The cultivation of hope and resilience is essential for helping African American students navigate the cultural shock they experience at PWIs.

Carter's (2006, 2010) research on cultural flexibility and identity explores how African American students navigate their cultural identities within different educational contexts. She

argues that students who can adapt their cultural expressions to fit various social environments

are more likely to succeed academically. This perspective highlights the importance of cultural

flexibility in educational attainment and underscores the need for educators to create inclusive

and supportive learning environments.

Integrating the insights from Montagu (1962), Emerson (2000) and Smith (2000), Du

Bois (1903), Rodriguez (2000), Torres-Guzman (2009), Baldwin (1993), and Ladson-Billings

(2006) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the multifaceted

challenges faced by African American students in PWIs. Montagu's (1962) dismantles the

biological basis of race, underscoring that race is a social construct with significant cultural

implications. This perspective is crucial for educational practitioners to recognize and challenge

the ingrained racial constructs that perpetuate inequalities within educational settings. By

fostering an environment that deconstructs these harmful ideologies, educational practitioners

can promote a more inclusive atmosphere that respects and values diverse cultural identities.

Emerson and Smith's (2000) reveal how religious and social contexts contribute to racial

segregation and inequality, highlighting the importance of understanding these dynamics within

educational institutions. This analysis underscores the need for educational practitioners to

develop culturally responsive curricula that acknowledge and address the intersectionality of race

and religion. By doing so, educational environments can better support African American

students by validating their experiences and providing a more holistic approach to inclusivity.

Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness from offers a profound understanding

of the internal conflict experienced by African American students as they navigate a

predominantly White academic environment. This duality, the struggle to reconcile one's

identity with societal expectations, speaks to the core of the discomfort and alienation felt by

these students. Educational practitioners can leverage Du Bois' insights to create supportive spaces that acknowledge these internal conflicts and provide emotional and psychological support, helping students to integrate their cultural identities with their academic pursuits.

Finally, Ladson-Billings' (2006) concept of the "education debt" reframes the achievement gap as a cumulative consequence of historical and systemic inequities. This perspective calls for systemic changes to address these deep-rooted disparities. Educational practitioners can develop strategies that not only aim to close the achievement gap but also to pay back the education debt by creating equitable learning environments that provide African American students with the resources and support they need to succeed. By integrating the theoretical insights of Montagu, Emerson and Smith, Du Bois, Rodriguez, Torres-Guzman, Baldwin, and Ladson-Billings, educational practitioners can foster academic and emotional well-being for African American students, ultimately cultivating inclusive and equitable educational environments.

By leveraging these theoretical insights, this dissertation aims to provide a nuanced understanding of African American men's experiences in PWIs, illuminating the complex interplay of race, education, and systemic inequality. This approach not only enriches our understanding of the issues at hand but also sets the stage for developing strategies to foster more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

Against All Odds: Historical Context of Resilience Among African American

In examining the agency and resilience of African American men within the context of PWIs, it is crucial to situate their experiences within a broader historical and structural framework. The concept of educational debt, as articulated by Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), provides a pivotal shift in understanding educational disparities—not as isolated achievement

gaps but as cumulative disadvantages rooted in systemic racism. This paradigm aligns with the critical reflections of Baldwin (1993) and Du Bois (1903), who underscore the persistent struggle of African Americans to achieve equality within an inherently unequal society. By framing educational disparities through the lens of educational debt, Ladson-Billings highlights the need for systemic change to address these deep-seated inequities.

The concept of educational debt, as articulated by scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), shifts the focus from individual achievement gaps to the cumulative disadvantages faced by African Americans due to systemic racism. Ladson-Billings argues that the disparities in educational outcomes are not merely gaps in achievement but are the result of an accumulated educational debt owed to historically marginalized communities. This perspective aligns with Baldwin's critique of America's failure to fulfill its promise of equality and Du Bois' notion of double consciousness, where African Americans are continually reminded of their marginalized status.

Jonathan Kozol (2012) and Patrick Sharkey (2013) provide empirical evidence of the structural inequalities that contribute to this educational debt. Kozol (2012) documents the vast disparities in funding, facilities, and educational quality between affluent and impoverished schools, highlighting how systemic racism perpetuates educational inequities. Sharkey (2013) examines the impact of residential segregation and neighborhood disadvantage on educational and social mobility, emphasizing the long-term effects of structural barriers. These works underscore the need for comprehensive policy reforms to address the root causes of educational disparities.

Alba and Nee (2009) and Mary Pattillo (2008) further explore the structural factors that perpetuate educational inequalities. Alba and Nee examine the challenges faced by minority

students in navigating educational systems that fail to recognize and accommodate their diverse cultural backgrounds. Pattillo's (2008) analysis of race and class politics highlights the intersectional nature of educational disparities, showing how structural racism and economic disadvantage reinforce each other. These perspectives emphasize the need for policies and practices that promote inclusivity and equity in education.

Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness and Baldwin's (1993) reflections provide critical frameworks for understanding the emotional and psychological costs of educational debt. Du Bois (1903) describes the internal conflict experienced by African Americans as they navigate a society that devalues their identity, while Baldwin (1993) highlights the persistent struggle for recognition and equality. Both authors emphasize the need for systemic reforms that address the structural barriers to educational equity and promote social justice. By conceptualizing educational disparities as an educational debt, we can develop more effective strategies to address the root causes of inequality and promote equity in education.

The promise of education as the great equalizer is continually challenged by the persistent realities of racial injustice. Horace Mann (1848) envisioned equal educational opportunities for all, yet he lived in a society that systematically denied these opportunities to African Americans. This irony is stark, as the education system intended to liberate was entangled with the institution of slavery. Mann's era, coupled with contemporary experiences, underscores the complex relationship between education and social equity. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness and Baldwin's (1993) reflections provide critical insights into this irony, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for recognition and equality within an inherently unequal system.

Myrdal (1944) and Gossett (1965) provide essential historical and sociological contexts for understanding these contradictions. Myrdal's comprehensive analysis of race relations in the United States highlights the deep-seated nature of racial inequality and its impact on various social institutions, including education. Gossett (1965) traces the evolution of racial ideas in America, illustrating how these ideas have shaped societal attitudes and policies. These foundational works underscore the persistent nature of educational disparities and the challenges of achieving true equality.

Blumer (1958) and Bonilla-Silva (1997, 1999, 2004) further elucidate the structural and ideological barriers to educational equality. Blumer (1958) explores how racial prejudice is rooted in group dynamics and power relations, while Bonilla-Silva (1997, 1999, 2004) examines the systemic nature of racism and its impact on social institutions. These perspectives highlight the necessity of systemic reforms to address the root causes of educational disparities and promote equity and inclusion. By recognizing these barriers, we can develop more effective strategies to tackle these challenges.

Ladson-Billings (2006) introduces the concept of the "educational debt," which provides a nuanced perspective on educational (in)equality. Rather than focusing solely on the achievement gap, Ladson-Billings (2006) emphasizes the cumulative disadvantages that African Americans have faced due to historical and systemic inequities. This concept aligns well with Du Bois' (1973) critiques and Epps's (1973) examination of the outlook for Black education. Both scholars highlight the ongoing struggle for equitable education and the need for systemic change.

Watkins (2001) and Wilder (2013) offer critical insights into the historical foundations of educational inequality. Watkins (2001) explores the ideological and power structures that shaped Black education, while Wilder (2013) examines the entanglement of American universities with

slavery. Woodson's ([1933] 2000) remains a seminal work, critiquing the educational system's role in perpetuating racial subjugation and advocating for a curriculum that empowers African American students.

Agency & Resilience

Contemporary scholarship further explores how African American men engage with predominantly White institutions. Wood and Turner (2014) examine Black males' perceptions in community colleges, highlighting the barriers to engagement and success. Booker (2007) and Fox (2021) investigate the sense of belonging among African American students, emphasizing the importance of supportive environments for academic and social integration. Lewis et al. (2021) and Means and Pyne (2017) delve into the impacts of racial microaggressions and institutional support on Black students' sense of belonging, underscoring the ongoing challenges they face in historically White universities.

These scholars collectively illustrate how African American men navigate and experience PWIs. Their work highlights the systemic and interpersonal challenges that impede their academic and social success. By understanding these dynamics, we can better appreciate the resilience and strengths of African American students while acknowledging the structural reforms necessary to create truly inclusive and equitable educational environments.

African American men in higher education demonstrate remarkable agency and resilience as they navigate and confront systemic barriers. Derrick R. Brooms' (2017a) work provides a comprehensive examination of how Black men leverage their agency to overcome the challenges posed by PWIs. Brooms highlights the importance of identity affirmation, supportive networks, and strategic resistance in fostering resilience among Black male students.

Abrica, Garcia-Louis, and Gallaway (2020) explore the experiences of Black male students in Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges, revealing how they navigate the pervasive antiblackness embedded within these institutions. These students exhibit resilience by creating supportive peer networks and engaging in micro-resistance strategies to counteract the marginalization they face. Similarly, Brooms (2023) investigates how Black men navigate gendered antiblackness at Hispanic-Serving Institutions, emphasizing the role of peer support and faculty mentorship in fostering resilience.

Dancy, Edwards, and Davis (2018) discuss the plantation politics in historically White universities (HWIs), highlighting how Black students resist and navigate these oppressive structures. They argue that resilience is fostered through collective agency and the creation of counterspaces where Black students can find support and affirmation. This perspective aligns with Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade's (2009) call for hope in educational settings, underscoring the need for environments that nurture resilience and provide emotional and psychological support for Black students.

Evans and Moore (2015) examine the emotional labor and micro-resistance required for Black students to survive in White institutions. They highlight how Black students strategically navigate hostile environments by forming supportive networks and engaging in acts of resistance. Griffin and Cummins (2012) discuss the strategic embrace of Black male counterstories as a means of navigating educational spaces that frequently fail to support their cultural identities. These acts of resilience are critical for Black male students as they strive to achieve academic and personal success in environments that often marginalize them.

Harmon, James, and Farooq (2020) explore the ecologies of hope that contribute to educational success among Black males in an urban Midwestern city. They highlight the

importance of community support, positive role models, and cultural affirmation in fostering resilience. Harper (2009) and Smith et al. (2016) delve into the microaggressions and racial battle fatigue experienced by Black students, emphasizing the ongoing struggle against antiblackness in educational environments. These scholars highlight the resilience of Black male students who persist and succeed despite facing systemic and interpersonal challenges.

Jack (2014) revisits the concept of culture shock, examining how class and cultural differences impact the experiences of African American students in elite institutions. He argues that resilience is fostered through the ability to navigate and adapt to new social and cultural environments. Jayakumar, Vue, and Allen (2013) discuss the pathways to college for young Black scholars, highlighting the role of community cultural wealth in fostering resilience and academic success. These perspectives underscore the importance of recognizing and leveraging the cultural strengths and resources of African American students.

Lewis et al. (2021) explore the impact of racial microaggressions and institutional support on Black students' sense of belonging. They argue that resilience is fostered through the creation of supportive networks and the affirmation of cultural identity. Mustaffa (2017) and Newton (2023) provide historical and theoretical contexts for understanding the systemic nature of anti-Blackness in education, highlighting the importance of resilience in navigating these oppressive structures. Pirtle et al. (2024) and Robertson and Chaney (2017) further explore the unmet needs of Black students and the persistent existence of racism in PWIs, emphasizing the resilience required to thrive in these environments.

Smith et al. (2007, 2011) delve into the concept of racial battle fatigue, examining how microaggressions and campus culture contribute to the emotional exhaustion of Black male students. They highlight the resilience of these students as they navigate and resist the systemic

barriers to their success. Steele (2000) and Steele and Aronson (1995) discuss the impact of stereotype threat on the academic performance of African American students, emphasizing the resilience required to overcome these psychological barriers.

Tierney (1999) explores the models of minority college-going and retention, highlighting the importance of cultural integrity in fostering resilience. Tichavakunda (2024) introduces the theory of Black placemaking in higher education, emphasizing the creation of spaces that affirm Black identity and foster resilience. Vega (2022) discusses how Hispanic-Serving Institutions can better serve Black communities, highlighting the need for inclusive practices that address the specific challenges faced by Black students.

Walker (2018) explores how othermothering and support systems can improve mental health outcomes among African American males at HBCUs. She emphasizes the importance of community and cultural affirmation in fostering resilience. By understanding the unique challenges faced by African American men in higher education and recognizing their agency and resilience, we can develop strategies to support their success and create more inclusive and equitable educational environments.

In conclusion, African American men's agency and resilience in higher education are critical for navigating and overcoming systemic barriers. By leveraging supportive networks, cultural affirmation, and strategic resistance, these students demonstrate remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. Understanding these dynamics allows educators and policymakers to develop strategies that not only support the academic success of African American men but also promote their overall well-being and sense of belonging in higher education.

Microcommunities of Peer and Faculty Support

Building on the historical context, scholars such as Baldwin (1993), Du Bois (1903), and Ladson-Billings (2006) provide critical insights into the systemic inequalities perpetuated by educational institutions. These critiques illustrate how educational systems function as mechanisms that reproduce existing power structures, often to the detriment of marginalized communities. Baldwin's (1993) reflections on the American dream versus the Black experience, Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness, and Ladson-Billings' (2006) concept of educational debt collectively highlight the ideological and structural barriers faced by African American students.

African American men in PWIs often rely on microcommunities of peer and faculty support to navigate the systemic challenges they face. These microcommunities serve as vital spaces for identity affirmation, resilience building, and the development of coping strategies against racism and marginalization.

The significance of peer support networks in fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among African American students cannot be overstated. Grier-Reed (2010) emphasizes the role of African American student networks in creating sanctuaries and counterspaces that help students cope with racial microaggressions. These networks provide emotional support, cultural affirmation, and a shared understanding of the challenges faced by Black students in PWIs.

Similarly, Museus (2008) highlights the role of ethnic student organizations in fostering cultural adjustment and social integration. These organizations serve as critical sites for cultural expression and identity development, helping African American students navigate the cultural alienation often experienced in predominantly white educational settings.

Strayhorn (2008a) explores how diverse interactions with peers affect the sense of belonging for Black men at PWIs. He finds that supportive peer relationships are crucial for fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging, which in turn positively impacts academic performance and retention. The presence of supportive peer networks helps mitigate the effects of cultural shock and isolation, providing a buffer against the systemic racism prevalent in these institutions.

Faculty support and mentorship are equally important in promoting the academic and personal success of African American men in higher education. Brooms (2020) discusses how connections and relationships with faculty members enhance Black men's sense of belonging in college. Positive faculty-student relationships provide academic guidance, mentorship, and validation, which are essential for the holistic development of African American students.

Harper and Quaye (2007) argue that student organizations serve as venues for Black identity expression and development. They emphasize the role of faculty advisors and mentors in these organizations, who provide crucial support and guidance to Black student leaders. Effective mentorship helps students navigate the academic and social challenges of college life, fostering resilience and academic success.

Goings (2017) examines the strategies used by high-achieving Black males at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to interact with faculty. He finds that positive faculty interactions, characterized by mentorship and support, are instrumental in promoting academic success. These findings underscore the importance of creating supportive academic environments that recognize and address the unique needs of African American students.

Cultural centers and counterspaces play a critical role in supporting African American students by providing spaces where they can connect with peers, faculty, and staff who share

their cultural background. Hypolite (2020a) explores the role of Black cultural centers in facilitating racial identity development and providing social capital. These centers offer resources, support, and a sense of community, helping students navigate the challenges of PWIs.

Keels (2019) discusses how Black and Latinx students search for community at historically white universities through campus counterspaces. These spaces provide a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation, helping students cope with the alienation and marginalization often experienced in PWIs. The creation of such counterspaces is essential for promoting the well-being and success of African American students.

Patton (2006) highlights the importance of Black culture centers in fostering a sense of belonging and community for African American students. These centers serve as safe havens where students can engage in cultural activities, receive academic support, and connect with peers and mentors. The presence of cultural centers is crucial for addressing the unique needs of African American students and promoting their academic and personal development.

The concept of community cultural wealth, as discussed by Jayakumar, Vue, and Allen (2013), emphasizes the strengths and resources that marginalized communities bring to educational settings. They argue that African American students possess valuable cultural capital that can be leveraged to promote academic success and social integration. Recognizing and valuing this cultural wealth is essential for creating inclusive and supportive educational environments.

McGowan and Pérez (2020) explore how Black undergraduate men bridge gaps to community cultural wealth through supportive networks and relationships. They find that these networks provide critical resources and support, helping students navigate the challenges of

higher education. By leveraging community cultural wealth, educators can develop strategies that promote equity and inclusion for African American students.

Understanding the role of microcommunities of peer and faculty support in the experiences of African American men at PWIs is essential for addressing the systemic barriers they face. These microcommunities provide crucial support, fostering resilience, identity affirmation, and academic success. By creating and sustaining these supportive environments, educators and policymakers can help mitigate the impact of systemic racism and promote the well-being and success of African American students in higher education. Integrating the insights from Baldwin (1993), Du Bois (1903), and Ladson-Billings (2006) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the educational disparities faced by African American men, emphasizing the importance of supportive microcommunities in fostering their success.

Conclusion

This literature review has explored three primary bodies of scholarship relevant to the experiences of African American men in PWIs: 1) Culture Shock, 2) Agency and Resilience, and 3) Microcommunities of Peer and Faculty Support. These areas collectively highlight the pervasive and systemic nature of educational disparities faced by these students and underscore the importance of supportive networks in navigating these challenges.

Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Baldwin (1993), Du Bois (1903), and Ladson-Billings (2006), the literature reveals the profound impact of cultural alienation and systemic racism on African American students. Baldwin's (1993) reflections on the dichotomy between the American dream and the Black experience, alongside Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness, elucidate the psychological and emotional struggles these students face. Ladson-

Billings' (2006) theory of educational debt frames these experiences within the broader context of historical and systemic inequities, emphasizing the need for structural change.

Secondarily, there is a body of literature highlights the remarkable agency and resilience demonstrated by African American men as they navigate and confront systemic barriers in higher education. Scholars such as Derrick R. Brooms (2017a) emphasize the importance of identity affirmation, supportive networks, and strategic resistance in fostering resilience. These findings are supported by the work of Abrica, Garcia-Louis, and Gallaway (2020), who explore the experiences of Black male students in Hispanic-serving community colleges, and Dancy, Edwards, and Davis (2018), who discuss the persistence of plantation politics in historically white universities. The resilience of these students is critical for their academic and personal success, despite the systemic and interpersonal challenges they face.

The significance of peer support networks and faculty mentorship in fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among African American students cannot be overstated. Grier-Reed (2010) and Museus (2008) highlight the role of African American student networks and ethnic student organizations in creating sanctuaries and counterspaces that help students cope with racial microaggressions and cultural isolation. Similarly, faculty support and mentorship, emphasized by Brooms (2020) and Harper and Quaye (2007), are crucial for promoting academic success and personal development. Cultural centers and counterspaces, explored by Hypolite (2020a) and Keels (2019), further underscore the importance of supportive environments that affirm Black identity and foster resilience.

By integrating the insights from these three bodies of literature, this review offers a nuanced understanding of the historical and contemporary contexts of educational inequalities. The review highlights the essential role of microcommunities of peer and faculty support in

fostering the academic and personal success of African American men. These supportive environments are crucial for mitigating the impact of systemic racism and promoting equity and inclusion in higher education.

Moving forward, it is imperative for educators and policymakers to recognize the critical role of these microcommunities and to develop strategies that foster inclusive and supportive educational environments. By addressing the ideological and structural barriers identified in this review, we can create educational systems that not only support the academic success of African American men but also promote their overall well-being and sense of belonging. This comprehensive approach is essential for fostering more equitable and inclusive educational environments, ultimately contributing to the broader goal of social justice in education.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

In this study, I conducted a multi-site, qualitative study that incorporates one-on-one, semi-structured interviews as my primary data source. I interviewed a select group of Black men across four predominantly white institutions (PWIs) with religious affiliations. I included a demographic survey as part of the interview process and conducted document analysis of available data and institutional information for each of the institutions. This comprehensive approach provides context for my conversations with participants and positions my work well to contribute to the existing literature on how white institutional culture influences Black men's persistence in higher education.

Overall, my methodological approach is designed to challenge and expand the current understanding of racial disparities in higher education. By integrating historical context, educational debt theory, and a critical examination of cultural interactions within educational settings, this research aims to propose actionable strategies for institutions to address the deep-seated inequities that affect African American male students, thereby aligning more closely with the ideal of education as a true equalizer.

In this research, I endeavor to dissect the complex layers of racial and cultural dynamics within the higher education system through a qualitative analysis that centers on the voices and experiences of African American men. My methodological approach is rooted in the belief that the current structures and systems within higher education inadequately address the specific

needs of African American male students, contributing more significantly to the noted achievement gap than the commonly referenced cultural shocks.

This methodological approach is crafted to challenge the prevailing deficit-based narratives and instead highlight the systemic barriers that perpetuate educational inequities. By focusing on the lived experiences of African American men within these educational institutions, this research seeks to propose actionable changes that can foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment. This lens not only allows the academic and social challenges faced by these students to be explored but also enables their resilience and contributions to the academic community to be celebrated.

Selection of Institutions

As mentioned, this study focuses on Black men's college experiences at four predominantly white institutions (PWIs) with religious affiliations as core to their founding. The religious undertone of these institutions provides a framework for interrogating the experience of Black men on college campuses with a clarion call to serve the greater good (Emerson & Smith 2000; Parks 2000; Warren & Mapp 2010; Astin, Astin, and Lindholm 2011; and Dancy & Brown 2011). My belief stems from my time as a student at a Jesuit institution, which professes to "help others and seek God in all things."

The goal was to elicit experiences from a broad range of students within a localized context to understand how these students experienced their racial and ethnic identities as related to their peers, professors, interactions with the school administration, and more. Each of the four schools are located in the Midwest and I use pseudonyms for each institution. The first school, Little Valley University, has a student population around 10,000, and the African-American population accounts for about 5%. The second school, Deer River University, has a population

around 13,000 students, and the African-American population accounts for about 7%. The third institution, Northview University, has a population around 8,000 with African-American students comprising about 6%. Finally, the fourth school, Mountainview University, has a population around 8,000 with African-American students comprising around 4%.

At the start of my project, Little Valley University was at the center of my study. In 2016, the university admitted a little under 3,000 full-time undergraduate students; of those admitted, roughly 800 of them were male. At that time, the school had just over 14,000 full-time undergraduate students; of that number, roughly 3,500 (24%) were male. These numbers meant that the admitted freshman class of the institution's male student population was about 23% of the male population on campus years prior. The total female undergraduate population was roughly double that of the full-time male population. At that same time, 7% of the population was African American, constituting about 1,000 students. Given this cursory examination, there are roughly between 50 and 60 African American male students per year admitted to the school if the numbers remain consistent with data published in the 2016 annual report. Little Valley University served as a benchmark for the total number of interviews required to have an adequate sampling of the Black male population on each of these campuses (Maxwell, 2013). According to Maxwell (2013), purposive sampling is a strategy that enables researchers to intentionally select cases that are particularly informative for qualitative studies. This approach supports the determination of an adequate sampling size for interviewing the Black male population at Little Valley University, ensuring that the selected participants provide rich and relevant data for the research. Therefore, by interviewing 20 African American male students on campus, I could account for about 45% of the Black male population in each incoming class. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 24 years, with the majority being freshmen and sophomores,

totaling 12, while the remaining were five juniors and three seniors. This age distribution was pivotal in understanding the developmental stages and institutional interactions of these young men within their academic journeys. The average GPA among the participants was 2.98, with a mode of 3.0, indicating a relatively typical academic performance spectrum with some outliers.

In navigating the qualitative analysis, I chose interviews as the cornerstone of my research methodology, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of African American men within the higher education landscape. These conversations, conducted with individuals attending four institutions with religious affiliations, were poised to shed light on the intricate interplay between institutional culture, racial identity, and academic persistence. Embracing a lens informed by the religious ethos of these schools, which emphasizes service and social responsibility, I sought to unravel how these values intersected with the lived experiences of Black men on college campuses, particularly in the context of PWIs.

The decision to uphold consistency in the demographic composition of selected institutions underscored a deliberate effort to preserve comparability across the research landscape. By adhering to this principle, I aimed to ensure that the narratives gleaned from each school resonated within a cohesive framework, facilitating meaningful cross-comparisons and insights into the overarching research inquiry. Through purposeful sampling guided by Maxwell's framework, the inclusion of multiple institutions served to enrich the depth and breadth of perspectives captured within the study.

With the groundwork laid for a comprehensive exploration of Black men's experiences in higher education, I turn my focus to discussing the distinctive institutional contexts of Deer River University, Northview University, and Mountainview University. Through an examination of the composition of these institutions and their similarities and differences from Little Valley

University, these narratives will offer a panoramic view of the multifaceted landscape shaping the educational journeys of African American men in PWIs.

An examination of the institutional contexts of Deer River University, Northview University, and Mountainview University reveals that each university presents unique demographic landscapes, which contrast with each other and with Little Valley University. This diversity in demographic composition is crucial for understanding the varied experiences of Black men in these PWIs. The four institutions varied in rankings, student population, acceptance rates, admissions policies, and several other factors.

Deer River University, as a private research institution, exhibits a relatively balanced racial composition, with Whites making up just over half of the student body (51%) and notable representations of Hispanic (21%) and Asian (12%) populations. The presence of Black or African American students stands at 7%, which is slightly higher than at some of the other institutions discussed. This seemingly positive statistic underscores a deeper issue. Within an environment where inclusion is lacking, a higher number of African American students can exacerbate feelings of isolation and marginalization. The disconnect between the institution and its African American student population becomes more pronounced, potentially leading to greater risks for adverse outcomes. This heightened visibility without genuine inclusion can amplify the psychological and social challenges these students face, impacting their overall academic and personal well-being. Such dynamics are critical to understanding the systemic barriers detailed in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

Northview University, distinguished by its religious affiliation, shows a unique demographic profile where Whites constitute a smaller majority (41%) compared to Deer River. It also has a higher percentage of Asian students (20%) and a significant international population

(10%). The representation of Black or African American students is about 6%. Northview's strong international presence and diverse racial makeup might influence the campus culture, potentially fostering a more globally oriented and culturally diverse environment.

Mountainview University stands out with the highest percentage of White students (69%), which indicates a less racially diverse environment compared with the other institutions. The representation of Hispanic (15%) and Asian (6%) students at Mountainview University is lower than at Deer River and Northview. Furthermore, the presence of Black or African American students at Mountainview is the lowest among the compared institutions, at only 4%. This demographic might suggest a more homogeneous student body, which could impact the experiences and perceptions of minority students, including Black men, in terms of inclusion and representation.

In contrast, Little Valley University, which also has a religious affiliation, presents a demographic composition somewhat at a midpoint between those of the other universities, with White students making up 54% of the population. It has higher Hispanic (18%) and Asian (13%) populations compared to Mountainview, but is similar to Deer River and Northview. The representation of Black students at 5% is comparable to Mountainview and slightly less than at Deer River. Little Valley's demographics suggest that it might provide a middle ground in terms of racial diversity among these institutions.

Overall, these universities illustrate the diversity within PWIs and underscore the importance of considering how institutional demographics can shape the educational experiences and outcomes of African American men. Deer River's relative racial diversity might offer more supportive environments for racial interactions, whereas Mountainview's demographic homogeneity could pose challenges for the inclusion and engagement of Black students.

Northview's unique blend of high Asian and international populations might also create distinctive cultural dynamics that influence African American men differently compared to the other institutions. This demographic mix may suggest a moderately diverse environment, potentially offering richer interactions among different racial groups. Little Valley's moderate diversity serves as a key point of comparison when examining the demographics of other institutions. This demographic profile allows for a nuanced analysis of how varying levels of diversity influence student experiences and outcomes. The presence of a moderately diverse student body at Little Valley highlights the complexities of inclusion and representation in higher education, offering a critical lens through which to assess the effectiveness of institutional policies and practices in supporting minority students. Such insights are essential for understanding the broader landscape of Black men's experiences in higher education.

Recruitment

In my research, I meticulously explored the lived experiences of African American male students within PWIs. The participant recruitment process was meticulously planned and executed, despite significant challenges and adaptations necessitated by the pandemic and shifting university environments. Nevertheless, to truly understand these students' experiences, I compared their experiences with one another. I carefully framed each participant's campus experiences with various administrators, faculty, and staff within the broader theoretical conversations on shock and diversity in higher education.

Initial Recruitment Efforts and Challenges. The initial phase of recruitment began with traditional methods, including posting flyers at Little Valley University and collaborating with student organizations dedicated to supporting African American men. These groups were crucial in helping me access potential participants who self-identified as African American men.

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted these efforts. As colleges and universities transitioned to remote learning and students were less physically present on campus, the effectiveness of flyers and face-to-face recruitment diminished.

Facing these challenges, I secured an extension to adapt my approach in my project. The need for physical distancing pushed me to revise and rethink my strategies to better suit the new virtual landscape, which initially slowed recruitment but was necessary to maintain the integrity and goals of the research.

Adapting to a Digital Recruitment Strategy

To navigate the new virtual environment, I utilized my connections within National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). I reached out to colleagues across campuses, who helped disseminate an email recruitment statement to undergraduate African American students. This email clearly outlined the study's aims, the nature of participation, and the ethical considerations, including the minimal risks involved—highlighting that the topics discussed were typical of regular campus interactions and posed no additional risk beyond daily experiences.

The recruitment email also mentioned the compensation—a $40 gift card—as a token of appreciation for the participants' time and emotional investment. This incentive was crucial in motivating participation and acknowledging the value of the students' contributions. The email facilitated a streamlined recruitment process, enabling students to directly schedule interviews at their convenience.

Snowball Sampling Technique

After initiating recruitment through NASPA, I employed a snowball sampling method. Participants were encouraged to share the study details with peers who met the eligibility

criteria—self-identified African American men, aged 18 or older, enrolled in any year from freshman to senior between 2019 and 2023, and living on campus or intended to live on campus prior to the pandemic. This method effectively broadened the participant pool, with participants leveraging personal networks to enhance the richness of the data collected.

Informed Consent and Ethical Considerations

Throughout the process, I upheld high ethical standards (O'Leary 214). Each participant received an email detailing the research project, its objectives, their rights as participants, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. They were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and informed that they could withdraw or omit responses at any point without penalty. Consent forms, along with my contact information, were distributed either in person or via email, depending on each participant's preference and the prevailing health guidelines.

My Reflections

Despite initial setbacks due to the pandemic, the adapted strategies enabled the successful recruitment of five students at Little Valley University initially, followed by an expanded effort that saw the recruitment of 15 more participants from multiple campuses (Deer River University, Northview University, and Mountainview University). These efforts provided a robust dataset that helped me identify emerging patterns and deepen the understanding of how racialization influences the attrition of African American males in university settings.

This narrative not only reflects the challenges and strategic pivots in my recruitment process but also underscores the responsiveness and adaptability required to conduct impactful social science research under unpredictable circumstances. The thorough and ethical approach ensured a comprehensive exploration of the experiences of African American men in PWIs,

contributing valuable insights to the academic discourse on race, education, and social integration.

Document Analysis

In this research, I also conducted document analysis, which primarily involved, examining publicly available documents that impacted or reflected the experiences of African American male students at predominantly white institutions. These documents included public communications from the institutions in response to significant national events and relevant news articles discussing institutional reactions.

I specifically analyzed public emails sent to students from university administrations in response to critical incidents, such as the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church shooting, the Tree of Life synagogue shooting, the murder of George Floyd, and various student protest movements associated with Black Lives Matter. These communications were pivotal in understanding how institutions publicly address issues of race, violence, and community solidarity, which are profoundly relevant to the experiences of African American students.

Additionally, I utilized publicly available news articles from sources such as the Washington Post, Huffington Post, The New York Times, Forbes, and the Tribune that provided external perspectives on how campuses responded to these events. This allowed for a comparison between the institutional narratives communicated through direct emails and the public discourse surrounding these responses. This comparative analysis was crucial for gauging the alignment or disparity between institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion as perceived by the public and the student body.

To provide a thorough context for the document analysis, I developed and followed a two-step process. The first step involved gathering background information on each institution,

including mission statements, enrollment data, and details on institutional support structures such as cultural centers, fraternities, bridge programs. The second step focused on reviewing institutional policies, statements, and other relevant documents within the context of their responses and reactions to current events, such as the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

Utilizing publicly available documents, including institutional communications and media reports, I examined key societal and campus events that coincided with the academic journey of the participants. This included responses to national tragedies, pivotal societal movements, and significant judicial decisions that resonated within the academic community, such as the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, racialized incidents on campus, and the Supreme Court's rulings on holistic admissions.

These documents served as a backdrop for understanding how the institutions communicated with their student populations during times of national or local upheaval. By reviewing the content and tone of these communications, I assessed whether the institutions acknowledged the specific impacts of these events on African American students or if the responses were perceived as generic or insufficiently attentive to their unique concerns.

Qualitative Interviews and Demographic Surveys. In this study, I conducted qualitative interviews that were supplemented by demographic surveys. These surveys gathered detailed information about participants' year in school, grade point average, the number of organizations they participated in, and their perception of their academic performance. This baseline data was crucial for interpreting the students' overall engagement with their institutions, providing a comprehensive understanding of their academic and extracurricular involvement.

To understand the implications of institutional structures and their roles in reinforcing cultural hierarchies within higher education, I leveraged the tenets of CRT to frame White supremacist cultural persistence and impact in higher education. I endeavored to elevate the voices of self-identified Black male students by allowing their stories to frame shared understandings of their experiences. Therefore, I interviewed self-identified African American men attending one of four universities in the first 4 years of college. I interviewed 20 African American men currently enrolled at one of the four institutions: Little Valley University, Deer River University, Northview University, and Mountainview University.

I used interviews as they make the "most significant events of people's lives become known to others," which no other tool available to the researcher can expose (Weiss, 1994, p. 2). Far too frequently, White supremacist society strips African Americans of their voices, especially as it pertains to their experiences of race and racism in higher education (Sue, 2016). Therefore, in this study, I attempt to provide space for these voices by using interviews as the primary data for my research. These interviews allowed participants to share why and how they responded to feelings of belonging or isolation while pursuing their college degrees.

Due to the devastating impacts of COVID-19, I conducted my interviews virtually. The interviews were 1 hour long and took place via Zoom video calls. I permitted participants to have their cameras on or off based on their preferences. I asked the students to use their pseudonyms as their names in the Zoom meeting to help maintain anonymity and confidentiality (Weiss, 1994). Interviews leveraged open-ended questions designed to spur conversations about various topics for first, second, third, and fourth-year, self-identified African American men to share their experiences in higher education. Prompts asked participants to recall their first encounter with college, how they made decisions about which programs or organizations to participate in

and which ones made them feel less welcome, how they have experienced their interactions with faculty and staff, how they made sense of their experiences of "shock," how they defined and measured success, and how they made sense of space and place while on campus. I recorded and transcribed the interviews and stored the files on a password-protected computer. I compensated participants with a $40 gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Interviewing Techniques. The interviews sought to deepen understanding of how, and the extent to which, students experience moments of racialization on campus, closely examining how they make sense of those moments. I used a semi-structured interviewing approach to allow space for participants to guide aspects of the conversation. This approach also allows for multiple opportunities for follow-up questions as a means to garner greater depth about participants' experiences and sensemaking. As an example, clarifying questions such as "How did this make you feel?" or "Why do you think this happened?" served to situate better how these young men made sense of their experiences. As the sole interviewer on this project, I provided consistency in the interviews by using the conversations with the students to help provide context and meaning to their own words. My conversations with these young men allowed me to compare their experiences with the broader literature on African American men's experience in higher education. In interviewing students, I maintained strict consistency regarding how and when I posed questions to participants to amplify the voices of these young men in the contours of my discourse.

Furthermore, as an African American male who has shared experiences with the study participants, I sometimes created space for elaborate descriptions by probing silence or searching for the students to express how various experiences impacted them in their own words. My interview process created consistency in the delivery of the questions, coding, and transcription.

Furthermore, I was able to have to follow up with more well-placed questions during the interviews that encouraged participants to share stories about their experiences providing richer data for analysis. My shared identities with the participants, coupled with the sample size, enabled me to quickly develop rapport with the participants in the interviews. My quick ability to develop rapport further highlighted the importance of my perspective and experience as the primary researcher.

Demographic Surveys

To enrich the qualitative interviews, I designed a comprehensive demographic survey that not only captured essential demographic and academic information about each participant, including age, grade point average (GPA), school, and major, but also detailed their engagement in extracurricular activities. This background and additional data provided deeper insights into the participants' social integration and involvement in campus life, serving as a foundational layer to contextualize the experiences shared during the interviews.

A significant aspect of the survey focused on the students' involvement in extracurricular activities. This information was crucial, as it provided a lens through which to view each student's level of engagement and potential support networks within the university setting. The surveys revealed a concentration of students in the humanities and social sciences. Many of these students expressed a sense of alienation from the STEM fields, which they attributed to various forms of discomfort and discouragement from advisors, highlighting a potential systemic bias within academic advising practices. This data enriched my understanding of how extracurricular involvement might mitigate or exacerbate feelings of alienation and influence overall persistence in higher education.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data analysis phase, a critical component of my research, was grounded in the principles of ethical rigor and methodological precision. This section outlines the analytical methods I employed, the structure of data management, and the emergent themes that framed the narrative of my findings.

Data Collection and Management. At the outset, Little Valley University emerged as a focal point of inquiry. With its modest African American student population comprising 5% of the total, the institution offered a nuanced microcosm for examining racial dynamics within the collegiate environment. However, my recruitment efforts faced an unexpected obstacle exacerbated by the pandemic-induced phenomenon of screen fatigue as my interviews shifted to Zoom (virtual). As the transition from high school to college marked a pivotal juncture in the experiences of first- and second-year students, I aimed to capture the fresh perspectives of these individuals amidst their initial forays into PWIs. Yet, the challenges of virtual engagement hindered my ability to recruit participants from Little Valley University, impeding the attainment of a representative sample size.

Recognizing the need to adapt my approach, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board to broaden my recruitment parameters, thereby diversifying the pool of participating institutions and the grade range of participants to any undergraduate self-identified African American male attending one of the four institutions. Leveraging my professional network within the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), I endeavored to forge connections with additional schools across the Midwest region. Despite this expansion, I remained steadfast in my commitment to maintaining a focus on institutions with

religious affiliations, viewing them as fertile ground for examining themes of social justice and communal responsibility.

I collected data primarily through audio recordings of interviews, which were conducted with the utmost respect for participants' privacy. Prior to each interview, participants selected a pseudonym, and this alias, along with a unique ID number, was used to label all corresponding audio files and transcripts. These audio files were stored securely on my password-protected computer and backed up on a hard drive kept in a locked cabinet within a secured office. After the transcription and verification process, all audio files were responsibly destroyed to ensure confidentiality.

Transcriptions were meticulously labeled using the respondents' ID numbers and pseudonyms to avoid any accidental disclosure of their identities. These transcripts were then securely stored on a separate flash drive, distinct from other research data, to further safeguard participant anonymity. The consent forms, equally important for ethical compliance, were digitally archived in a separate secure folder and were scheduled for destruction post-research to maintain privacy.

Data Coding and Analysis. The analytical journey began with an inductive analytical approach, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data while being initially guided by pre-determined codes related to my research questions. These base codes included aspects such as preparation for college, definitions of success, experiences of shock or reaction to the environment, feelings of belonging versus inclusion, and encounters with White spaces on campus.

As I delved deeper into the data, employing the principles of open coding, I adapted my approach to accommodate emerging themes that were not initially anticipated (Bowen 2009 and

Maxwell 2013). This flexible coding strategy was vital as it allowed the lived experiences of the

participants to guide the analysis, revealing nuanced insights into their journeys. Using NVivo, a

robust data coding software, I was able to systematically organize and link similar thematic

expressions across different transcripts, assisting me in developing a fuller understanding of the

data. Additionally, by being the only coder, I maintained uniformity in how information was

coded and transcribed across interviews.

In synthesizing the narratives of the Black men within the context of these four

environments, I intertwined interview codes with pivotal theories—CRT, double consciousness,

and educational debt—to forge a nuanced lens through which I deciphered and discussed the

participants' experiences. The coded interviews, derived from authentic voices and lived

experiences, not only illuminate the persistent racial disparities and systemic barriers within

higher education but also put those voices into dialogue with the tenants of CRT, exposing the

embedded racial hierarchies and power dynamics that permeate these institutional spaces. The

notion of double consciousness, articulated by Du Bois, provides a theoretical scaffold,

elucidating the internal conflict and duality Black men navigate as they simultaneously negotiate

their racial and academic identities amidst predominantly White environments. Additionally, by

invoking the conceptual framework of educational debt, the study explores the historical,

economic, sociopolitical, and moral inequities that have perpetually marginalized Black men in

educational contexts. Ultimately, the amalgamation of real narratives and theoretical frameworks

catalyzes pivotal discussions and informs pragmatic strategies, aiming to mitigate the challenges,

enrich the academic experiences, and elevate the voices of Black men in colleges across the

nation.

Theme Development. During the initial coding phase, I identified several key themes that emerged from the participants' narratives. These themes were not merely incidental findings but were systematically derived from the data through an iterative process of coding and analysis.

The first major theme, which forms the basis of the first findings chapter was the profound sense of isolation and culture shock experienced by African American students. This theme was identified through patterns in the participants' accounts of feeling disconnected from the broader institutional culture and encountering unexpected, often racialized, experiences. These encounters, stemming from acts of othering by peers and institutional structures, vividly illustrated the initial challenges these students faced upon entering predominantly white institutions.

The second theme, intricately tied to the concept of belonging, is detailed in the second findings chapter. This theme was developed by coding instances where students felt acknowledged and valued, highlighting specific places, moments, and interactions that provided a sense of belonging. Despite an overarching sense of alienation, these moments offered significant insights into the sporadic yet impactful experiences of inclusion within the campus community.

The third theme, encapsulated in the third findings chapter emerged from the participants' narratives about navigating their identity and meeting institutional expectations. This theme was identified through patterns in their stories about coping with adversity, managing self-doubt, and engaging with both supportive and challenging institutional structures. This ongoing journey of adaptation and resilience reflects the continuous effort required of African American men to succeed in predominantly white academic environments.

The fourth theme, was developed from discussions about the constant awareness of being perceived as outsiders. This theme was identified through coding references to racial microaggressions, stereotypes, and the emotional labor involved in navigating these challenges. It underscores the concept of dual consciousness described by Du Bois (1903) and the psychological toll of systemic racism detailed by Baldwin (1993).

By systematically coding and analyzing these themes, I was able to construct a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the unique experiences of African American men in higher education. These themes not only highlight the challenges but also illuminate the resilience and strategies employed by these students to navigate their academic journeys. This methodological approach ensures that the findings are deeply rooted in the lived experiences of the participants, providing a robust foundation for understanding and addressing educational disparities.

Analytical Reflections and Continuous Adaptation. Throughout the analysis, I remained acutely aware of the potential overlaps and conflicts between various codes. This awareness guided my interpretation, allowing me to draw connections between seemingly disparate themes such as institutional dynamics and personal experiences of success and shock. My primary aim was to honor and amplify the voices of African American students, letting their genuine experiences inform and guide the conclusions of my study.

In reflection, the data analysis not only provided structured insights into the specific experiences of African American men in higher education but also illuminated the broader socio-cultural dynamics at play. By remaining open to the fluidity of the research findings and being guided by the participants' voices, I was able to construct a narrative that is both impactful and reflective of the true challenges and triumphs faced by these students within PWIs.

Interactive Feedback Loop. After the initial rounds of coding the interview transcripts and integrating the survey and document data, I implemented an interactive feedback loop by inviting participants to review the coded data. This step was crucial not only for verifying the accuracy of the data representation but also for ensuring the ethical integrity of the research process. Participants were encouraged to express any concerns about the data treatment or interpretation, which allowed for adjustments in the coding and analysis to better reflect their lived experiences.

The feedback received was instrumental in affirming the initial codes and, in some cases, led to the reevaluation of certain themes that had been misunderstood or underrepresented in the initial analysis. This participatory approach not only strengthened the trustworthiness of the research findings but also empowered the participants by involving them directly in the research process.

Conclusion on Data Analysis. The integration of demographic survey data and document analysis with qualitative interviews provided a comprehensive view of the participants' academic and personal landscapes. The multifaceted data collection and analysis methods ensured a robust examination of the experiences of African American males in PWIs, highlighting both the challenges and the resilience evident in their academic journeys. This holistic approach allowed for a nuanced interpretation of how racialization affects their educational experiences and outcomes, ultimately contributing to a richer, more informed discourse on diversity and inclusion in higher education.

Through this comprehensive approach, I was able to critically examine the moments when the participants felt that their institutions failed to consider their specific experiences as Black men navigating both their academic environments and broader societal challenges. These

reflections were particularly poignant in discussions about racialized incidents on campus and national events that spurred significant emotional and psychological responses among the students.

The document analysis not only contextualized the students' experiences within a specific historical and social framework but also highlighted the potential discrepancies between institutional intentions and student perceptions. This examination was crucial for understanding how these young men perceived their places within their educational communities, particularly in terms of feeling seen, supported, and valued during times of significant social stress and change.

My Positionality

Reflecting on the graduation disparities highlighted by the National Center for Education Statistics and informed by the works of scholars such as Harper and Brooms, my journey as an African American first-generation college student nearing the completion of my Ph.D. lends a unique perspective to this study. This journey, underscored by the systemic barriers and cultural challenges emphasized in Combs's research on racial identity and social cohesion in Black neighborhoods (Combs, 2010), mirrors the complexities African American men face in higher education. My experiences in graduate education at leading institutions resonate with the themes of institutional racism and cultural shock, drawing parallels to the insights offered by Du Bois and Bonilla-Silva on race and structural inequities (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Du Bois, 1903). Therefore, this research is a fusion of academic inquiry and personal narrative, reflecting the multifaceted experiences of African American students in predominantly White academic settings.

I have become acutely aware of the "educational debt" concept, as discussed by Ladson-Billings, and the pervasive nature of systemic injustices highlighted in Combs's work on everyday racism (Combs, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006). As a first-generation student, my journey through an educational system marred by historical injustices echoes the insights on structural and institutional racism presented by Bonilla-Silva (1997) and, in many ways, parallels the experiences of the young men in my study. My professional experiences in graduate education have illuminated these disparities, underscoring the importance of institutional engagement and support for minority students. This perspective, aligned with the CRT framework proposed by scholars such as Harper, Brooms, and Davis (Brooms 2017; Harper, 2009), shapes my approach to examining the experiences of African American men in higher education, exploring the educational debt owed to these students and the responsibilities of institutions in addressing this debt.

My role in graduate education has offered a unique perspective to observe the challenges and triumphs of African American students, aligning with the CRT themes emphasized by CRT scholars. These experiences significantly influenced the methodologies used in this research. By employing qualitative analysis and focusing on interviews, this study uncovers the layered experiences of African American men. The study moves beyond mere statistics to reveal the depth of the participants' journeys and the impact of institutional cultures on their academic and personal growth. This method aligns with my conviction that the narratives of African American men in academia are complex and require a nuanced approach to fully comprehend. My ideals are shaped by years of educational and professional experiences and informed by Combs's insights on the role of place in racial identity formation (Combs, 2010).

Finally, my identity as an African American first-generation college student nearing the completion of my Ph.D. has been a cornerstone of my commitment to this research. This identity has informed my understanding of the significance of voice and representation in academic studies, resonating with Harper's and Brooms advocacy for counter-narratives in CRT (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2009). This research is not merely an academic endeavor but a personal mission to amplify the narratives of African American men in higher education. By interweaving my experiences with theoretical frameworks such as CRT, double consciousness, and educational debt, I offer a comprehensive and empathetic analysis that not only highlights the challenges faced by these students but also underscores the resilience and strength inherent in their stories, echoing the sentiments expressed in Combs's examination of continuing racism in U.S. society (Combs, 2018).

By speaking with Black men about their experiences as part of these various communities on campus, I developed a richer understanding of how the institutions have responded to the needs of a shrinking Black population on their campuses. To interpret the support these students did or did not receive, I will highlight the similarities between their lived experiences and suggest ways higher education practitioners can engage historically underrepresented populations on campus. One such way is by conducting similar interviews and conversations with their students to understand the role of hegemonic whiteness within the respective institutions.

CHAPTER FOUR

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD:

NAVIGATING CULTURE SHOCK AND (UN)WELCOME SPACES

Culture shock is a deeply ingrained aspect of the collegiate journey for many self-identified African-American men it is "the strangeness and discomfort [marginalized students] feel when they matriculate" (Torres 2009:885). It manifests as a profound disconnection between their identity and the often-dominant White culture within these academic spaces (Jack 2014; Tatum 1997; Tierney 1999; Torres 2009). As these young men strive to find their place and purpose within the majority-White institution, they grapple with the complexities of adapting to a new cultural landscape while preserving their unique identities (Carter, 2005). In this chapter, I delve into the multifaceted dimensions of culture shock, exploring how it influences Black men's college experience and shapes their perceptions of themselves and the institutions they attend. Their narratives and insights provide a deeper understanding of the challenges, triumphs, and transformations that occur when culture shock becomes an integral part of their academic journey.

This chapter incorporates culture shock, social-emotional isolation, and double consciousness to deepen understanding of these students' challenges and strategies for navigation. This study synthesizes Pedersen's (1995) culture shock, Torres's (2009) isolation findings, and Jack's (2014) assimilation analysis to illustrate how institutional culture and White supremacy impact African American male students by reinforcing stereotypes, restricting resources, fostering isolation, and pressuring conformity, affecting their academic, mental, and

overall college experience. Furthermore, drawing from Du Bois (1903) theory of double consciousness, this chapter examines the historical and social costs of navigating predominantly White spaces. This approach addresses the experiences of Black men on college campuses and challenges traditional interpretations of culture shock. The approach sets the stage for these young men to articulate their unique experiences and resistances within the academic environment.

According to Pedersen (1995: 1), "The term culture shock was first introduced by Kalvero Oberg (1960) to describe the anxiety resulting from not knowing what to do in a new culture" (Pedersen, 1995, p. 1). Since this term was introduced, scholars have published numerous books and articles about the causes, stages, and consequences of culture shock. To create a shared understanding of culture shock, I analyze the stages using Pedersen's (1995) framework. Pedersen (1995), a noted psychologist, asserts that culture shock consists of the following:

First, culture shock is described as a grief-like mourning reaction over having lost back-home relationships. Second, culture shock is presumed to be inevitable for all sojourners and cannot be avoided from this fatalistic perspective. Third, culture shock is explained as a process of natural selection or "survival of the fittest." Fourth, culture shock is blamed on unrealistic expectations by sojourners in the new settings. Fifth, culture shock is blamed on negative life events that interrupt the daily routine in unsettling ways. Sixth, culture shock is blamed on a clash of values and their consequent misunderstandings and conflicts. Seventh, culture shock is blamed on a social skills deficit where inadequate or unskilled individuals have a difficult time adjusting. Eighth, culture shock is blamed on a lack of social support, drawing on attachment theory, social network theory, and psychotherapeutic explanations. (pp. 5–7)

Beyond a social and cultural explanation of the challenges faced by African Americans in their pursuit of higher education, there is also the social-emotional cost of what academics have theorized as culture shock. Pedersen (1995) describes culture shock as the experience of engaging with a foreign environment. When this notion is combined with the belief that African Americans hold a separate and distinct set of cultural norms and values (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), some scholars have used the concept of culture shock to claim that Black people experience shock when entering institutions of higher learning (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1966; Deutsch & Deutsch, 1963; Feagin et al., 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Moynihan, 1965; Wilson, 1978, 1987, 2009). Torres-Guzman (2009) highlights the social and emotional isolation African Americans at PWIs experience. Furthermore, Torres discusses how Black students find themselves on the fringes of some social functions due to the prevalence of White culture at higher education institutions. Conversely, Jack (2014) examines the varying degrees of shock experienced by what he coins the "doubly disadvantaged" and the "privileged poor," bringing to the forefront the notion that African Americans who have the appropriate toolkits can navigate the racial undertones of their college experiences through assimilation tactics. Jack (2014) clarifies that there is something at work beyond social and economic disadvantage on college campuses. Instead, his work highlights the institutional pressures to assimilate using a system of reward and punishment. Combining these ideas with Du Bois' (1903) "double consciousness" theory fosters understanding of the social and historical impact of White supremacy on the life trajectory of modern African Americans.

Expanding upon the concept of culture shock, as described by Pedersen (1995) and other scholars, it is imperative to recognize that for self-identified African American men entering PWIs, this phenomenon transcends the boundaries of mere adaptation to a new environment.

Culture shock is a multifaceted experience encompassing the challenges associated with navigating unfamiliar cultural norms and the profound social-emotional isolation individuals may encounter during this journey. The insights provided in interviews with participants link the concept of culture shock to the feelings of alienation and loneliness these students face as they find themselves in spaces where they constitute a minority, as was the case for Kincade and others. For example, Kincade described being a student at Northview University who felt a deep sense of isolation from his peers while taking core classes for his major. Stone from Little Valley University internalized the shortcomings of his high school, and Chachi Townsend from Mountainview University discussed not fully understanding the resident assistant application process, thus leading to a sense of failure. This sense of disconnection from their cultural roots and a prevailing feeling of being "othered" can profoundly impact Black men's overall well-being and sense of belonging within their academic communities. Many participants also grappled with finding authentic connections within their institutions due to a lack of cultural representation and exclusion from social circles. This struggle intensifies feelings of isolation and significantly affects their engagement with the college community. As the study delves deeper into the narratives and experiences of these young men, it will become evident that the social-emotional isolation and culture shock they encounter are not isolated incidents but interconnected facets of their higher education journey.

Social-Emotional Isolation

In interviews with self-identified African American men navigating PWIs, the recurring theme of social-emotional isolation emerged. This sense of isolation was evident in my interview with Dee Griffin from Deer River University. The transition from familiar environments to college life is often accompanied by living independently for the first time without the familial

support students once relied on. As Dee poignantly described, "Living alone for the first time, there's a lot of things you struggle with … nobody really there to tell you like, 'Hey, do this, do that.'. So you just gotta decide to either get up and do it or not do it … It can really damage your mental." This newfound independence can be a double-edged sword, offering autonomy but also exacerbating feelings of loneliness and self-doubt. Dee's point highlights how the absence of guidance from others contributes to the challenge of navigating new environments. Without familiar support systems, students may struggle to understand what to expect and how to effectively manage their new responsibilities, which can heighten their sense of isolation and uncertainty.

Many participants recounted experiences where they were among the few, if not the only, students of color in their courses. This sense of academic isolation can lead to feelings of confusion and inadequacy. Kalil expressed this by saying,

> I would say like in my calculus course. I was like, it was only me and one other person who were Black and just surrounded, like, you know, by like White students … we were ridiculed in a way because we didn't know how, like, to complete the problem. And like, you can hear, like the whispers and all that.

The lack of representation in these academic spaces can intensify the pressure to perform and the fear of standing out, creating an environment where academic success feels elusive.

The struggle to establish a sense of belonging within PWIs can further intensify the social-emotional isolation experienced by African American men, as was the case with Kincade. The challenge is not about finding something that is lost, but about carving out a space where they feel accepted and supported amidst a predominantly white environment that often does not acknowledge or address their unique needs and experiences. Kincade expressed,

> I think I feel like it makes me doubt myself because I feel like there's just so much for me to do kind of alone. And like especially when you don't—like especially like at that time when I wasn't really thinking about, like, the resources I had available to me or like …

just like even with professors that—just like let them know that I had a lot going on. And like ask them if it was possible to get like an extension on an essay. So it does feel like, you have like—you have all this stuff to do and you kind of need to do it. But like, it just feels like it's too much to do by yourself.

As academic demands mount, it becomes clear that the path to success is fraught with challenges. Unfortunately, some participants recount instances where they requested help and experienced indifference or even resistance from faculty. For example, Kalil revealed,

Yeah. I can say in chemistry I wasn't getting the help that I needed … he was like, you know, you are not doing well in my class. I was like, yeah. I've been asking for help for weeks. And he was like, 'Well, I wish you would have come to me earlier.'"

The lack of support hinders academic progress and contributes to feelings of loneliness and self-doubt. The lack of support students feel underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive academic environment for all students.

Challenges in Cultivating Peer Support in PWIs

Difficulty making authentic connections with peers in courses where they are the minority was a recurring theme among participants. Kincade aptly noted,

It has been true in a couple of my classes … when I take a math class or social class, there's like one or two other Black people there, and it can be very isolating because I'm not only not having like, like, a similar like being able to identify each other but like also knowing that like, beyond not being the same ethnicity as other people in the class there's likely like class and cultural differences.

Kincade's experience in predominantly White classes highlights the profound sense of isolation stemming from both racial and socio-cultural differences. His struggle to connect with peers due to class and cultural gaps reflects a deeper issue of feeling like an outsider, which is compounded by the lack of similar ethnic representation. This scenario aligns with Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness, where African American individuals navigate an internal conflict between their self-perception and societal perceptions. Baldwin's (1993) insights into Black men navigating spaces not designed for them further illuminate Kincade's

experience, illustrating the psychological toll of systemic anti-Blackness. Kincade's hesitance to articulate his feelings of disconnection during the interview underscores an internal struggle to make sense of his experiences, exacerbating his sense of isolation. This reflects broader themes of anti-Blackness, where systemic structures and social dynamics continuously marginalize African American students, reinforcing their outsider status and challenging their ability to integrate fully into the academic environment (Brooms and Druery 2003, Combs 2022, Evans and Moore 2015, and Smith et al. 2016).

The isolation Kincade experiences is rooted in ethnic and cultural disparities, aligning with Pedersen's (1995) notion that culture shock can result from realizing profound cultural differences between oneself and others in a new environment.

The changing sense of self these students experience further exemplifies the struggle to forge authentic connections. They recognize their isolation but increasingly internalize the notion that they themselves are the problem, aligning with Du Bois' (1903) concept of viewing oneself as a problem. This internalized perception heightens their feelings of disconnection and inadequacy, making it even more challenging to navigate the already hostile environment of predominantly White institutions. Many describe how, over time, they felt increasingly distant from their peers, struggling to find common ground. For example, Stone candidly expressed,

> I just feel like … I've gotten less and less in common with some of my peers. I mean, I'm not really sure … it's a weird thing because I think you could obviously chalk it up to some form of racism, but it also could be just like, I'm not approachable for some reason.

These shifts in peer connections leave students like Stone uncertain about the nature of these changes. He wonders whether racism underlies these peer interactions or if his peers perceive him as unapproachable. This situation goes beyond an evolving sense of self; it highlights the complexities of forming connections in a predominantly White environment. These dynamics

illustrate the broader challenge of navigating identity in spaces where African American students are not inherently welcomed or understood. It aligns with Pedersen's notion of culture shock as grappling with a new self-identity in response to unfamiliar surroundings. It further highlights what many of the students in my study expressed: that these external factors lead to internalized doubt and self-deprecation instead of confronting the outside forces that create these notions of self-criticism.

Culture shock can have a significant impact on the self-perception African American men as they confront the stark clash of cultural norms within PWIs. Jowuan Pierce from Little Valley University shared, "I felt like I had to change the way I acted, the way I spoke, just to fit in … It's like I had to leave part of myself behind to be accepted." This sentiment underscores the tremendous pressure placed upon these students to conform to White cultural standards to gain acceptance within the academic and social spheres of their PWIs. This struggle for conformity reflects the findings of Allen et al. (1991), Feagin et al. (1996), and Willie (2003), who all highlighted how African American individuals often find themselves at odds with their authentic cultural identities when trying to assimilate into predominantly White environments. According to Tierney (1999), the cost of this assimilation can be profound, leading to what he describes as "cultural suicide." This term refers to the loss of cultural integrity and the internal conflict that arises when students feel compelled to abandon their cultural values and identities to fit into the dominant institutional culture. This not only exacerbates feelings of isolation and alienation but can also undermine their academic and personal well-being. Tierney argues that maintaining cultural integrity is crucial for minority students' success and retention in higher education, as it allows them to remain connected to their roots while navigating the demands of a predominantly White institution.

The dissonance between the cultural norms of African American students and the prevailing culture at PWIs can lead to feelings of isolation and discomfort, which are central components of culture shock. Joseph Harris from Mountainview University shared his experience upon arriving at a predominantly White campus, vividly illustrating this phenomenon:

> I didn't know that Mountainview University was predominantly White, or PWI. So when I came on campus, I'm thinking, 'Oh, it's downtown, I came from a public school, this is gonna be fun.' Then I came on campus, and I just felt like I was being stared at … I just don't feel comfortable. I wasn't used to that, you know, just seeing a bunch of people that don't look like me, just, you know, exist.

Joseph is a student who lived in a large metropolitan city in the Midwest and transitioned from his neighborhood to a school located downtown in the same city where he had grown up. This initial discomfort, arising from the stark contrast between previous experiences and the new PWI environment, was significantly amplified for Joseph due to his lack of awareness about attending a predominantly White institution. Being blindsided by the cultural dynamics of a PWI led to a more dramatic and disorienting experience. Furthermore, his hypervisibility within this environment intensified feelings of being out of place and scrutinized by his peers. This heightened awareness and constant sense of being watched contributed to his overall discomfort and sense of alienation, making it challenging to navigate the academic and social landscape effectively. Joseph's discomfort aligns with the observations made by Torres (2009) regarding the social and emotional isolation experienced by African-American students at PWIs. The students' ongoing difficulties in forming friendships and integrating into the academic community highlight the enduring effects of culture shock on their college experiences. This struggle is evident in the data, showing that students often find it challenging to make meaningful connections. The institutional pressures to assimilate, as described by Jack (2014),

and the internal conflict of double consciousness articulated by Du Bois (1903), underscore the complexity of navigating predominantly White institutions. These challenges illustrate the profound impact of cultural dissonance on students' social and academic lives.

Language and Identity: The Role of Code-Switching

As Myers (2020) articulates in her autoethnographic analysis, code-switching becomes an essential survival strategy for many self-identified African American men navigating predominantly white institutions (PWIs). This practice involves adjusting one's language, behavior, and appearance to conform to the dominant cultural norms, reflecting the tension between maintaining cultural integrity and adapting to the expectations of the surrounding environment. Stone fittingly described it as both a necessity and an exhausting endeavor: "Code switching is exhausting, but it's necessary … You don't want to be seen as 'too Black' or 'not Black enough' depending on who you're talking to." This statement highlights the constant tension these students face, balancing their authentic selves with the pressure for them to assimilate into an environment that often expects them to conform to White cultural norms. This exhausting act of code-switching resonates with the experiences described by Harper (2013) and Strayhorn (2008ab), wherein African Americans grapple with maintaining a dual identity to navigate a racially stratified society. Harper (2013) explores how Black undergraduates engage in racial socialization and peer pedagogies in predominantly white postsecondary contexts, while Strayhorn (2008ab) examines the impact of diverse peer interactions and supportive relationships on the sense of belonging and success for Black men at predominantly white institutions. Moreover, Jack's (2014) work on the "privileged poor" underscores how code-switching pressures extend beyond the social sphere and into academic life.

The struggle with code switching extends beyond language and behavior; it encompasses the broader college experience for African American students at PWIs. Kalil reflected on the relentless need to adapt: "There's a lot of code switching here for us … why do we have to change ourselves so we can get a good grade? There's a lot of proving yourself here as a Black person." This sentiment illuminates these students' alienation and psychological burden as they navigate the academic landscape. They often find themselves at a disadvantage, having not received the same educational opportunities or exposure as their White peers. Jack's (2014) observations on institutional pressures to conform through assimilation tactics resonate here, as the students in my study face constant pressure to prove their worth in an environment that often fails to provide the necessary support and resources.

The emotional and psychological toll of code-switching is deeply intertwined with culture shock, particularly as experienced by African American students at PWIs. Black students often feel compelled to code-switch due to pervasive racial stereotypes that continuously disregard and marginalize Black identity, culture, and life. These stereotypes are especially rife in environments that are not supportive or welcoming to Black students. As a result, the need to constantly adjust their behavior and speech to fit the dominant cultural norms imposes an additional layer of stress and alienation. This ongoing navigation between identities is not only exhausting but also erodes the students' sense of authenticity and belonging, further exacerbating the culture shock they experience. The lack of institutional support and recognition of their unique cultural backgrounds intensifies these challenges, making it even more difficult for African American students to thrive academically and socially in such hostile environments. The adjustment to an often-hostile academic environment, characterized by cultural dissonance and the need for constant adaptation, aligns with Pedersen's (1995) stages of culture shock. As these

students grapple with identity, academic rigor, and social isolation, their PWIs force them to confront their cultural norms and the stark contrast between them and those of their white peers. Du Bois' (1903) concept of "double consciousness" is exemplified in these students' daily experiences as they navigate their authentic selves and the expectations of a predominantly White academic and social world. As Du Bois states, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 8), this is what many of the students in my study confronted as they navigate their PWIs. This double consciousness underscores the need for African American individuals to assimilate into White culture, a process that is never chosen, yet, begins at birth.

Consequently, when African American students enter college, they are already grappling with the challenge of existing in a predominantly White world (Du Bois, 1903). Jack's (2014) discussion of assimilation pressures further elucidates how code switching can exacerbate the sense of cultural displacement, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of culture shock in this context. Understanding the challenges of assimilation pressures and culture shock highlights the complexities of navigating PWIs for African American men. Considering these challenges, the importance of promoting greater diversity and representation within the campus community becomes even more evident.

Faculty and Staff Representation Matters

African American men value the presence of representation in faculty and administration as it fosters a sense of belonging and cultural affirmation. In the words of Chachi, "When I see someone who looks like me in a position of authority, it gives me hope … It's like they are telling us, 'You can be successful here, just like we are.'" This sentiment underscores the

significance of having individuals who share their racial and cultural backgrounds in leadership roles within the university. Such representation provides a tangible example of success and challenges the prevailing narrative that suggests African American men are less likely to thrive academically. The lack of representation sends a powerful message that the institution does not recognize or respect their unique experiences and perspectives.

Without representation, some students have taken it upon themselves to create their own spaces for cultural affirmation and support. For instance, Jowuan mentioned, "I think I found the ability to create my own space, definitely. That's all I've been doing really, was creating space for myself, especially like with Our Streets." "Our Streets" is a student organization established to articulate and advocate for the needs of African American students on their college campus. Without formal institutional support, these self-realized initiatives demonstrate resilience and a commitment to fostering a sense of community. They provide platforms for sharing experiences, offering mentorship, and collectively addressing challenges. These grassroots efforts challenge the notion that African American men solely rely on the institution for support, highlighting their agency in carving out spaces where they can thrive.

It is important to note that while these self-initiated spaces are crucial, they should not replace the institution's responsibility to actively promote diversity and inclusion. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) emphasizes that understanding race and racism requires an examination of structural and institutional factors rather than just individual actions. As predominantly White spaces, educational institutions must take proactive measures to ensure that all students, especially African American men, feel recognized, supported, and valued. These proactive measures include diversifying faculty and administration, creating an inclusive curriculum, and providing comprehensive resources to help bridge gaps in academic preparedness, as articulated

by Louis Knowles and Kenneth Prewett (1969). By doing so, institutions can move beyond symbolic representation to meaningful engagement with their student body's diverse experiences, as Joe Feagin (2009) advocates.

Therefore, a complex interplay of social-emotional isolation, culture shock, and challenges with identity within majority-White institutions shapes the experiences of African American men entering college. These challenges underscore the need for institutions to reevaluate and enhance their support systems to ensure that students, regardless of their racial or cultural background, can find a sense of belonging and thrive in the academic environment. Du Bois' work on double consciousness underscores the reality that these young men have faced a lifetime of code switching and other tactics geared toward cultural adaptation and remain othered at PWIs.

Social-emotional isolation is a stark reality for many of these students as they grapple with feeling disconnected from their peers and the broader college community. However, as already established, mentorship and support from culturally responsive faculty and staff can be a powerful antidote to these feelings, providing a lifeline for students seeking connection and affirmation (Brooms, 2015, 2017, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Therefore, it is important to leverage the tools provided through the work of CRT scholars to create a counter-narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In many ways, these students have internalized the oppression they experience on campus and take on various coping mechanisms that stretch far beyond merely "blaming the victim," leaving countless mental and emotional scars. Kalil Matthew's articulation of feeling marginalized, encapsulated in his sentiment of being perceived more as a statistic than a student vividly illustrates the internalized oppression that Du Bois (1903) described as the "twoness" experienced by these young men. This phenomenon not only underlines the deep-

seated conflict they endure but also foregrounds the complex coping mechanisms they adopt in response to such systemic marginalization, mechanisms that extend well beyond simplistic notions of "blaming the victim" and contribute to profound mental and emotional repercussions.

Summary

As evidenced by the responses of these young men, culture shock is a significant aspect of their journey as they navigate the delicate balance between their authentic selves and the pressure to conform to prevailing White cultural norms. Code switching becomes a survival strategy, revealing the resilience and adaptability of these students (Young, 2007). Still, institutions must acknowledge the toll culture shock can take on the students' emotional and psychological well-being. As Harper (2009) puts it, these students experience "niggering" as PWIs relegate Black students to subordinate positions and consistently assault their identities. These assaults leave students vulnerable to social-emotional isolation and frequently exacerbate self-identified African American men's desire to withdraw from these environments.

In this intricate web of experiences, the presence of faculty and administrators who share the racial and cultural backgrounds of these Black students emerges as a beacon of hope and a source of inspiration. When students see someone, who looks like them in positions of authority, it sends a powerful message that they, too, can excel in the institution. A commitment to culturally responsive education can also bridge preparation gaps and set the stage for academic triumph. However, institutions of higher education must first acknowledge and correct the historical and pervasive culture of whiteness as defined and cultivated by the work of Feagin (2009). Feagin discusses how "the white racial frame constantly creates and maintains the prized white racial identity, and regularly denigrates the identities of racialized 'others'" (p. 162).

In this endeavor, institutions can draw inspiration from the words of critical race theorists such as Bonilla-Silva (1997) and Feagin (2009), who call for a structural examination of the repercussions of race and racism within educational systems. Furthermore, the work of scholars such as Torres-Guzman (2009) and Jack (2014) provides invaluable insights into the complexities of culture shock and identity struggles, emphasizing the need for pedagogical approaches that promote cultural affirmation. Creating a learning environment where all students can thrive is a collective responsibility that transcends racial, cultural, and institutional boundaries. It requires a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at all higher education levels. By embracing the richness of its student body and fostering a sense of belonging, institutions can uplift African American men and enhance the educational experience for every student. Together, they can ensure that every journey through higher education is marked by affirmation, belonging, and achievement, contributing to a brighter and more equitable future for all.

The preceding chapter explored, the experiences of self-identified African American men at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are fraught with challenges that stem from culture shock, social-emotional isolation, and the psychological strain of navigating these environments. The narratives of these young men reveal the profound impact of cultural dissonance and the internal conflict of double consciousness, as they strive to adapt while maintaining their authentic identities. These experiences underscore the necessity of understanding the broader socio-cultural factors that influence their educational journeys.

Building on these insights, I intend to delve into the concept of agency and resilience among African American men in PWIs. While this chapter highlighted the barriers and struggles these students face, this chapter focuses on the glimmer of hope found in their proactive efforts

to create spaces of belonging and empowerment within their academic environments. By examining their stories of activism, community-building, and self-advocacy, we gain a deeper understanding of how these students navigate and transform their institutions to foster a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere.

In this chapter, we explore how the African American men in my study leverage their agency to challenge institutional norms and advocate for change. Their narratives illustrate the dynamic interplay between individual actions and broader structural forces, showcasing the potential for collective and individual agency to effect meaningful change. As we delve into the experiences of these students, we uncover the intricate web of factors that contribute to their sense of belonging and resilience, ultimately highlighting the transformative power of agency in their educational journeys.

The following chapter will further illustrate how these young men navigate their academic paths, not merely as passive participants but as active agents of change. Their stories of resilience, advocacy, and community engagement provide a compelling counter-narrative to the challenges discussed in this chapter, offering insights into the possibilities for creating more inclusive and supportive educational environments.

CHAPTER FIVE

STRENGTH IN STRUGGLE:

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE AGENCY AND RESILIENCE IN PWIS

African American men's journeys in PWIs are not solely a reflection of their academic aptitude; these journeys are deeply intertwined with intricate socio-cultural factors, including their perceptions of agency, resilience, and belonging within the academic landscape. How these students engage with their institutions and their interpretations of how these institutions interact with them can have profound impacts on their academic trajectories. This chapter delves deeply into the narratives and insights drawn from in-depth interviews with self-identified African American men, highlighting their stories of agency and resilience as they advocate for themselves in hostile environments. Their lived experiences provide invaluable insights for researchers, educators, and institutional administrators into the challenges and triumphs they encounter on their educational journeys and the places, spaces, individuals, and organizations that foster a sense of belonging and empowerment. This chapter uncovers the intricate web of experiences African American men navigate and explores the potential for creating an educational environment that genuinely encourages and supports diversity.

In light of the prevailing disparities in educational outcomes, especially for African American men, it is crucial to shift the focus from the individual level to the structural and institutional forces that perpetuate these inequalities. As Bonilla-Silva (1997) contends, examining race and racism must consider these broader structural and institutional factors that shape the educational landscape. Modern higher education institutions, as Knowles and Prewett

(1969) suggest, are social arrangements that unwittingly allow the reproduction of racism. These institutions operate within what Feagin (2009) aptly describes as the "white racial frame," perpetuating norms, values, and frameworks that are predominantly White in origin. By recognizing colleges and universities as "white spaces," following the insights of Moore (2007), one can begin to grasp the profound impact these institutions have on the experiences of non-White, non-male, and non-cis students as they enter these institutions. African American students, in particular, find themselves navigating spaces where their White counterparts often remain oblivious to the structural racism embedded within these institutions, as noted by Anderson (2015). This failure to acknowledge the consequences of higher education as a White space hinders the ability to address the unique challenges and opportunities that African American men encounter during their academic journeys.

Indeed, the narratives of these African American men offer a window into the multifaceted journeys of self-identified African American students in PWIs. Numerous examples show how these students' agency takes shape and leads to remarkable outcomes, be it in student governance or grassroots activism, as exemplified by Jowuan Pierce. These narratives reveal not just individual triumphs but a larger narrative of determination and advocacy, extending beyond the self to address broader societal issues. They represent a glimmer of hope in the larger narrative, showcasing the potential of collective and individual agency to influence change within these academic spaces. This hope is not merely an abstract ideal but a tangible and audacious force, as conceptualized by Duncan-Andrade (2009) in his discussion of "growing roses in concrete." This audacious hope is embodied in the resilience and determination of African American men who, despite facing systemic barriers and hostile environments, actively work to create supportive spaces and advocate for themselves and their peers.

Furthermore, this hope is nested in robust support structures, as highlighted by Harmon et al. (2020) in their exploration of educational success among Black males. The ecologies of hope that these students cultivate involve creating and sustaining networks of support that foster a sense of belonging and empowerment. These narratives demonstrate that hope is both an embodied experience and a product of the supportive environments these students build and inhabit, illustrating the profound impact of their agency on transforming the academic landscape.

The upcoming sections will further explore how this sense of agency intertwines with African American students' experiences of resilience and the critical role that belonging plays in shaping their educational paths. Their stories show that these individuals do not merely adapt to their academic landscapes; they actively engage with them, striving to transform their institutions into inclusive environments where diversity thrives and where they can truly belong.

Success Reimagined: The Power of Agency in Academic and Personal Achievements

Jowuan Pierce's narrative demonstrates a clear exercise of agency through student activism, as observed by the university's response to his efforts. In reflecting on his achievements in student government and the impact he and his peers made during Black History Month, Jowuan shared, "I definitely felt a lot of this last year … I got a legislation passed that formally recognized Black History Month within the student government … It just made me very happy." His achievement showcases his proactive role in challenging institutional norms and pushing for the recognition of important cultural milestones. Moreover, Jowuan's involvement in protest activities is a striking testament to his exercise of agency. He mentioned his co-founding of the student advocacy group Off the Streets, which engaged in numerous protests, including advocating for the removal of a university dean associated with White supremacy. He expressed his deep connection to this work, stating, "It just felt good … I felt like I had a reason to get up

every day." This unyielding commitment reflects a strong sense of agency that goes beyond personal success to focus on broader societal change.

The agency of Jowuan's peers in creating spaces for belonging is evident in his account of establishing connections and forming a community on campus. He recounts his participation in a group chat for Black freshmen initiated by a peer, saying, "I got a DM on Instagram saying 'Hey, I'm making a group chat of all the Black freshmen at [Little Valley]'s... and I was like, 'oh, like, okay.'" This initiative highlights the proactive efforts of his peers to foster a sense of community and support, which are crucial for the social integration and resilience of African American students at PWIs.

The importance of building and sustaining community as a key component of African American male resilience and agency is well-documented in the literature. Guiffrida (2003) emphasizes that African American student organizations play a vital role in facilitating social integration and providing a supportive network that enhances students' college experiences. Similarly, Harper and Quaye (2007) argue that student organizations serve as crucial venues for Black identity expression and development, allowing African American male student leaders to navigate and challenge the dominant cultural norms of their institutions.

Hypolite (2020) explores how Black cultural centers, and their staff act as facilitators of social capital, providing a sense of place and connection that is essential for racial identity development. The presence of such centers and organizations offers African American students a space where their experiences are understood and valued, countering the feelings of isolation often encountered at PWIs. This is echoed by Museus (2008), who highlights the role of ethnic student organizations in fostering cultural adjustment and supporting students in navigating the challenges of predominantly White environments.

Patton (2006) further frames these observations within the context of Critical Race Theory (CRT), arguing that Black cultural centers and student organizations serve as counterspaces that resist the marginalizing forces of the dominant institutional culture. These spaces not only support the academic and social success of African American students but also empower them to advocate for greater inclusion and equity within their institutions.

In light of this scholarship, the group chat initiated by Jowuan's peer can be seen as a microcosm of these broader dynamics. The peer's agency in creating a supportive community provided Jowuan and others with a platform to connect and share their experiences, ultimately encouraging Jowuan to embark on his own journey of advocacy. Inspired by the solidarity and support he found within this group, Jowuan was motivated to create spaces of belonging for himself and his colleagues, demonstrating the transformative power of community in fostering resilience and agency among African American men at PWIs. This aligns with the literature's emphasis on the importance of collective efforts in overcoming the challenges posed by hostile and unwelcoming academic environments. His active engagement in this network highlights his determination to foster an environment where Black students can feel a sense of belonging and support. Furthermore, Jowuan's decision to transition into a new friend group reveals his agency in seeking authentic relationships and creating a space to be his true self. He explained, "I kind of stopped being friends with a lot of people … I met some people that really are like my favorite people on this planet … I felt like I was able to make relationships that really mattered." His willingness to construct a supportive community showcases his agency in shaping his social environment to better align with his identity and values.

In Joseph's interview, he discussed his involvement in the Urban Student Development Program, emphasizing the importance of the program's sense of community on campus. As he

put it, "And what we basically do is, it gives me a sense of community on campus. We do a lot of volunteer work, do a lot of events on campus, you know, and yeah, it's just a great, great thing." This proactive approach aligns with the perspective of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997), who emphasizes the need to consider structural and institutional factors in understanding the repercussions of race and racism. The participant's active engagement with the Urban Student Development Program exemplifies his agency in pursuing opportunities for personal and community growth, contributing positively to his college experience.

Furthermore, Joseph's interview highlighted his decision to commute to campus and the motivation behind it. Early college experience serves as an impetus for a coping strategy Joseph developed. Joseph recounts his experience at new student orientation, noting, "So, I'm like—we ended up, like, pulling each other like, swinging each other and I pulled hard enough, and she likes—kind of, it was like a cartoon-like she swung, but I didn't know that she swung." Joseph's experience during new student orientation profoundly impacted his sense of agency and decision-making throughout his academic journey. Feeling hypervisible—where Black people are present but marginalized in white spaces (Brooms and Druery 2023; Newton 2023)— among his White peers, he perceived that they saw him as a threat or villain while he was merely being competitive. This initial encounter left him feeling scrutinized and marginalized, influencing his subsequent choices. As a result, Joseph opted to commute rather than live on campus, a decision that reflects his proactive exercise of agency to safeguard his academic journey. This choice, driven by the desire to avoid further uncomfortable interactions, had long-term implications for his educational experience, limiting his opportunities to build meaningful connections and fully engage with the campus community. By commuting, Joseph aimed to mitigate the psychological

and emotional toll of being constantly under surveillance, illustrating the nuanced ways in which African American students navigate and adapt to PWIs.

Joseph discussed his involvement in student organizations, particularly the Black Student Union and the Black Brown Boogie. He shared his experiences in these groups and the joy of seeing many people come together, stating, "It was actually a great time, just to see so many people come together." This active participation exemplifies his agency in fostering unity and safe spaces for students of color on campus. His involvement aligns with the concept of safe spaces, as discussed in the literature, emphasizing the importance of creating environments where students can voice their concerns and feel a sense of belonging (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Often, these spaces are intended to counter the dominant ethos on campus and thus can be considered as what Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) articulate as "counter spaces"—which "serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (p. 70).

In his interview, Joseph expressed the need for greater inclusivity on campus and shared his belief that he can explore and be a part of different spaces. He stated, "I feel like I can walk into anywhere and just experience something. And you know, be a part of it if I wish to be." This aspiration reflects his agency in advocating for a more inclusive campus environment. His perspective aligns with the literature discussing the importance of acknowledging structural factors that affect students' experiences on predominantly White campuses. His desire to be part of various spaces highlights his active engagement and commitment to creating a more inclusive college atmosphere for himself and others.

Additionally, it is essential to recognize that the exercise of agency by Black men on college campuses is not in isolation but exists within a broader context. Moore (2007)

emphasizes the significance of understanding higher education institutions as predominantly White spaces, which inherently wield the power to influence students' perceptions, behaviors, and overall experiences. For example, in Joseph's interview, the student emphasized his proactive involvement in the Urban Scholars Initiative, a community-focused initiative (Joseph Harris, 05:07). This involvement signifies a deliberate choice to engage with a predominantly White institution in a manner that aligns with his personal values of community and belonging. Furthermore, Joseph showcases his commitment to creating change, as seen through his leadership within the Black Brown Boogie, which aimed to unite students of color on campus. The contributions of African American men to such organizations are examples of self-initiated actions that counter the institutional norms and structures identified by Anderson (2015), which have historically perpetuated a predominantly White culture. The expressed agency within these contexts echoes the sentiments of Harper (2009), who highlights the significance of empowerment and resilience in Black men's experiences within higher education. This concept reinforces the assertions of Brooms and Davis (2017), who advocate for a shift in research focus toward areas where African Americans have achieved success, exemplifying the potency of agency in reshaping the academic journeys of African Americans.

When discussing personal safety, Joseph and Jowuan revealed their exercise of agency in how they interacted with their peers and who they allowed to have influence in their campus experiences. Jowuan shared his experience of avoiding certain areas he deemed unsafe on campus and how he consciously made this choice to avoid placing himself into environments where he did not feel welcomed. In contrast, Joseph emphasized his decision to commute to campus to ensure his safety. These choices reflect how these students choose to navigate a predominantly White institution with regard to maintaining their sense of safety. Jowuan's

vigilant approach to avoiding unwelcoming spaces aligns with the sentiment of existing literature that highlights the need for students to adapt and make choices, reinforcing their use of agency to protect themselves and foster academic success (Anderson, 2015; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2009; Moore, 2007).

Joseph and Jowuan expressed their agency through attempting to create more inclusive campus spaces in their own ways. Jowuan conveyed a strong commitment to creating safe spaces for African American students on campus through his involvement in organizations such as the Black Student Union. Joseph shared a desire to be part of different spaces on campus where African American men are not typically seen and to promote inclusivity across the campus. These aspirations illustrate these young men's agency in advocating for inclusivity within the campus environment. Their narratives align with the perspective that higher education institutions need to address the issue of inclusivity and create environments where students can fully engage and feel a sense of belonging (Black and Bimper 2020; Grier-Reed 2010; Keels 2019; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). Their commitment to being part of spaces beyond their specific groups and promoting inclusivity underlines their exercise of voice and choice in striving for a more diverse and welcoming campus community.

In these interviews, Joseph and Jowuan revealed that they actively engage with their academic environments through community-building efforts, safety-conscious choices, or advocating for inclusivity. Their narratives resonate with the themes discussed in the existing literature, emphasizing the importance of students' active roles in shaping their experiences within PWIs (Brooms and Davis 2017; Grier-Reed 2010; Keels 2019). These narratives underscore the dynamic nature of how these students leverage choice to help alter their experiences as African American men on college campuses. Moreover, these narratives

underscore the multifaceted ways Black men exercise agency within the context of predominantly White higher education institutions, showcasing their determination to shape their college experiences in line with their values and needs.

Dee Griffin from Deer River University emphasized the significance of finding welcoming and inclusive spaces on campus. He specifically highlights the role of interest-based organizations and multicultural groups that can contribute to a sense of belonging. These organizations provide Black students with opportunities to engage with the campus community on their terms. This is a response to the predominantly White culture on campus, aligning with the concept of navigating White institutional spaces, as Moore (2007) outlines. Additionally, the interviewee mentioned a Black Student Week event, which is a cookout that fostered a strong sense of belonging and community. This event serves as a tangible example of how Black students proactively participate in activities that reinforce their sense of identity, thereby countering the risk of feeling like an outsider in a predominantly White institution. This aligns with Anderson's (2015) observations about the psychological and emotional toll experienced by African American students in White spaces, as these students feel compelled to find these spaces to garner a sense of community. Additionally, these students' experiences reflect Black student life at predominantly white institutions, specifically through their placemaking on campus (Tichavakunda 2021).

Kalil offered a candid perspective on the fears and challenges of a Black student in a predominantly White institution. Kalil acknowledged his initial apprehension due to concerns about racial injustice and impostor syndrome. Despite these challenges, he expressed a strong desire to find a community that shares his values and experiences, particularly focusing on groups such as the Black Student Union. Moreover, he discussed the struggles of feeling like a

statistic due to his race rather than a valued student. This narrative supports Harper's (2009)

emphasis on the importance of empowerment and resilience in the experiences of Black men in

higher education. It underscores the agency required to navigate and persevere through such

challenges.

While Dee underscored the importance of Black students finding welcoming spaces,

Kalil highlighted the significance of seeking community and support. The accounts of both

interviewees align with Brooms and Davis's (2017) call for research to focus on areas where

African Americans have experienced success at the collegiate level. Their experiences reflect

how African American students can respond to the prevailing institutional and cultural norms

outlined by Moore (2007) and Anderson (2015) within their PWIs. These narratives show that

Black men on campus are not passive recipients of their environment but actively engage in

shaping their college experiences. This proactive approach, underpinned by a desire for

community and belonging, plays a crucial role in their journey through higher education,

offering valuable insights into the nuances of how Black men can find success in a

predominantly White academic landscape.

One common thread in these interviews is the significance of seeking out supportive

communities within PWIs. As Joseph's interview emphasizes, this involvement signifies a

deliberate choice to engage with a predominantly White institution in a manner that aligns with

their personal values of community and belonging. Similarly, Kincade Shaw echoed this

sentiment when he mentioned his participation in the Bridge to the Future program: "Luckily, I

was able to do a summer program called [Bridge to the Future] that specifically targets first-

generation, lower-income, and underrepresented groups. So that was like a really great way to,

like, make a lot of friendships and connections with a lot of Black people that would also be

here." These examples underscore the way these students leveraged their agency to engage intentionally on campus, which ultimately helped them create a sense of belonging within their PWIs (Jayakumar, Vue, and Allen 2013; McGowan and Perez 2020).

Academic Spaces: The Dynamics of Belonging and Exclusion

Another shared theme across these interviews is the challenge of navigating classroom dynamics in predominantly white spaces. These students often expressed hesitation in classroom participation due to the implicit biases of their classmates. For instance, Dee underscores the importance of finding welcoming and inclusive spaces on campus, stating that such organizations provide Black students with opportunities to engage with the campus community on their terms. Similarly, Kincade discusses his difficulties with classroom engagement, noting, "In class sometimes, like, I feel like, I don't know what I'm doing… some of the time." These experiences highlight the common challenges faced by students of color in PWIs regarding classroom dynamics.

African American men in PWIs frequently encounter implicit biases that lead to a sense of confusion and disconnection in the learning process. These disconnections can significantly impact student outcomes, as the lack of engagement and understanding hampers academic performance. Faculty members who do not share the lived experiences of African American students often fail to build the necessary scaffolding to connect these students to the material effectively. This gap in understanding and support further exacerbates the students' feelings of isolation and inadequacy.

Dee and Kincade's experiences resonate with the findings of Brooms (2020), who emphasizes the importance of connections and relationships with faculty in fostering a sense of belonging for Black men in college. When faculty members are unable to relate to the cultural

and social contexts of their African American students, they inadvertently contribute to a learning environment that feels alienating and unwelcoming. Newman, Wood, and Harris (2015) also highlight that Black men's perceptions of belonging with faculty in community colleges are crucial for their academic success. Without this sense of belonging, students like Dee and Kincade are less likely to engage actively in the classroom, leading to a cycle of disengagement and poor academic outcomes.

Wood (2014) and Wood and Turner (2012) further elaborate on the apprehension that Black males feel in classroom settings, noting that the lack of culturally responsive teaching practices often leaves these students feeling unsupported and misunderstood. This lack of engagement can result in lower academic performance and a diminished sense of self-efficacy. The narratives of Dee and Kincade illustrate how these broader trends manifest in the lived experiences of African American men at PWIs, underscoring the critical need for faculty to develop culturally responsive pedagogies that acknowledge and address the unique challenges these students face.

The interviews with Dee and Kincade reveal the profound impact of classroom dynamics on African American men's academic experiences in PWIs. The implicit biases of classmates, coupled with the lack of culturally competent faculty support, create significant barriers to engagement and success. By connecting these experiences to the broader literature, it becomes evident that fostering a sense of belonging and providing culturally responsive support are essential strategies for improving the academic outcomes of African American men in higher education

Furthermore, Stone from Little Valley University contributes to this narrative by emphasizing the initial struggles of adjusting to college life, a shared experience among students.

Stone reflected on his first semester, noting, "My first day of classes was very nerve-wracking. Because I didn't know what to expect, I was surrounded by many new faces. Um, it was a new chapter in my life; it was like, 'I'm in college now. Here we go.'" This reinforces the notion that the adjustment period can be particularly pronounced in predominantly White environments and is complicated by the challenges posed by the pandemic.

A notable difference highlighted in Kincade's interview is his recognition of the need to be open to forming diverse friendships. Kincade mentioned, "I also did know one thing, that I would just have to be like open to like, making different types of friendships." While all interviews underscore the importance of finding one's community, this perspective introduces a unique aspect of agency where the student is open to connecting with students who have varying identities. Kincade's interview demonstrates a willingness to engage with peers from various backgrounds and a distinctive approach to navigating the predominantly White environment.

Kincade's willingness to engage with peers from various backgrounds not only reflects a distinctive approach to navigating the predominantly white environment but also aligns with Strayhorn's (2008a) findings that diverse interactions with peers significantly enhance the sense of belonging for Black men at predominantly white institutions PWIs. Strayhorn's research emphasizes that forming connections with peers from different racial and cultural backgrounds can foster a supportive and inclusive academic environment, mitigating feelings of isolation and enhancing the overall college experience for African American men.

However, forging these diverse relationships comes with its own set of challenges and costs for Kincade. According to Strayhorn (2008a), while diverse interactions can enhance a sense of belonging, they also require African American students to frequently navigate and negotiate their identities within predominantly white contexts. This process can be emotionally

taxing as it often involves confronting and overcoming implicit biases and microaggressions from peers who may lack understanding or awareness of Kincade's cultural background.

Moreover, the effort to build relationships across diverse groups can lead to what Strayhorn describes as "cultural dissonance," where the cultural norms and values of Kincade's peers may conflict with his own. This dissonance requires Kincade to continuously adapt and code-switch, which can be mentally exhausting and may detract from his academic focus and well-being. The necessity to constantly manage these interactions can place additional stress on Kincade, as he works to maintain his cultural integrity while also seeking acceptance and understanding from his peers.

Additionally, Kincade's attempt to integrate into a diverse peer group may sometimes lead to feelings of alienation or tokenism, where he might feel pressured to represent his entire racial group or educate others about racial issues. This can result in a burden that is not shared by his peers, further complicating his social dynamics and sense of belonging.

Despite these challenges, Kincade's proactive engagement with a diverse student body exemplifies resilience and a strategic approach to fostering inclusivity and support within his academic environment. His efforts underscore the complex interplay between the benefits and costs of diverse peer interactions, highlighting the need for institutions to provide robust support systems that facilitate genuine inclusivity and cultural competence among all students. By understanding and addressing these dynamics, PWIs can better support African American men like Kincade in their pursuit of academic and social success.

Regarding finding support within the academic community, both Kincade and Stone expressed occasional hesitancy about class participation. Kincade stated, "In class sometimes, like, I do find it difficult for me to speak up in class," mirroring the observations made by the

other students interviewed regarding the challenges of navigating classroom dynamics in predominantly White spaces. However, Stone emphasized the sense of belonging within the academic community, highlighting the role of campus organizations in fostering support and community: "Definitely, like definitely going to the basketball games or some of the events … Definitely feel like I belong because it's a very welcoming community that makes you feel at home." These insights reflect the complexities of agency, encompassing both the challenges faced and the sense of belonging experienced by students in predominantly White environments.

The young men in my study consistently emphasized the importance of finding and actively engaging with inclusive and supportive environments. These environments are pivotal in their academic journeys, providing spaces where their unique challenges and experiences are recognized and validated. Joseph underscores this point, as he stated, "It's important to have places where you feel seen and understood." These students recognize the significance of environments that acknowledge their identity and experiences, thereby validating their sense of self-worth within the academic context.

Furthermore, the need for increased representation of diverse voices and cultures within PWIs is a recurring theme in these interviews. Jowuan underscores this necessity, stating, "It's crucial to have faculty and staff who understand our experiences and can relate to us." Such representation is pivotal, as it bridges the gap between the predominantly white culture of PWIs and the diverse backgrounds of African American students.

Increased representation creates a more inclusive atmosphere, providing role models and mentors who can guide students through their academic journeys. Goings (2017) highlights that high-achieving Black males, both traditional and nontraditional, benefit significantly from interactions with faculty who understand their unique experiences. These faculty members offer

not only academic guidance but also critical emotional and social support, which is essential for student success.

Moreover, Palmer and Gasman (2008) emphasize the role of social capital in promoting academic success among African American men. They argue that having faculty and staff who share similar cultural backgrounds or who are culturally competent can foster a supportive environment that enhances students' sense of belonging and academic achievement. This support network, reminiscent of the communal and familial support systems often found at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), helps bridge the cultural divide at PWIs.

Walker (2018) further illustrates the importance of supportive systems through the concept of "othermothering," where faculty and staff act as surrogate family members. This approach not only improves mental health outcomes but also contributes to the overall well-being and academic success of African American males. The presence of faculty and staff who can relate to and empathize with their experiences provides a critical support system that is often lacking in PWIs.

Jowuan's insight into the necessity of culturally competent faculty and staff is thus supported by extensive scholarly research. This representation is not merely about increasing diversity numbers but about fostering a nurturing environment where African American students feel understood, valued, and supported. By bridging the cultural gaps and offering relatable mentorship, institutions can significantly impact the academic and personal growth of African American men, ultimately contributing to their success and well-being within the academic landscape.

In pursuing inclusive environments, these students have actively sought out and participated in cultural and identity-based organizations and initiatives within their PWIs. Kalil's

interview provides a compelling example of this, as he stated, "I got involved with the Black Student Union, and it made a world of difference." These organizations serve as platforms for self-identified African American men to express their identities, share experiences, and advocate for their unique needs within the academic setting. By participating in these communities, these students exercise agency in a way that counterbalances their institutions' predominantly white culture (Guiffrida 2003; Harper and Quaye 2007).

Moreover, these students have gone beyond participation and taken on leadership roles within these organizations. Dee's interview highlights this by mentioning his involvement in a student-led initiative aimed at uniting students of color on campus. By actively contributing to the creation of spaces where they and their peers can thrive, these students exercise agency not only in navigating their academic journeys but also in shaping the campus culture. Researchers contend that Black men's engagement in leadership roles on campus contributes to their development, empowerment, and resilience as these students work to create environments that empower themselves and their peers to succeed within PWIs (Domingue 2015; Hotchkins and Dancy 2015).

In short, the interviews with these young men about their experiences at their respective PWIs highlight their active pursuit and cultivation of inclusive and supportive environments within campus communities. These environments serve as crucial spaces where their unique challenges and identities are acknowledged and validated. Simultaneously, the call for increased representation within PWIs underscores the importance of creating academic landscapes reflecting the diversity of voices and cultures on campus. By participating in cultural organizations and taking on leadership roles, these students exercise agency in navigating and reshaping their academic journeys within PWIs.

In their pursuit of academic success and personal well-being, these young African American men at PWIs employ a multifaceted approach, fostering inclusive and supportive environments with coping strategies to navigate the specific challenges they encounter. Scholars have intrinsically tied the coping mechanisms employed by self-identified African American men in PWIs to the broader sociological literature that delves into their experiences within these academic settings. Scholars such as Harper and Palmer have extensively researched this demographic, shedding light on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to navigate the institutional landscape. Specifically, they discuss how these young people create space for themselves in unwelcoming and unsupportive environments.

Harper's work emphasizes the significance of support networks within the institution, which aligns with the coping mechanisms observed in these interviews. Harper argues that building relationships with peers, faculty, and staff who share a similar racial or ethnic identity can provide a sense of belonging and support that is crucial for academic success. Kincade's interview, which mentions the importance of forging friendships with other Black students, exemplifies this concept. The ability to form these bonds within the institution is essential for self-identified African American men to cope with their unique challenges.

Smith et al. (2011) provide a critical framework for understanding the coping mechanisms of African American men in PWIs through their research on racial battle fatigue and racial battle stress. Their work contextualizes the necessity of building communities of support as discussed in the interviews. These racial battles highlight the profound psychological toll that navigating predominantly white spaces imposes on individuals from marginalized racial backgrounds. Seeking external resources, such as counseling or mentors, as mentioned in Stone's

interview, becomes a crucial strategy for dealing with the emotional and psychological challenges associated with being in a PWI.

Smith et al. (2007, 2011, 2016) underscore the importance of recognizing the impact of institutional challenges on students' mental and emotional well-being. Their research into racial battle fatigue reveals that African American men experience ongoing racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stressors that collectively undermine their psychological health. Stone's experience vividly illustrates these themes, as he emphasizes the significance of finding supportive communities to mitigate the adverse effects of these pervasive stressors.

In Stone's interview, the need for external resources such as counseling or mentors is evident as a strategy to cope with the relentless pressures of racial battle fatigue. Smith et al. (2007) highlight that these support systems are essential for helping students manage the mental strain induced by constant racial microaggressions and the broader societal issues that exacerbate their stress. Stone's proactive approach to seeking out these resources is a testament to his resilience and determination to navigate an often-hostile academic environment.

The necessity of building communities of support is further connected to the larger theme of double consciousness, as articulated by Du Bois (1903) and Baldwin (1993). Du Bois' concept of double consciousness describes the internal conflict African Americans face as they navigate their identities in a society that devalues their existence. While Baldwin's reflections on Black men confronting a White world unwelcoming to them echo this sentiment, emphasizing the struggle to find a sense of belonging in environments that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization.

For African American men in PWIs, building supportive communities is not just a coping mechanism; it is a vital strategy for survival and success. These communities provide a space

where students can express their authentic selves without the constant pressure to conform to dominant cultural norms. They offer a refuge from the psychological assaults of racial battle fatigue, allowing students to recharge and reaffirm their identities.

The insights from Smith et al. (2007, 2011, 2016) enrich researchers' and practitioners' understanding of the critical role that communities of support play in the lives of African American men in PWIs. Stone's experiences underscore the importance of these networks in combating the pervasive effects of racial battle fatigue. By connecting these experiences to the broader themes of double consciousness and the challenges of confronting a predominantly White world, we gain a deeper appreciation of the transformative power and agency exhibited by these students as they navigate their academic journeys.

The coping strategies employed by self-identified African American men in PWIs, as observed in these interviews, align with and are informed by the broader sociological literature on their experiences. Smith et al. (2007, 2011, 2016) highlight the concept of racial battle fatigue, revealing how African American men experience continuous racial microaggressions, societal problems, and environmental stressors that undermine their psychological health. These findings underscore the necessity for African American men to build support networks within the institution and seek external resources to cope with these challenges.

Building support networks is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and resilience among African American men in PWIs. Brooms (2020) emphasizes the importance of connections and relationships with faculty in enhancing Black men's sense of belonging. Similarly, Newman, Wood, and Harris (2015) highlight that positive interactions with faculty members can significantly impact the academic success and overall well-being of Black men in

community colleges. These relationships provide not only academic guidance but also emotional and social support, crucial for navigating the often-hostile environments of PWIs.

Furthermore, Guiffrida (2003) and Harper and Quaye (2007) discuss the critical role of African American student organizations in promoting social integration and identity development. These organizations act as vital spaces where African American men can express their identities, share experiences, and build community. Hypolite (2020a) adds that Black cultural centers play a significant role in facilitating racial identity development and providing a supportive environment that fosters social capital.

Seeking external resources, such as counseling and mentorship, is another crucial strategy for managing the emotional and psychological challenges associated with being in a PWI. Wood and Turner (2012) emphasize that student perspectives on faculty and academic success highlight the importance of accessible support systems. These external resources help African American men navigate the pressures of racial battle fatigue by offering professional guidance and a safe space to discuss their experiences and challenges.

In short, the coping strategies of building support networks within the institution and seeking external resources are rooted in a substantial body of scholarship that underscores their importance. These strategies are imperative considerations for higher education practitioners and researchers alike, as they address the unique challenges faced by African American men in predominantly white academic environments. By fostering resilience and academic success through these adaptive responses, institutions can create more inclusive and supportive environments for all students.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

In summary, these interviews provide a comprehensive view of the agency exercised by

Black students in PWIs. Jowuan, Joseph, Dee, and Kalil's interviews underscore the significance of creating supportive communities and navigating classroom dynamics within PWIs, aligning with existing literature that places an emphasis on Black students' empowerment and resilience (Harper 2009; Means et al 2017; Smith et al 2016; Strayhorn 2008). These students' testimonies reveal the proactive steps they take to foster a sense of belonging amidst predominantly white academic landscapes. Furthermore, Anderson's (2015) observations on the psychological toll faced by African American students in predominantly white spaces resonate with the experiences shared in these interviews. The emotional weight of being in such spaces and needing to carve out niches for themselves are recurrent themes (Griffin and Cummins 2012; Jenkins 2006; Smith et al. 2016).

Conversely, Kincade and Stone add depth to this narrative by highlighting the importance of embracing diverse friendships and the challenges of adjusting to college life in PWIs, reflecting Strayhorn's (2008) exploration of how diverse interactions with peers can contribute to Black men's sense of belonging at PWIs. Kincade's emphasis on open-mindedness in forming connections introduces a unique facet of agency, illustrating the adaptive nature of Black students in predominantly White environments. While Stone's interview provides insights into the role of campus organizations in fostering support and belonging within the academic community, it also delves into the complexities of trying to fit into social dynamics where some students may have pre-established connections.

These interviews reaffirm the multifaceted nature of agency among Black students at PWIs. Their exercise of agency spans from the deliberate creation of communities and negotiation of classroom dynamics to the willingness to embrace diversity in friendships. This comprehensive exploration aligns with existing literature on Black students' experiences in

PWIs, emphasizing the complex interplay between agency and the broader context of predominantly white institutions and the resilience and empowerment that underscore their academic journeys (Allen et al. 1991; Anderson 2015; Black and Bimper 2020; Museus 2008; Guiffrida 2003; Smith et al. 2007). Together, these interviews emphasize that agency is not a one-size-fits-all concept; rather, it is the individuals who adjust how they activate and deploy their agency to navigate the unique challenges and opportunities presented within the varied landscapes of PWIs. Their experiences underscore the crucial role of agency in navigating these institutions and challenging historical norms.

CHAPTER SIX

FORGING PATHS: LEADERSHIP, ACTIVISM, AND THE QUEST FOR EQUITY

The journey through predominantly white institutions (PWIs) often begins with a mixture of excitement and apprehension for African American men. This chapter delves into the complex experiences and strategies employed by these students as they navigate the social, academic, and cultural landscapes of PWIs. By examining the narratives of students such as Jowuan Pierce and Kalil Matthew, this chapter highlights the dualities and challenges faced by African American men in higher education, emphasizing the importance of community, cultural capital, and institutional support. Through the lens of several sociological theories and the work of various scholars, we explore how these students leverage their agency, build supportive networks, engage in leadership and activism, and confront racial discrimination and stereotyping they face at PWIs. The insights gleaned from these experiences underscore the need for systemic change within PWIs to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for African American men.

The journey for African American men through PWIs often begins with a blend of eager anticipation and underlying apprehension. Jowuan exemplifies this complex emotional landscape through his reflections on transitioning to college. He expressed his enthusiasm for independence and self-expression, stating:

> I'm very big into decorating. I just like to kind of see. I love decorating in front of me I have like a huge like wall of stuff. It was the big thing. I also love cooking and baking so I bought like a majority of like the kitchen supply like when I was younger. For Christmas I would always ask for like kitchen supplies because I just loved cooking and stuff. So like that was very exciting. And then just like this is like the first time I've had like my like I always had my own room but I've never had like my own room where I had like free rein on like everything that I had in it. So that was really nice. Yes, I mean, majority essentials,

just all that stuff, but um it all happens so fast, like it really felt like just like a week process of just like moving in. Yeah, mainly just because, like I went to an all-boys school, and like, it was very like Irish Catholic, so like being, you know, Black or like an all-boys Irish Catholic school is always rough, so like, you kind of really had to find like your community and I did, I did like musical theater, and that kind of became like my family. Because, like theater, kids always tend to like band together and like a weird way. So they just kind of help, you know, like, keep my spirits up and like help me like still want to like go to school and stuff.

Jowuan's experience highlights the excitement and challenges that come with newfound independence and self-expression in college. He was eager to embrace the freedom of personalizing his dorm space and pursuing his passions, such as cooking and baking, which he had cherished since childhood. This enthusiasm for self-expression and autonomy marks a significant shift from his high school experience at a predominantly white, Irish Catholic, all-boys school, where finding a sense of belonging required considerable effort and compromise.

In high school, Jowuan had already navigated the complexities of fitting in and carving out a space for himself within a predominantly white environment. He found solace in musical theater, forming a close-knit community that uplifted him and sustained his academic motivation. His past experiences equipped him with a keen awareness of the effort needed to establish a supportive community in white spaces. However, the prospect of college represented a dream for Jowuan: the removal of the barriers he had encountered in high school and the opportunity for unrestrained self-actualization. He carried with him the hope that college would allow him to embrace his full identity without the need for compromise. This dream, symbolized by his collection of cookware and his connection to the arts community, underscored his desire to find a balance between individuality and belonging.

Jowuan's narrative reveals a poignant mix of hope and realism. He was acutely aware of the challenges of establishing community in predominantly white spaces but remained optimistic about realizing his aspirations for independence and self-expression in college. His journey

underscores a recurring theme among African American men at PWIs: the delicate balance

between excitement for new opportunities and the apprehension of navigating a space where

their racial and cultural identities are in the minority.

The enduring legacy of race and racism profoundly shapes the lives of self-identified

African American men, particularly within PWIs. Tatum (1997) elucidates how individuals often

initially connect based on visible similarities such as race. This immediate visual connection

offers a sense of belonging that precedes deeper interpersonal understanding. Within the context

of PWIs, this phenomenon frequently leads African American students to gravitate toward one

another, creating a supportive network amidst a majority culture that often overlooks their unique

experiences and needs.

This natural gravitation towards racially similar peers is not merely a social preference

but a strategic response to an environment where African American students might otherwise

feel isolated or marginalized. Tatum's insights highlight the duality of emotions that African

American students navigate—simultaneously seeking belonging while confronting the pressures

to assimilate into the dominant culture. Jowuan's narrative exemplifies this dichotomy, as he

balances his enthusiasm for independence and self-expression with the realities of entering a

space where his racial and cultural identity places him in the minority.

Placing Tatum's (2017) ideas in conversation with Althusser's (1971) further illuminates

the structural challenges African American men face in PWIs. Althusser's writing posits that

institutions such as schools propagate dominant ideologies that subtly shape individuals'

perceptions and behaviors, reinforcing societal hierarchies and norms. Within this framework,

the tendency of African American students to form racially homogenous groups can be seen as a

form of resistance against the dominant ideologies that pervade PWIs. These groups offer a refuge where students can assert their identities and find solidarity.

However, there is a significant cost associated with this approach, especially when African American men attempt to forgo this natural inclination in favor of a more inclusive, yet palatable, approach for their white peers. By striving to integrate more fully into the broader campus community, these students often face the risk of diluting their cultural identities and experiences. The pressure to conform to the dominant culture's expectations can lead to a form of cultural erasure, where the richness of their backgrounds is overshadowed by the need to fit in.

Moreover, attempting to navigate these institutional spaces without the immediate support of a racially similar peer group can heighten feelings of isolation and stress. The lack of a readily accessible support network forces these students to constantly negotiate their identities and seek validation in environments that may not fully understand or appreciate their experiences. This approach can result in significant emotional and psychological costs, as students balance the desire for broader acceptance with the need to maintain their cultural integrity.

Althusser's (1971) and Tatum's (2017) analysis of racial grouping thus intersect to underscore the complexities of racial dynamics in educational settings. African American men at PWIs face a precarious balancing act—seeking belonging and support within their racial group while navigating the broader institutional pressures to assimilate. The challenge lies in maintaining a strong sense of self and community without succumbing to the ideological forces that seek to marginalize their identities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing more inclusive and supportive educational environments that recognize and celebrate the diverse experiences of all students.

Building Power Through Communities of Support

The social dynamics within PWIs can be particularly disorienting and alienating for African American men. For students such as Jowuan, finding solace in extracurricular activities, such as theater, which offered a sense of community, is a common strategy. This approach underscores the necessity for these students to seek out and create niches of belonging within the larger, often unwelcoming, university environment. This strategy aligns with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) concept of cultural reproduction, where students strive to establish spaces that resonate with their cultural capital. The social and cultural reproduction of capital significantly influences the lives and experiences of these young men by setting standards for desirable cultural practices, often marginalizing for non-White students and fostering a heightened sense of isolation among minority groups.

To cope with the pervasive systemic racial structures within educational institutions, African American men often turn to support networks. Bonilla-Silva's (1997) "structural interpretation" of racism contextualizes this phenomenon, highlighting how these networks become essential for students to navigate their place in a predominantly white space. Building a support network is not just important but crucial for these students. As Jowuan explained,

> Yeah, it was actually so there were two people in my grade; it was actually just like an iMessage group chat that's how few of us there are that like we were able to have one of those. And I got a DM on Instagram saying hey I'm making a group chat of like all the Black freshmen at Little Valley like what's your number I'll add you, and I was like, oh, like okay, and then just added me to it, and then we like, we had like a group FaceTime one night. We'd like text and stuff all the time throughout the summer, it was pretty cool.

Jowuan's initiative to join a group chat with other Black freshmen provided a digital space for connection amidst the physical and cultural isolation of campus life. These micro-communities are essential for sharing experiences and fostering a sense of belonging. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the value of these virtual micro-communities became even more critical. The

scholarship of Carter (2005 and 2006) and Brooms (2017a) highlights the profound impact of forming social and cultural networks on the success and well-being of African American men in higher education. Carter (2005) emphasizes the importance of "cultural navigation" in educational settings, where students must negotiate their cultural identities within the broader campus culture. This idea aligns with Jowuan's efforts to join a digital community, providing a space for cultural connection and support.

Brooms (2017) further underscores the unique challenges Black male students face, including racial stigmatization and marginalization, which can impede their academic and social success. Without such networks, these students risk social isolation, exacerbating the difficulties of navigating a PWI. Therefore, creating these micro-communities, especially in a digital format during periods of physical distancing, becomes a crucial strategy for survival and success in an environment that often fails to adequately support Black students' cultural and social needs. When students are denied these connections or simply cannot make them, they are forced to find alternative ways to connect to the larger community.

These digital communities during the peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic played a pivotal role in providing sense-making and support for African American men at PWIs. They served as spaces where students could share their experiences, offer mutual support, and build a collective sense of resilience. This networked solidarity was not just about surviving the immediate challenges of isolation but also about building power through counter-cultural norms. These digital spaces became incubators for leadership and activism, allowing students to advocate for themselves and their peers in broader institutional contexts.

Jowuan's narrative exemplifies how these digital micro-communities laid the groundwork for taking up leadership roles and advocating for themselves in other spaces. As

these students navigated the complex landscape of PWIs, their digital networks provided a

foundation for organizing, mobilizing, and pushing for change. This collective effort reflects

Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) concept of cultural reproduction, where these students actively

work to reshape their environments to reflect their cultural capital. It also aligns with Bonilla-

Silva's (1997) structural interpretation of racism, highlighting the importance of building

supportive networks as a means of countering systemic barriers.

The creation of digital support networks among African American men at PWIs,

particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, illustrates the power of counter-cultural norms in

fostering belonging and resilience. These networks are crucial for navigating the isolating and

often hostile environments of PWIs, providing a platform for sense-making, support, and

leadership. Jowuan's experience underscores the importance of these digital communities in not

only offering immediate support but also in empowering students to advocate for themselves and

effect change within their institutions.

<div align="center">**Leadership and Activism**</div>

The journey to leadership and activism for African American men in PWIs often begins

with the support and solidarity found within micro-communities. These spaces, created by and

for Black students, provide a crucial foundation of strength and resilience (Allen et al. 1991;

Anderson 2015; Black and Bimper 2020; Museus 2008; Guiffrida 2003; Smith et al. 2007). For

Jowuan, the digital camaraderie he found enabled him to step into a leadership role within the

larger university community, where he felt the imperative to address systemic issues head-on.

The drive to effect changes through leadership and activism can be seen as a direct

response to the "color-blind racism" described by Bonilla-Silva (2014). This form of racism,

which ignores and perpetuates racial inequities, coupled with a lack of adequate social

connections, creates an environment where African American students must navigate and

challenge institutional racial dynamics. Jowuan's experience exemplifies this struggle:

> Yeah, I definitely felt a lot of this last year. I was on student government, and I was the chair of the Justice Committee, which as a freshman, I kind of felt like a big deal for me because like I was, you know, young and like, you know, whatever. And right before Black History Month ended, I got our legislation passed, like formally recognized Black History Month within like the student government and call on the university to do the same. Because like Little Valley doesn't formally recognize Black History Month. So, like, it was that was a very big like I just felt very like successful and like it just made me very happy. I don't know, and I was just kind of like proud. I also did feel very like successful and proud with like, um, like our protests like before, like the school started and like early in the school year. And I'm like looking forward to...hoping that those start up again.

Jowuan's involvement in student government and his role in getting Black History Month

recognized on campus illustrates the necessity and impact of Black student leadership. His

initiative to pass legislation despite institutional inertia underscores the significant personal and

emotional investment required to advocate for basic recognition and respect. When asked about

how he felt about Black History Month not being officially recognized, Jowuan responded:

> When I found out, I like, kind of like, troubled it was like a little embarrassing. Like, it's so weird to me. And like they still don't even after that legislation passed, they still haven't done anything with it yet because I'm not in student government right now so I couldn't keep pushing it...I was like that's like ridiculous like writing a legislation for something so basic was honestly challenging because it's like how do I argue that this should be a thing like how is that not just common sense. So it was a little bit weird.

Jowuan's experience at Little Valley, where Black History Month was not officially

recognized, made him feel undervalued by the institution. This neglect catalyzed his drive to

initiate change, a journey that profoundly impacted his personal development and self-

actualization. This reflects the broader experiences of many African American men in PWIs

who, out of necessity, become advocates for their communities. According to Hotchkins and

Dancy (2015), Black male student leaders often engage in activism to address the disparities they

encounter, driven by a combination of personal and communal necessity.

However, the role of a social activist is not without its costs. As Jones (2016) highlights, Black student leaders frequently face additional scrutiny and pressures, which can impact their mental health and academic performance. Jowuan's activism, while fulfilling, also placed a considerable burden on him, highlighting the dual-edged nature of such roles.

Transitioning from student government to broader activism, Jowuan and his peers took their efforts beyond the campus governance structures. This shift is evident in his reflection:

> Yeah, so me and a couple of my friends started this protest group called Our Streets... And we did like a lot of protesting…for like Black Lives Matter, like calling on the university to fire. [A staff member] who was like this white supremacist, [in] the Dean of the admissions office. There's a whole lot of other stuff that we did, but it…felt good, like it gave me a purpose, like I felt like I had a reason to get up every day and as we were protesting every day and like doing different events and things…I don't know it definitely was like something that I became very passionate about.

Jowuan's journey from a digital community of support to proactive leadership and activism underscores the transformative power of these networks. His story illustrates how African American men at PWIs navigate and challenge institutional racial dynamics, advocating for recognition and systemic change despite the significant personal costs involved. Through these efforts, they create pockets of belonging and empowerment, both for themselves and for future students.

Furthermore, based on Du Bois' (1903) profound insights on the struggles of African Americans, Pierce's activism can be further contextualized within the broader narrative of striving for racial equity. Du Bois (1903) articulates the "double consciousness" experienced by African Americans, a concept that captures the emotional and psychological toll of navigating a predominantly White space while maintaining one's cultural identity. As seen in Jowuan's advocacy, this duality often leads to a significant expenditure of time, energy, and attention, which colleges and universities rarely recognizes or replenishes. These young Black men, in

their quest to champion policy changes within the academy, face additional social-emotional costs. They carry the burden of representing their community, often confronting systemic barriers and biases that can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration. This unyielding commitment to advocacy demonstrates their resilience and underscores the need for institutional recognition and support for their endeavors.

<div align="center">**Mixed Responses to Student Advocacy**</div>

Nevertheless, institutional responses to student activism are often mixed. Jowuan talked about starting a protest group, highlighting the need for action in the face of institutional inertia. This activism directly responds to feelings of marginalization within the university system. The mixed institutional response to activism can be interpreted through Feagin et al.'s (1996) discussion of the agony of education for Black students in White colleges, reflecting the systemic challenges faced in seeking change (Feagin et al., 1996). The experiences shared by Jowuan highlight a common sentiment among African American men at PWIs: a feeling of alienation within the institutional structure. Institutions further exacerbate this sense of marginalization through their tendency to defend controversial figures under the guise of free speech. This practice sends a clear message to these students: Their voices and presence are often regarded as incongruent with the norms of the higher education environment, exacerbating the feeling of isolation.

In the context of Bonilla-Silva's and Feagin's work, the presence of racist or problematic leadership within institutions significantly impacts African American men. Bonilla-Silva's analysis of color-blind racism reflects how such leadership can perpetuate racial inequalities under the guise of neutrality (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Feagin's concept of the White racial frame fosters understanding of how these institutional attitudes and actions, often defended as "free

speech" or tradition, embed racial biases deeply within the system (Feagin, 2009). The resultant

environment not only perpetuates alienation and marginalization among African American men

but also imposes significant emotional and mental costs. Continually advocating against these

ingrained systems drains African American men's resources and can lead to a sense of

hopelessness, further intensifying feelings of isolation and the burden of representing their

community in the fight for equity and inclusion. The challenges faced by young Black men in the

academy, exacerbated by the persistence of problematic leadership, underscore the dire need for

substantial institutional change and heightened racial awareness in higher education. Institutions

must actively dismantle the structural inequalities and racist ideologies perpetuated within their

systems, as identified by scholars such as Bonilla-Silva and Feagin. This process involves re-

evaluating policies, leadership, and curricula to ensure that they foster an inclusive environment

that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges faced by African American students. The

goal should be to create a supportive educational landscape that recognizes the value of diverse

perspectives and actively works to uplift and empower these students.

Forging Authentic Connections

The anticipation and fear of racial injustice and exclusion at PWIs underscore the

complexities of racial identity formation in such spaces. For many African American students,

particularly the men in this study, the struggle to forge authentic peer connections in academic

settings is a recurring challenge. Kalil shared his experience:

> Um I can say I really like to look forward to the community. Because I do my like
> application, I like heavily put you know, like I am you know, I must join for like Black
> everything, you know, like the, like Black Student Union, all that. And I was like, okay, I
> really want to find my group and also like going to a PWI really scared me so like my high
> school like prepared us to like, you know, be sociable in all communities because I went
> to a predominately Black high school. So it was like, unfortunately, I said, be like, Okay,
> you have to be social because this road is not for you and the school is like not built for

you. So, I was like, looking forward to like making friends and like making the community and connections with everyone at the University.

Kalil's background of attending a predominantly Black high school provided him with a sense of cultural affirmation and community, yet it also meant that the transition to a PWI was particularly daunting. His preparation to navigate predominantly white spaces involved a conscious effort to seek out Black-centric organizations, such as the Black Student Union, as a way to re-establish a sense of belonging and community.

In contrast, Jowuan, who came from a predominantly white Irish Catholic high school, was already familiar with being a minority in his educational environment. He had experienced the necessity of finding and creating spaces of acceptance within a predominantly white culture. Despite these differences, both Kalil and Jowuan encountered similar obstacles upon entering their respective PWIs. Their experiences highlight that irrespective of their high school backgrounds, these institutions were not designed to fully welcome or support them. Both students sought solace and support within the Black community on their campuses, recognizing the importance of these micro-communities for their social and emotional well-being. They were open to forging meaningful relationships with a diverse set of peers, hoping to integrate into the broader university culture while still holding on to their racial and cultural identities.

Kalil's narrative further elaborates on the fears and challenges he faced upon entering the PWI:

> Yeah, I was very scared. There's like a racial injustice of everything. You know. A couple of years ago, there was like something with like our old president and the 2020 riots that scared me. And then my mom went to a parent meeting for the Black students at Northview. They told her and I was in the room they were like, Yeah, your child may get bullied because they might not think that they really belong here. And it was from other students, like, students bullied. Yeah, it was put in like, I don't know what it's called a thing. It's like imposter syndrome when you don't want to be like you don't belong. Here.

Kalil's fear of racial injustice and the potential for bullying reflect a broader concern among Black students at PWIs, who often face an environment where they are made to feel like outsiders. This feeling of not belonging, compounded by instances of overt and covert racism, contributes to the psychological phenomenon known as imposter syndrome. Both Kalil and Jowuan, despite their different preparatory backgrounds, had to navigate these challenging dynamics, seeking out supportive networks within their Black communities while striving to establish their place within the wider university landscape.

Their experiences illustrate the nuanced challenges African American men face at PWIs, where the journey to finding and maintaining a sense of belonging is fraught with both overt and subtle forms of exclusion. This underscores the critical need for institutions to create more inclusive environments that genuinely support and recognize the diverse backgrounds and experiences of all students.

Kalil Matthew reflects on his initial experiences at a PWI, articulating a profound sense of alienation and disappointment:

> For my first quarter and onto my second quarter of my first year, I really felt like I did not belong here because of everything that was said. It felt like I was a statistic and not a student, as if I was admitted because I'm Black and everything that happened in the past couple of years. When I arrived, I didn't have the resources I was promised. Despite putting 'Black everything' on my application, the supports were not actually in place. They were just in the process of being created and were not ready yet. That was what I was going through.

Kalil's narrative captures the complex emotional landscape that many African American students navigate upon entering PWIs. His anticipation of finding a supportive community sharply contrasted with the reality of racial injustice and exclusion. The sense of being admitted as a statistic, rather than as a valued student, highlights the pervasive impact of systemic racism and the inadequacies in institutional support.

Kalil's experience of feeling out of place extended well into his second quarter, a critical period for acclimating to college life. The sense of being reduced to a statistic, a token of diversity rather than an individual with unique aspirations and abilities, deeply affected his sense of belonging. This feeling was exacerbated by the lack of promised resources. Despite the institution's commitment to diversity on paper, the actual supports and programs for African American students were underdeveloped or still in the planning stages, leaving students like Kalil further isolated and disillusioned.

The promises of support that were not fully realized reflect a broader issue within many colleges and universities, particularly highlighted during the pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. Institutions rapidly introduced services and programs aimed at supporting African American students in response to heightened awareness of racial inequities. However, these initiatives often lacked the necessary infrastructure and resources to be effective. As a result, students frequently found themselves without the expected institutional support, facing both the academic and emotional challenges of navigating a predominantly white environment without adequate backing.

This gap between institutional promises and the reality faced by students underscores the need for more comprehensive and timelier implementation of support systems. It highlights the importance of not just committing to diversity and inclusion in rhetoric but also ensuring that tangible resources and programs are fully developed and accessible from the moment students step onto campus. For students like Kalil, the failure to deliver on these promises can significantly impact their college experience, contributing to feelings of isolation and undermining their academic and social success. Kalil's story exemplifies the urgent need for institutions to go beyond symbolic gestures of inclusion and ensure that support systems are

robust, fully operational, and genuinely responsive to the needs of African American students. This is essential not only for their academic success but also for their overall well-being and sense of belonging in higher education.

Incorporating Brooms' (2017) insights, it is clear that the struggle for African American men to forge authentic connections in academic settings is a multifaceted issue deeply intertwined with the institutional challenges (also see Bonilla-Silva [1997]; Feagin [2009]). Brooms (2017) underscores the difficulty Black male students face in establishing meaningful relationships within an educational system laden with racial biases. These systemic barriers hinder their academic success and impose high social and emotional costs. The effort to build genuine rapport with peers and faculty in an environment that may not always be welcoming or understanding of their experiences can exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation. The need to constantly navigate and counteract racial stereotypes and prejudices compounds these difficult feelings, further draining their emotional and mental resources. The establishment of supportive networks and the creation of inclusive spaces become crucial in mitigating these challenges. These findings highlight the need for institutional reforms that prioritize racial awareness and actively support the well-being and success of African American students.

@@African-American men who experience "othering" in academic settings are profoundly impacted (Brooms and Druery 2023; Harper 2009; Jenkins 2006). "Othering" often manifests as a reinforcement of the internal fears held by these students, intensifying their sense of being outsiders. This dynamic not only challenges their ability to form genuine connections but also contributes to a heightened sense of vulnerability and alienation. The social-emotional costs are significant and include feelings of loneliness, heightened stress, and a persistent sense of not belonging. As students navigate these challenges, the psychological toll of continually

countering racial stereotypes and seeking acceptance can be overwhelming. Research on the impact of "othering" underscores the importance of fostering environments that embrace diversity and support African American students in forming meaningful relationships vital for their academic and personal success (Grier-Reed 2010; Hypolite 2020a). Brooms' work highlights the need for institutions to not only recognize but actively address these challenges to support the well-being of their African American male students (Brooms 2017).

Kalil's perspective, as shared above, illustrates the complex emotions African American students experience when entering PWIs. His anticipation of finding a community, especially through groups like the Black Student Union, contrasts sharply with his fears of racial injustice and feeling out of place. This duality reflects the broader challenges students of color face in predominantly white academic environments. Kalil's concerns about being seen as a statistic rather than a student and his anxiety about fitting in due to his racial identity underscore the deep-seated issues of inclusion and representation in higher education. His experiences highlight the need for institutions to not only create but also effectively implement support systems and resources that truly address the needs of their diverse student populations.

Building upon Kalil's experiences and Du Bois' concept of double consciousness shows how pronounced the plight of African American students at PWIs is. Du Bois (1903), introduces the idea of a dual identity that African Americans navigate, constantly balancing their own self-perception against how the dominant White society perceives them. This "two-ness" is a profound social-emotional burden, as students such as Matthew find themselves straddling two worlds—their authentic selves and the expectations of a predominantly White institution. This constant negotiation of identity can make students feel alienated and painfully aware of being "othered." The challenge of being consigned as the other is not just academic but deeply

personal, as these students strive to forge meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging in an environment that often does not fully acknowledge or appreciate their unique cultural experiences. Du Bois' insights shed light on the ongoing struggle for African American students to reconcile these aspects of their identity within the academic setting. Du Bois' (1903) work highlights the critical need for institutions to foster environments where diversity is genuinely understood and embraced.

Combs' (2010) research adds a crucial dimension to understanding the experiences of African American students like Kalil at PWIs. Combs emphasizes the significance of 'place' in shaping racial identity, particularly in environments where African Americans find themselves in the minority. The impact of space in identity formation resonates deeply with the experiences of students at PWIs, where the physical and cultural landscape often reinforces feelings of racial isolation and otherness. The anticipation and fear of racial injustice that students like Kalil carry are not just reflections of personal anxieties but are rooted in the broader context of racial identity formation within predominantly white spaces.

Griffith, Hurd, and Hussain (2017) further illuminate these experiences by examining the race-related stressors and coping responses among Black students attending a predominantly white institution. Their qualitative study reveals that these students frequently encounter racial microaggressions and systemic biases, which exacerbate their stress and challenge their coping mechanisms. This constant navigation of racial tensions contributes to a pervasive sense of not belonging, mirroring the feelings of isolation and otherness discussed by Combs.

Moreover, McClain et al. (2016) explore the compounded impact of racial and ethnic identity, imposter feelings, and minority status stress on the mental health of Black college students. Their findings underscore the psychological toll of existing in environments that are not

designed to support their identities. Black students often grapple with imposter syndrome and minority status stress, which further strains their mental health and hinders their academic and social success. The research by McClain et al. aligns with Combs' emphasis on the significance of 'place,' highlighting how the cultural and physical landscapes of PWIs can deeply affect the well-being and identity formation of African American students.

These insights collectively emphasize the necessity for institutional reforms that create more inclusive and supportive environments. Addressing the systemic issues that perpetuate racial isolation and stress is crucial for fostering the academic and personal success of African American students at PWIs. The struggle to maintain a sense of self while navigating these spaces can have profound social-emotional costs, including stress, anxiety, and a sense of dislocation. As Combs illustrates, the environment in which African American students find themselves plays a crucial role in how they perceive and engage with their racial identity, often necessitating a constant and exhausting process of adjustment and accommodation. The interplay between place and identity formation, as outlined by Combs, underscores the need for PWIs to create more inclusive and understanding environments that acknowledge and address these unique challenges (Combs 2010).

Racial Discrimination and Stereotyping

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2014) research offers a critical lens through which to view the racial discrimination and stereotyping that African American students face, particularly in PWIs. This work suggests that racism in contemporary society operates in a more covert, systemic way, often manifesting through seemingly benign neglect or passive-aggressive actions that can escalate into outright bullying and harassment. For African American students like those mentioned in Combs' (2010) study, these dynamics compound the stress and anxiety associated

with navigating spaces that are not fully inclusive or understanding of their racial identities. Bonilla-Silva's (2014) analysis indicates that these experiences are not isolated incidents but are part of a broader pattern of color-blind racism that maintains racial inequalities by obscuring and minimizing the realities of racial discrimination.

The social-emotional costs to African American students facing these challenges are significant, impacting their academic performance, mental health, and overall well-being (Evans and Moore 2015; Smith et al 2016; and Strayhorn 2008ab). Evans and Moore (2015) highlight how the emotional labor required to constantly counteract racial microaggressions can lead to significant stress and exhaustion, a phenomenon they term "racial battle fatigue." This concept is further supported by Smith et al. (2016), who discuss the cumulative effect of Black misandric microaggressions, which not only affect mental health but also impede the ability to perform academically and socially in a predominantly white campus culture.

Strayhorn (2008a) emphasizes the critical role of supportive relationships in mitigating these effects, arguing that strong, supportive networks are essential for the success of African American males in college. These networks provide a buffer against the negative impacts of racial discrimination, offering emotional support and a sense of belonging that is often lacking in the broader institutional environment.

Persisting in such environments demands a resilience that is often taxing, underscoring the urgency for institutional changes that genuinely address racial awareness, inclusivity, and support systems. Bonilla-Silva (2014) offers a compelling argument for understanding the experiences of Kalil and others like him at PWIs. Bonilla-Silva's (2014) analysis of color-blind racism—a form of racism that pretends not to see race, even as it perpetuates racial inequalities—mirrors Kalil's observations about the subtle and not-so-subtle ways racial

discrimination manifests at PWIs. The notion that institutions can simultaneously acknowledge diversity in their admissions processes and yet fail to provide the necessary support systems once students of color are enrolled aligns with Bonilla-Silva's (2014) argument that contemporary racism is sophisticated, systemic, and deeply embedded in the fabric of society.

Jowuan and Kalil's experiences at their respective PWIs illustrate the pervasive impact of these dynamics. Jowuan's involvement in student government and his efforts to have Black History Month formally recognized highlight the challenges of advocating for racial equity in an institution that is slow to acknowledge and act upon these issues. Despite his initial excitement and enthusiasm for college life, Jowuan's realization that his university did not value his cultural heritage as much as he hoped led him to take on a leadership role out of necessity. This involvement, while empowering, also placed a significant emotional burden on him, as he navigated the complexities of institutional resistance and racial apathy.

Kalil, on the other hand, entered his PWI with a keen awareness of the potential for racial injustice, shaped by his experiences at a predominantly Black high school. His anticipation of community was met with the harsh reality of feeling like a statistic rather than a valued member of the academic community. The lack of fully developed support systems, despite promises made during the admissions process, left him feeling further isolated and disillusioned. Kalil's experience underscores the importance of not only acknowledging diversity but also actively supporting it through tangible, effective resources and programs.

Both Jowuan and Kalil's experiences demonstrate the necessity of fostering environments that embrace diversity and support African American students in forming meaningful relationships. Institutional reforms that prioritize racial awareness and inclusivity are essential in addressing the systemic barriers that hinder the academic success and well-being of African

American students. Without these changes, the resilience required to navigate such environments will continue to impose high social and emotional costs on these students. Kalil's recounting of his anticipation for community and subsequent experiences of racial injustice, the fear of not belonging, and the sensation of being reduced to a statistic rather than recognized as a full student. The dissonance between the promise of inclusivity and the reality of racial alienation and exclusion at PWIs exemplifies color-blind racism's impact. Kalil's experiences—ranging from direct bullying by peers to institutional negligence in fully supporting Black student organizations—reflect the systemic maintenance of racial hierarchies that Bonilla-Silva (2014) identifies. The emotional and psychological toll on students like Kalil, who navigate these hostile environments, underscores the urgent need for PWIs to move beyond superficial acknowledgments of diversity to enact meaningful, systemic changes that dismantle the structures of color-blind racism.

Brooms' (2017) work delves into the lived experiences of African American men in predominantly white institutions (PWIs), shedding light on the nuanced ways in which racial discrimination and stereotyping manifest and the profound impact they have on these students. Brooms emphasizes the systemic barriers African American men encounter, which Bonilla-Silva's (2014) concept of color-blind racism highlighting how these systemic issues perpetuate racial inequalities under the guise of neutrality. This racial discrimination often escalates into bullying and harassment, exacerbating the social-emotional costs for these students. Their resilience against these pressures is commendable but highlights the urgent need for institutional reforms. Brooms (2017) suggests that meaningful support systems and an inclusive curriculum are essential in mitigating the effects of racial stereotypes and creating a campus environment where African American men can thrive without the constant burden of combating racial

prejudices. Brooms' (2017) discussion of the need for reform in higher education that fits the unique need of African American students underscores the critical importance of acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by African American students, advocating for a shift towards a more equitable and supportive educational landscape, as these struggles often foster a sense of imposter syndrome and exacerbate notions of shock.

Findings from Brooms' (2017) work validates Kalil's experiences. Brooms' research focuses on understanding and confronting the unique challenges faced by Black male students in predominantly white institutions. He emphasizes the systemic nature of racial discrimination and the stereotypes that Black men must navigate, which aligns with Kalil's fears of racial injustice and feelings of alienation. Brooms articulates how these young men often feel pressured to prove their belonging and confront the imposter syndrome Kalil describes, where despite their efforts and achievements, they still feel like outsiders within their own educational communities. Brooms' (2017) work specifically addresses the critical need for PWIs to acknowledge the existence of these issues and to actively work toward creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for Black male students. By doing so, institutions can help alleviate the sense of being "othered" that Kalil articulates. Student organizations and supportive networks, such as the Black Student Union that Kalil looked forward to joining, play a pivotal role in helping Black male students find a sense of community and belonging (Brooms 2017; Guiffrida 2003; Harper and Quaye 2007). Yet, as Kalil points out, the promise of such resources often falls short of the reality, leaving students to navigate these challenges with insufficient support. This disconnect between the expectations set by universities and the actual experience of students like Kalil underscores the necessity for systemic changes within these institutions.

Feagin et al. (1996) comprehensively examines the challenges and systemic barriers Black students face at predominantly White colleges and universities. Furthermore, Feagin et al. address the systemic issues of racism and discrimination that Black students face in PWIs. The book provides an in-depth analysis of the social and educational barriers these students encounter, including racial microaggressions, institutionalized biases, and the lack of supportive networks. Feagin et al. argue that these challenges not only hinder the academic and social experiences of Black students but also impact their identity and psychological well-being. This work is directly relevant to the experiences of Kalil Matthew, as it discusses the psychological and emotional impact of racial discrimination and the sense of alienation Black students often feel in such environments.

Feagin et al. (1996) argue that Black students at PWIs frequently encounter a campus culture that marginalizes and excludes them, both socially and academically. This point aligns with Matthew's fears of not belonging and being perceived as an outsider, underscored by his concern about racial injustice and his anticipation of finding a supportive community through organizations such as the Black Student Union. The authors highlight how institutional racism and a lack of genuine inclusivity contribute to feelings of imposter syndrome among Black students, where they doubt their place and value within the academic community.

Research by Feagin (1996) comprehensively examines the challenges and systemic barriers Black students face at predominantly white colleges and universities. Feagin and his colleagues address the pervasive issues of racism and discrimination that Black students encounter in these settings. This work provides an in-depth analysis of the social and educational barriers, including racial microaggressions, institutionalized biases, and the lack of supportive networks. Feagin and his co-authors argue that these challenges not only hinder the academic

and social experiences of Black students but also significantly impact their identity and psychological well-being.

Kalil's narrative vividly illustrates these challenges. He entered his PWI with a strong anticipation of finding a supportive community, heavily emphasizing his intention to join Black student organizations such as the Black Student Union. However, his experience was marred by fears of not belonging and being perceived as an outsider. The systemic issues outlined by Feagin et al. (1996) resonate deeply with Kalil's concerns about racial injustice and his struggle with feelings of alienation and imposter syndrome. These feelings are exacerbated by the lack of genuine inclusivity and the presence of institutional racism, which together create an environment where Black students like Kalil frequently doubt their place and value within the academic community.

Similarly, Jowuan's experiences at his PWI further underscore the systemic nature of these challenges. Despite his initial enthusiasm and his proactive involvement in student government, Jowuan soon realized that his university did not value his cultural heritage as he had hoped. His efforts to have Black History Month formally recognized highlight the slow and often resistant institutional response to issues of racial equity. This leadership role, while empowering, also placed a significant emotional burden on him, as he navigated the complexities of advocating for change in an environment that marginalizes and excludes Black students both socially and academically.

Feagin et al. (1996) argue that Black students at PWIs frequently encounter a campus culture that marginalizes and excludes them, both socially and academically. This marginalization contributes to feelings of imposter syndrome, where students doubt their place and value within the academic community. This point aligns with Kalil's fears of not belonging

and being perceived as an outsider. His concerns about racial injustice and his anticipation of finding a supportive community through organizations like the Black Student Union are echoed in the broader patterns identified by Feagin and his co-authors.

The work by Feagin et al. also highlights the social-emotional costs of navigating these predominantly white spaces, including the stress of facing racial stereotypes and the burden of representing one's race. This theory resonates with Jowuan's and Kalil's expressions of feeling like statistics rather than students, suggesting that their experiences are not isolated but part of a broader systemic issue. The authors call for substantial institutional changes to create more inclusive and equitable educational environments. They emphasize the need for universities to recognize and dismantle the structures and practices that perpetuate racial inequalities and to actively support the success and well-being of Black students.

Feagin's (2013) concept of the white racial frame provides a comprehensive discussion by which to understand the racial dynamics and challenges that individuals like Kalil and Jowuan face in PWIs. This concept explains how pervasive and entrenched white-centric viewpoints, assumptions, stereotypes, and biases systematically influence and structure societal institutions, including educational settings. Kalil's anticipation of community and his fear of racial injustice at a PWI validate his experiences in several ways: the expectation of community versus the reality of his exclusion, racial injustice and bullying; imposter syndrome and statistical othering; and finally, a complete lack of resources. Through the lens of Feagin's work, the experiences of Kalil and Jowuan underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing the racial dynamics at PWIs. Their narratives highlight the need for substantial institutional change to create a more equitable and supportive educational landscape for Black students. By fostering environments

that genuinely embrace diversity and provide robust support systems, institutions can better

support the academic and personal success of African American students.

Kalil's desire to find a supportive community through the Black Student Union and

similar organizations reflects his search for spaces within the PWI where the White racial frame

might be less dominant or mitigated by solidarity among Black students. However, the reality

that these spaces are not as readily available or as supportive as expected exemplifies how the

White racial frame can marginalize and isolate Black students even within structures that are

nominally designed to support them. The fear of racial injustice and being bullied, as mentioned

by Kalil, underscores the pervasive nature of the White racial frame in shaping interpersonal

dynamics at PWIs. Furthermore, the warning given to Kalil's mother about potential bullying

because he might "not really belong here" is a direct manifestation of the White racial frame,

where White students question Black students' presence and legitimacy, reinforcing feelings of

being an "outsider" and exacerbating these Black men's experience of imposter syndrome. The

White racial frame's implicit messaging that Black students are there to fulfill diversity quotas

rather than being full members of the academic community reinforces Matthew's feelings that

his classmates consider him a statistic rather than a student. This perception contributes to a

sense of alienation and causes these students to question their belonging in these educational

spaces.

Finally, Kalil's observation that the promised resources and support systems for Black

students were "not ready" or insufficient speaks to the failure of PWIs to adequately challenge

the White racial frame within their institutions. Despite outward commitments to diversity and

inclusion, the lack of substantive support for Black students reveals a gap between rhetoric and

reality, perpetuated by the White racial frame's influence on institutional priorities and resource

allocation. Feagin's framework helps elucidate how the White racial frame not only validates Kalil's experiences but also highlights the systemic nature of these challenges. It stresses the need for PWIs to critically examine and dismantle the White racial frame within their structures and practices to create truly inclusive and supportive environments for all students, particularly those from marginalized racial backgrounds.

Carter's (2005) work delves into African American students' strategies to maintain authenticity while achieving academic success in environments that may not fully recognize or value their cultural background. This concept can validate and support Kalil's experiences by highlighting the importance of finding a community where one can relate to others with similar backgrounds and challenges. Kalil's proactive approach to seeking out Black-centric organizations, such as the Black Student Union, and his concerns about racial injustice and feeling like an imposter reflect the broader issues of racial identity formation and the search for belonging that Carter (2005) addresses.

Carter's (2005) research discusses the social-emotional costs of navigating these spaces, such as the stress and anxiety of being perceived as not belonging or only being admitted due to one's racial background. This framing directly relates to Kalil's fears and the real impact of such perceptions on his sense of belonging and self-worth. Through this lens, Carter's (2005) research underscores the need for PWIs to foster genuinely inclusive environments that recognize and celebrate the diversity of student experiences and identities, thereby mitigating feelings of otherness and supporting students' academic and social success.

In her work, Carter (2005) investigates the complex interplay between race, identity, and academic achievement in American schools, focusing particularly on African American and Latino/a students. She challenges the simplistic notion of a racial achievement gap by delving

into the nuanced ways that students navigate their racial identities within the educational system. Carter (2005) argues that schools often operate under a culture of power that values certain behaviors, speech patterns, and dress codes more closely aligned with white, middle-class norms. Students who can code-switch between their home culture and the school's dominant culture tend to perform better academically. Those who resist conforming to the school's cultural norms often do so as a way of maintaining their racial identity but may face academic and social penalties as a result.

Kalil's narrative vividly illustrates these dynamics. Coming from a predominantly Black high school, he anticipated finding a supportive community at his PWI but was met with fears of exclusion and imposter syndrome. His proactive approach to joining Black-centric organizations was a strategy to maintain his cultural identity while navigating the predominantly white space. However, the lack of fully developed support systems exacerbated his feelings of isolation, as discussed in Carter's (2005) work.

Similarly, Jowuan's experiences at his PWI further underscore these challenges. Despite his initial enthusiasm and proactive involvement in student government, Jowuan realized that his university did not value his cultural heritage as he had hoped. His efforts to have Black History Month formally recognized highlight the slow and often resistant institutional response to issues of racial equity. This leadership role, while empowering, also placed a significant emotional burden on him as he navigated advocating for change in an environment that marginalizes and excludes Black students.

Carter's (2010) concept of cultural flexibility describes how students of color negotiate and reconcile their home cultural identities with the dominant cultural norms of their schools to achieve academic success. Her study explores the development of culturally flexible students

within various racial and ethnic school compositions. This research underscores the importance of schools promoting environments that encourage cross-cultural understanding and interaction, aligning closely with Kalil's experiences and concerns about finding community and facing racial injustice at PWIs.

Carter's (2010) insights into cultural flexibility and the influence of school environments on students' ability to navigate diverse settings resonate with Kalil's experiences at Northview University, a PWI. Kalil's anticipation of finding community through Black-centric organizations at the university, coupled with his fears of racial injustice and feelings of imposter syndrome, highlights the challenges Black students face in PWIs. These challenges include navigating racial discrimination and stereotyping, which can escalate to bullying and harassment, thereby compounding the stress and anxiety associated with their academic and social lives.

Carter's (2005, 2010) emphasis on the importance of schools acknowledging and valuing the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students underscores the need for PWIs to foster genuinely inclusive environments. Such environments would recognize and celebrate the diversity of student experiences and identities, thereby supporting their academic and social success and mitigating feelings of otherness.

Booker (2007), Fox (2021), and Lewis et al. (2021) all explore similar themes of belonging and identity in their research. Booker's study on perceptions of classroom belongingness among African-American college students, Fox's work on cultivating a sense of belonging at PWIs, and Lewis et al.'s examination of racial microaggressions and sense of belonging all highlight the critical need for supportive and inclusive environments. These studies support the notion that Black students' success is closely tied to their ability to find community and support within their educational institutions.

Furthermore, Means and Pyne (2017) and Harper (2009) discuss the importance of institutional support and the detrimental effects of its absence. Means and Pyne focus on the perceptions of institutional support among low-income, first-generation college students, while Harper provides a critical race counternarrative on Black male student achievement at PWIs. Both studies emphasize the need for robust support systems to help students navigate the challenges of their academic environments.

Smith et al. (2016) provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the emotional and psychological toll of navigating hostile campus cultures. Their concept of racial battle fatigue and the experiences of microaggressions and misandric stereotypes faced by Black male students highlight the severe impact of these environments on student well-being. This framework aligns with the experiences of Kalil and Jowuan, who both faced significant emotional and psychological challenges in their respective PWIs.

Integrating these scholars' work (Booker, 2017; Carter 2010; Fox, 2021; Lewis et al., 2021; Means and Pyne, 2017; Harper, 2009; Smith et al. 2016) provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by Black students at PWIs. These scholars collectively emphasize the need for institutions to create genuinely inclusive environments that support the academic and social success of African American students, mitigate feelings of otherness, and recognize and celebrate their diverse cultural backgrounds. Kalil and Jowuan's narratives exemplify the broader systemic issues and highlight the urgent need for substantial institutional changes to address these challenges.

Summary

The journey through PWIs often begins with a blend of eager anticipation and underlying apprehension for African American men. This chapter delves into their complex experiences and

strategies as they navigate the social, academic, and cultural landscapes of PWIs. By examining the narratives of Jowuan and Kalil, it highlights the dualities and challenges faced in higher education, emphasizing the importance of community, cultural capital, and institutional support. Through the lens of several sociological theories and the work of various scholars, the chapter explores how these students leverage their agency, build supportive networks, engage in leadership and activism, and confront racial discrimination and stereotyping at PWIs. The insights gleaned underscore the need for systemic change within PWIs to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for African American men.

Jowuan and Kalil's experiences underscore the systemic barriers and racial apathy prevalent in PWIs. Jowuan's efforts to advocate for Black History Month and Kalil's anticipation of finding a supportive community through Black-centric organizations like the Black Student Union illustrate the significant emotional and psychological burdens these students carry. Their stories reflect the broader issues of racial identity formation, imposter syndrome, and the need for genuine institutional inclusivity and support systems. Integrating the insights of multiple as a sampling of the scholarship explored in this chapter (Booker, 2017; Carter 2010; Fox, 2021; and Lewis et al., 2021) provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by Black students at PWIs.

These scholars collectively emphasize the need for institutions to create genuinely inclusive environments that support the academic and social success of African American students, mitigate feelings of otherness, and recognize and celebrate their diverse cultural backgrounds. Jowuan and Kalil's narratives exemplify the broader systemic issues, highlighting the urgent need for substantial institutional changes. Bonilla-Silva's (2014) analysis of color-blind racism—a form of racism that pretends not to see race, even as it perpetuates racial

inequalities—mirrors Kalil's observations about the subtle and not-so-subtle ways racial discrimination manifests at PWIs. This chapter asserts that fostering such environments is crucial for addressing the systemic barriers and ensuring the well-being and success of African American students in higher education.

In summary, the chapter calls for PWIs to move beyond superficial acknowledgments of diversity and enact meaningful, systemic changes that dismantle structures of color-blind racism. It emphasizes the need for institutions to create supportive educational landscapes that recognize the value of diverse perspectives and actively work to uplift and empower African American students. Kalil and Jowuan's experiences illustrate the resilience required to navigate these environments and underscore the critical need for robust support systems that genuinely address the needs of African American students. Through the lens of various sociological theories and scholarly work, the chapter offers a compelling argument for institutional reform to create more equitable and inclusive educational settings.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HERE BUT NOT HERE: THE EXPERIENCE OF 'OTHERING' IN COLLEGE LIFE

The experiences of African American men in PWIs are shaped by a complex interplay of systemic barriers, cultural challenges, and academic struggles. This chapter delves into the multifaceted dimensions of these experiences. By transcending traditional narratives of culture shock, it reveals the layers of resilience, struggle, and the quest for a supportive community that define the collegiate journey for Black men. Leveraging the lived experiences of my Kincade this chapter engages the need for more culturally competent faculty. These educators, who share lived experiences with their students, can foster an environment of respect, understanding, and inclusivity. The narrative is further enriched by the contributions of Dee and Stone, whose reflections on representation and academic challenges illustrate the broader systemic issues at play. This chapter not only examines the personal journeys of these students but also calls for a concerted effort to address the systemic inequalities within educational institutions. By doing so, it illuminates the pathways toward creating inclusive and equitable environments that support the success and well-being of African American men in higher education.

In this chapter I delve into the myriad ways scholars and educators have studied these concepts, highlighting the importance of understanding the complexities of Black men's experiences within educational settings. This analysis enriches our understanding of their journeys and illuminates the pathways toward fostering environments that support their success and well-being. Kincade's testimony encapsulates the discomfort and sensitivity these discussions can evoke:

> I do feel uncomfortable in class because when we do talk about how things like race or gender influence the way society treats us, especially in like the set of questions I've had, it does start to feel very uncomfortable when like I feel like that like Whites, my White peers like center different identities about, themselves. When we do talk about like, oh people are consistently discriminate against by doctors. Or like how the medical system treats people. And like, it can feel really sensitive, sensitive, like the language that they use to describe people of color or Black people.

Kincade's quote underscores the sensitivity of conversations about race and identity in classroom settings, highlighting the discomfort that African American students often feel when such topics arise. The language and perspectives of White peers can inadvertently marginalize or misrepresent the experiences of people of color, exacerbating feelings of isolation and discomfort.

The need for more culturally competent faculty who share lived experiences with their students is paramount. Such faculty members can empathize with what their students might experience in the classroom, fostering an environment where sensitive topics can be discussed with respect, understanding, and inclusivity. By promoting cultural competence among faculty and encouraging the presence of diverse educators, educational institutions can better support African American students, ensuring that their voices are heard, and their experiences are validated. This approach is crucial for creating a learning environment that not only addresses but also embraces the complexities of race and identity, ultimately contributing to the academic and personal success of African American men in higher education.

Social Historical Framing of Race Talk in Higher Education

Kincade Shaw's quote echoes the historical and contemporary challenges African American men face in PWIs. His experience of discomfort in class discussions about race and gender, particularly when White peers prioritize their own experiences over the systemic discrimination faced by people of color and Black individuals, directly reflects these ongoing

issues. Kincade's account highlights the persistent difficulty of fostering inclusive and

empathetic conversations about race in educational environments.

Kincade's reflection on the discomfort caused by White peers centering their own

experiences and using insensitive language during discussions of historical contexts illustrates a

significant issue within PWIs. He states,

> Um, I think it's just like, a like, an uncomfortable I think primarily feels uncomfortable
> because it's like, there is actual like, even if they're quoting the language, but like what
> they continue to talk about the quote like, they're using the same language that they use
> that that original author has used to describe, like Black people or people of color, and it
> can feel like, especially when we do talk about like older, older texts, it can feel like like
> they're using the same language that like people who are like known racist.

This quote underscores the challenge of insensitivity in language use during academic

discussions. The casual repetition of derogatory terms, even under the guise of academic critique,

perpetuates harm and shows a glaring lack of understanding regarding the dehumanizing power

of language. This aspect of Kincade's experience underscores the deep-seated issues within

PWIs in acknowledging and addressing the historical and ongoing impact of racialized language,

further complicating the pursuit of truly inclusive and respectful discourse about race.

Kincade's insights also express a longing for increased support and mentorship from

Black faculty and staff within academia. This desire spotlights a prevalent concern across higher

education landscapes, where representation and guidance from mentors who share similar racial

and cultural experiences remain scarce for African American students. Kincade's call for a more

diverse faculty not only reflects a quest for belonging and understanding within academic spaces

but also emphasizes the crucial role that representation and mentorship play in enhancing the

educational journey and personal growth of students of color.

Du Bois' (1903) concept of "double consciousness" offers a poignant reflection on

Kincade's discomfort and alienation. Du Bois (1903) articulated the inner conflict experienced

by African Americans, torn between their African heritage and the pressures to assimilate into a dominant White culture that views them through a lens of racial stereotypes and historical prejudices. Kincade's discomfort in class discussions, where his White peers inadvertently center their own experiences while discussing racial and gender disparities, mirrors the "veil" Du Bois describes. This "veil" encapsulates the discomfort Kincade feels, highlighting the ongoing struggle to navigate a society that fails to fully acknowledge or understand the depth of racialized experiences and the impact of language.

Ladson-Billings' (2006) concept of the "education debt" further deepens understanding of Kincade's experiences. Ladson-Billings (2006) challenges readers to recognize the cumulative historical, sociopolitical, economic, and moral debts contributing to disparities in educational outcomes for Black students. Kincade's wish for more support from Black faculty and peers reflects the need to address this "debt" by fostering environments that acknowledge and actively work to counteract the systemic barriers and isolation that African American students face in higher education. Her work urges institutions to create spaces that affirm Black identity and culture, promoting a sense of belonging and community that can mitigate feelings of isolation.

Bonilla-Silva's (2014) analysis of color-blind racism offers a critical lens to examine the structural underpinnings of Kincade's discomfort. Bonilla-Silva's (2014) critique of the subtle, systemic forms of racism that permeate "color-blind" societies highlights the nuanced ways in which racial discrimination manifests within academic settings. The failure of Kincade's peers and institutions to fully grasp and address the dehumanizing aspects of historical and contemporary racial discourse exemplifies the persistence of color-blind racism. Bonilla-Silva fosters understanding of how systemic racism perpetuates the social-emotional isolation and academic challenges that Kincade articulates, emphasizing the need for educational institutions

to move beyond superficial acknowledgments of diversity towards meaningful, systemic change that addresses the root causes of racial inequality.

Reviewing the insights of Du Bois (1903), Ladson-Billings (2006), and Bonilla-Silva (2014) alongside the lived experiences of Kincade reveals that the challenges faced by African American men in higher education are not merely individual or isolated incidents. Instead, they are symptomatic of deeper, systemic issues rooted in historical and ongoing discrimination. These scholars provide the theoretical tools to understand and confront the structural barriers contributing to social-emotional isolation and the academic challenges students like Kincade encounter. Through a concerted effort to address these systemic inequalities, higher education institutions can create more inclusive, supportive, and equitable educational environments that acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of Black men's student experiences and identities on college campuses.

The Harsh Reality of Being the "Other"

Kincade's poignant reflections underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by African American men in PWIs. These challenges, deeply rooted in historical and systemic discrimination, manifest not just as isolated incidents but as pervasive elements of their academic and social lives. The feelings of discomfort and alienation that Kincade describes are emblematic of a broader phenomenon that scholars such as Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Du Bois (1903), Bonilla-Silva (2014), and Tatum (1997) have sought to articulate and understand through their respective research. Their work provides a critical framework for dissecting the nuances of racial dynamics in educational settings, offering insights into the mechanisms of exclusion and the path toward more inclusive environments.

Kincade's words, "I do wish I had the opportunity to get like, more support from Black people outside of like, my peers, in the sense that like, even while like there aren't a lot of Black professors or like faculty that outside of like certain academic spaces that can help me. So I feel like if I do pursue certain majors or classes like there will be less and less Black people that can turn to in those spaces and that's something like, I wish would be different in like terms of my like future here," vividly express the need for more culturally competent faculty who share lived experiences with their students and can empathize with what they might experience in the classroom.

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) illuminate the social pressures and academic challenges that African American students face when navigating PWIs. They suggest that Black students, such as Kincade, grapple with a perceived need to assimilate into the dominant culture to achieve academic success, often at the cost of their racial identity. This dichotomy creates an internal conflict, as academia forces students to balance the authenticity of their cultural identity against the expectations of a predominantly White academic setting. The discomfort Kincade experiences in class discussions where racial and gender topics surface can be seen as a manifestation of this broader struggle, highlighting the complex interplay between identity, academic achievement, and societal expectations.

Similarly, Tatum's (1997) work sheds light on the everyday interactions and microaggressions that contribute to a sense of otherness among African American students. Tatum's (1997) analysis of racial dynamics in educational settings offers a pertinent context for understanding Kincade's sensitivity to the language used in class discussions. By examining the subtleties of racial discourse and its impact on students of color, Tatum provides a lens through

which to view the micro-level dynamics that exacerbate feelings of discomfort and isolation, further complicating the academic journey for students such as Kincade.

The concept of double consciousness, as articulated by Du Bois (1903), offers a profound understanding of the internal conflict experienced by African American students in PWIs. Du Bois' (1903) notion that African Americans navigate the world with a sense of "twoness" as an American and a Negro—two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings—resonates with Kincade's narrative of feeling uncomfortable and out of place. This duality, the struggle to reconcile one's identity within a society that consistently marginalizes and devalues it, speaks to the core of Kincade's discomfort. It reflects the broader societal issue of racial inequality that permeates even the supposedly neutral grounds of educational institutions.

Bonilla-Silva's (2014) research on color-blind racism provides a structural analysis of how systemic racism operates in subtle but impactful ways within educational settings. Bonilla-Silva's (2014) critique of the ostensible absence of racism in a color-blind society underscores Kincade's observations that insensitivities and racialized language persist, often masked by a veneer of neutrality or historical context. This framework helps elucidate the structural underpinnings of Kincade's discomfort, highlighting how systemic racism is perpetuated through everyday interactions and the failure to critically engage with the historical and contemporary implications of racial discourse.

Framing these scholars' perspectives as they relate to Kincade's lived experiences evidence that the journey of African American men in PWIs is fraught with challenges that are deeply embedded in the fabric of American society. The feeling of being "othered," the internal conflict between identity and academic success, and the systemic perpetuation of racial inequalities are not isolated experiences but are interconnected facets of a broader narrative. The

theoretical lenses provided by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Du Bois (1903), Bonilla-Silva (2014), and Tatum (1997) enable a better understanding of the social-emotional isolation and the struggle for belonging that Kincade and many others face. Addressing these systemic inequalities requires a concerted effort to create educational environments that acknowledge, actively embrace, and celebrate the diversity of student experiences and identities, fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging for all.

The Need for More African American Faculty and Staff

Integrating key concepts from Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Du Bois (1903), Bonilla-Silva (2014), and Carter (2005) sheds light on the challenges faced by African American men in PWIs. This scholarly framework clarifies the systemic nature of racial discrimination and alienation in educational settings and offers insights into the resilience and strategies employed by Black students to navigate these environments.

Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) highlight the internal conflicts African American students face and underscores the significance of representation among faculty and staff in PWIs. The pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture, as described by Fordham and Ogbu, is exacerbated by the lack of African American role models within academic settings. This absence leaves students such as Kincade navigating a path that often feels alien and isolating, highlighting the critical need for mentors with similar cultural backgrounds and experiences. African American faculty and staff can offer invaluable support, helping students reconcile their racial identity with academic success in a predominantly White environment.

Transitioning from Fordham and Ogbu's insights, Carter's (2005) work provides a complementary perspective on the necessity of African American representation in the faculty and staff of PWIs. Carter's exploration of the challenges Black students face in educational

spaces that do not affirm their racial and cultural identities speaks directly to the issues raised by Fordham and Ogbu. Carter's (2005) scholarship suggests that African American mentors and role models can play a pivotal role in validating the experiences of Black students, thereby reducing feelings of isolation and alienation. Placing Carter's work together with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) insights makes it clear that navigating academic success while maintaining one's cultural identity is significantly alleviated by the presence of African American faculty who can provide academic and emotional support.

Building on the dialogue between Carter's findings and Fordham and Ogbu's theories, Fleming's (1984) work further emphasizes the importance of a supportive network of Black faculty and peers in enhancing the educational experience of African American students at PWIs. Fleming's (1984) research not only corroborates the earlier discussions on the impact of representation but also adds a nuanced understanding of how such networks contribute to a sense of belonging and community. This sense of belonging is critical for students navigating the complexities of racial identity in predominantly White spaces. Fleming's work extends the conversation by illustrating how supporting African American faculty and staff is beneficial and essential for the holistic development of Black students in higher education. Through this scholarship, the interconnectedness of academic success, cultural identity, and the need for mentorship from African American faculty and staff becomes even more pronounced, reinforcing the call for systemic changes within PWIs to address these needs.

Kincade's reflections encapsulate these insights: "More support from Black people outside of like, my peers, in the sense that like, even while like there aren't a lot of Black professors or like faculty that outside of like certain academic spaces that can help me." This poignant remark underscores the profound impact that African American faculty and staff can

have in providing both academic guidance and emotional support, significantly enhancing the collegiate experience for students like Kincade.

Similarly, Dee highlights the transformative power of representation: "Seeing people who look like me in positions of power... it changes how you see what's possible for yourself." This sentiment reinforces the critical need for diverse faculty and staff who can serve as role models, fostering a sense of possibility and belonging for African American students.

In short, the contributions of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), Carter (2005), and Fleming (1984) provide a look into the multifaceted challenges African American students face at PWIs and the transformative potential of increasing African American representation among faculty and staff. Each scholar's work builds upon the others to create a cohesive argument for the necessity of such representation, not only as a means of support but also as a crucial element in fostering an educational environment where all students can thrive. The dialogue between these scholarly perspectives illuminates the path forward: to create inclusive academic spaces that recognize and celebrate diversity, institutions must commit to recruiting and retaining African American faculty and staff. This commitment is essential for dismantling the barriers to success that students such as Kincade face, marking a step towards a more equitable and supportive higher education system.

Ultimately, this chapter stands at the crossroads of theory and practice, where the scholarly frameworks of Fordham and Ogbu, Du Bois, Bonilla-Silva, Ladson-Billings, Carter, and Fleming intersect with the lived experiences of African American men in PWIs, such as Kincade. This confluence of perspectives sheds light on the multifaceted challenges faced by Black male students—challenges that are deeply rooted in historical and systemic discrimination yet are confronted daily within the academic arena. Kincade's narrative reminds us of the

profound discomfort and alienation that arise from a curriculum and discourse that often marginalizes and misunderstands the complexity of Black identity and experiences. As Kincade articulates, this discomfort is not simply a matter of personal sensitivity but a reflection of the broader systemic failures to engage with the historical and contemporary realities of race in a critical and empathetic manner.

Reflecting on these ideas and participants' narratives underscores the critical need for PWIs to consider Black male students' needs. The integration of these perspectives highlights the potential for educational institutions to act as catalysts for social change, challenging and dismantling the legacy of racial discrimination and inequality. It calls for reimagining academic spaces where diverse experiences and identities are recognized and celebrated as a cornerstone of learning and development. In this vision, the experiences of Black male students such as Kincade are not outliers but integral to the fabric of educational discourse, contributing to a more nuanced, empathetic, and comprehensive understanding of the societal structures that shape humans' lives. Accordingly, it is imperative to create educational environments that truly reflect the diversity of human experience, grounded in the belief that such environments enrich the individuals who navigate them and the broader society they will go on to shape.

Dee's sentiment, "Seeing people who look like me in positions of power... it changes how you see what's possible for yourself," echoes the essential role of representation and mentorship in fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment. Similarly, Kincade's reflection on the lack of Black professors and faculty outside of certain academic spaces further emphasizes the necessity of systemic change to enhance the support structures for African American students.

Transitioning to Stone's experience offers a poignant perspective on the academic challenges faced by African American students due to disparities in educational preparation:

> Yeah, I'm definitely like, in college, I have the subjects I've been struggling in is usually the math and writing part, the math and reading subjects, because I was good in math back in, back in high school, and middle school as well. But when I went to college, when I came to college, it's, I found it, I found myself struggling because a lot of the courses that that you know, you need to take to prepare yourself for these higher-level math courses. They didn't offer it in my high school. And, and, um, yeah, I found it like, the subject matter really had to work a lot harder. Then so many other students who are experienced with the subjects. Like, for example, like some high schools have precalculus to prepare you for calculus in college. And I unfortunately didn't get that. But I have to work twice as hard to understand the subject. And some of the writing courses have been a little challenging because they, expect a lot from you, you feel like you've met the requirements. And you feel like you've met the requirements, but one bad grade comes, you feel like, you don't get the grade that you deserve. So, you feel like you've left something out or, you know, something was missing. But it didn't come clear when you were doing the assignment. So definitely, I'm having trouble in those two subjects in college so far.

Stone's narrative encapsulates the broader challenges of educational inequities and the resilience required to overcome them. His experience underscores the critical need for systemic reforms to address disparities in educational preparation and to provide robust support mechanisms for African American students. His determination to persevere despite these challenges highlights the resilience and strength of students navigating the complexities of higher education.

Apart from the discussions surrounding the multifaceted challenges and systemic injustices faced by African American men within PWIs, an equally compelling narrative that resonates across the spectrum of academic experience is mentorship and othermothering. Stone's candid reflection on his academic struggles offers a poignant entry point into a broader discourse that transcends individual experiences to touch upon universal themes of academic struggles, educational disparities, perceived inequities, resilience, and persistence. Stone's articulation of the challenges he encounters in navigating the rigorous demands of higher education, particularly

in subjects such as math and writing, mirrors his journey and is a window into the systemic

obstacles and inequities that pervade the educational systems.

While deeply personal, this narrative echo the experiences of countless students who

confront the daunting transition from high school to college, facing academic hurdles often

exacerbated by disparities in educational preparation and access. Stone's struggle provides an

invitation to delve deeper into the structural and institutional barriers contributing to educational

inequities. Moreover, his determination to persevere despite these challenges embodies an

admirable resilience and is indicative of a broader trend among students who, against all odds,

strive to overcome academic obstacles in pursuit of their educational goals.

Stone's experiences invite a consideration of the interconnectedness of academic

struggles with broader themes of educational disparities and perceived inequities. This

discussion, grounded in the lived experiences of students such as Stone, offers a vital perspective

on the resilience and persistence required to navigate the complex landscape of higher education.

It prompts an exploration of the individual determinants of academic success and the systemic

reforms needed to address the underlying causes of educational disparities. These measures can

foster an academic environment that recognizes and actively addresses the challenges faced by

students from diverse backgrounds, ensuring that every student can thrive and succeed.

Academic Struggles

Building upon the foundational narratives of academic struggle and systemic barriers

articulated through African American men's experiences in PWIs, Stone's reflections serve as a

profound exemplar of the broader academic challenges faced by these students. This transition

mirrors the complex interplay between individual perseverance and systemic inequities, a

dynamic deeply rooted in the educational landscape of America. Drawing upon the seminal

works of Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Lareau (2000b), I contextualize Stone's academic

journey within a broader socio-economic framework that underscores the educational disparities

faced by African American men transitioning to college.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that the education system serves to reproduce social class

structures. This process can severely impact students such as Stone, whose high schools did not

offer critical preparatory courses such as precalculus. This systemic flaw not only reflects the

socio-economic stratification inherent in the educational system but also highlights the specific

academic hurdles that disproportionately affect students from marginalized communities

navigating higher education. Stone's struggle with math and writing in college epitomizes the

broader issue of educational preparation inextricably linked to one's socio-economic status,

thereby perpetuating a cycle of academic disparity.

Further, Lareau's (2000b) concept of "concerted cultivation" versus "the accomplishment

of natural growth" provides a nuanced understanding of the familial and socio-economic factors

that shape educational outcomes. Lareau suggests that differences in parenting styles, often

correlated with social class, significantly influence children's academic and extracurricular

preparation for college. This disparity in preparation can lead to the kinds of academic struggles

Stone describes. Students from backgrounds characterized by "the accomplishment of natural

growth" may find themselves less prepared for the expectations of college-level coursework

compared to their peers who benefited from "concerted cultivation."

The interwoven themes of Bowles and Gintis's critique of the education system's role in

reproducing social inequalities and Lareau's analysis of the impact of familial and socio-

economic background on educational preparation offer a compelling framework for

understanding the academic struggles of African American men in PWIs. Stone's narrative is not

an isolated incident but a reflection of the systemic inequities that pervade the educational system, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms that address these disparities at their root.

Experiences such as Stone's serve as a reminder of the resilience and persistence required to overcome these systemic barriers. The academic journeys of African American men in PWIs, characterized by challenges such as those faced by Stone, underscore the critical need for institutional support systems that recognize and address the unique obstacles posed by educational disparities and socio-economic inequities. Engaging with these themes invites a broader discussion on the systemic reforms necessary to ensure that all students, regardless of their socio-economic background, can succeed in higher education. This commitment to equity and inclusion is essential for dismantling the barriers to academic success and fostering an environment where every student can thrive.

Educational Disparities

Stone's academic troubles within the structure of PWIs echo the deeper, systemic disparities described by Kozol (2012) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1970). Kozol's exploration into the profound disparities between affluent and impoverished school districts provides a stark backdrop against which Stone's experiences unfold, illustrating the tangible consequences of an education system fractured by socio-economic status. This context explains the foundational reasons for the absence of essential preparatory courses, such as precalculus, in Stone's high school, situating his struggles within a broader landscape of educational inequality that privileges certain demographics while systematically disadvantaging others, particularly African American students in PWIs.

Similarly, Bourdieu and Passeron's concept of cultural capital extends this discussion by elucidating the mechanisms through which education systems perpetuate social inequalities. Their theory posits that acquiring cultural capital, including knowledge, skills, and educational credentials, is crucial for navigating the social structures within educational institutions. However, the uneven distribution of cultural capital, often aligned with socio-economic status, exacerbates educational disparities, placing students such as Stone at a systemic disadvantage. The absence of courses such as precalculus in Stone's high school curriculum not only reflects a gap in educational resources but also signifies a deeper issue of inequitable access to the cultural capital necessary for success in higher education.

The interplay between Kozol's detailed account of educational resource disparities and Bourdieu and Passeron's theoretical framework of cultural capital offers a comprehensive understanding of the systemic barriers that African American men, such as Stone, encounter in their academic journeys from enrollment to graduation in PWIs. These scholarly insights illuminate the structural underpinnings of Stone's academic struggles, underscoring the need for systemic reforms that address educational inequality's material and cultural dimensions.

Considering the cumulative impact of these disparities, it becomes imperative to advocate for institutional support systems within PWIs that are attuned to the specific challenges faced by students emerging from backgrounds marked by reduced access to essential educational resources and cultural capital. Such an approach requires a commitment to equity and inclusion that transcends superficial acknowledgments of diversity, aiming instead to dismantle the entrenched barriers to academic success. Through this lens, the academic journey of African American men in PWIs, exemplified by Stone's narrative, becomes a call to action for

educational institutions to recognize and actively rectify the deep-seated inequities that hinder the full realization of their students' potential.

Perceived Inequities

The narrative of Stone's academic endeavors within the confines of PWIs not only unveils the stark realities of educational disparities but also segues into a critical examination of perceived inequities in the grading system, echoing the systemic biases highlighted by Bonilla-Silva (2014). Bonilla-Silva's discourse on color-blind racism illuminates how systemic inequalities and biases subtly permeate subjective areas such as grading, potentially exacerbating the challenges faced by African American students such as Stone. The color-blind racism phenomenon, where the White majority masks racial inequalities under the guise of neutrality, may very well contribute to the grading discrepancies and perceived unfairness highlighted in Stone's experiences. Such systemic biases against African American students in academic assessments underscore the necessity of addressing not just the visible but also the invisible barriers that impede their academic progress.

Further, Ladson-Billings's (2006) education debt concept shifts the paradigm from the conventional discourse on the achievement gap to a more holistic understanding of the cumulative historical, economic, and political debts owed to communities of color. This reframing moves the conversation beyond individual student deficits to consider the broader, systemic obligations that have been neglected. Ladson-Billings's perspective provides a foundational backdrop to Stone's struggle, suggesting that the challenges he and other African American students face in PWIs are not merely personal inadequacies but are indicative of a broader systemic failure to address the education debt.

Interweaving the insights of Bonilla-Silva and Ladson-Billings with Stone's lived experiences demonstrates a complex web of systemic barriers that African American men navigate in their pursuit of higher education. These barriers are not limited to the preparatory discrepancies and cultural capital deficits elucidated by Kozol, Bourdieu, and Passeron but extend into the very mechanisms of assessment and recognition of academic achievements within PWIs. This compounded narrative underscores a critical need for educational institutions to acknowledge and actively dismantle the multifaceted barriers to success for African American men. Engaging with and addressing the nuanced challenges highlighted by the concept of color-blind racism and education debt is imperative for creating an academic environment where equity and inclusion are not merely aspirational but are actualized in every facet of the educational experience, ensuring that African American men are not only surviving but thriving in their academic journeys.

One such web is unveiled by integrating Ladson-Billings's education debt theory into the discussion of socio-economic disparities, thus enriching understanding of the interconnectedness between race, socioeconomics, and educational outcomes. The education debt concept (Ladson-Billings, 2006) shifts the discourse from individual academic deficiencies to a broader analysis of the cumulative deficits imposed on communities of color due to historical, economic, and political injustices. This theoretical framework directly connects to the socio-economic disparities highlighted by Kozol, Bourdieu, and Passeron by underscoring the systemic nature of educational inequalities that African American students face in PWIs. Ladson-Billings's perspective highlights how these disparities are not coincidental but result from a longstanding debt owed to these communities, thereby situating educational inequalities within the larger context of social and cultural reproduction.

The emphasis on the connection between race and socioeconomics within the framework of education debt makes it critical to consider how racial disparities cannot be disentangled from socio-economic conditions. It posits that the educational challenges faced by African American students such as Stone are symptomatic of broader structural inequities that have been perpetuated and exacerbated by a failure to address this debt. This analysis bridges the gap between the socio-economic stratification detailed by Bowles and Gintis and the cultural capital disparities outlined by Bourdieu and Passeron. These theories demonstrate how society intertwines race and socioeconomics to perpetuate educational inequities.

Furthermore, the conversation on education debt and socio-economic disparities brings to the forefront the role of social and cultural reproduction in maintaining these inequities. It suggests that the education system, through its failure to rectify these debts, continues to reproduce social class structures and racial inequalities, thereby hindering the academic and socio-economic mobility of African American students in PWIs. Placing Ladson-Billings's scholarship together with the socio-economic disparities discussed highlights the critical need for systemic reforms that address educational inequality's material and cultural dimensions. This approach acknowledges the multi-layered challenges faced by African American students and calls for a concerted effort to dismantle the structural barriers that perpetuate these disparities, ensuring a more equitable educational landscape for all students.

Resilience and Persistence

Stone's reflections not only encapsulate his academic challenges within PWIs but also embody the broader intellectual discourse on resilience, persistence, and the systemic barriers African American men face in higher education. Carol Dweck's (2007) illuminates the critical role of a growth mindset in overcoming educational obstacles. Dweck's emphasis on resilience

and persistence as pivotal components of academic success resonates with Stone's determined effort to navigate the rigorous demands of higher education despite the absence of crucial preparatory coursework in his high school. This connection between Stone's experiences and Dweck's research highlights the importance of fostering a growth mindset among students who face systemic challenges, suggesting that resilience can be a powerful tool in counteracting educational disparities.

Similarly, Prudence L. Carter's (2005) explores how students of color navigate the dual pressures of racial and academic identities, often employing resilience in the face of systemic educational hurdles. Carter's exploration aligns with Stone's persistence and underscores the multifaceted nature of the challenges African American students encounter in PWI. This scholarship enriches understanding of Stone's narrative, placing his academic struggles and perseverance within broader discussions about racial identity, socio-economic disparities, and the institutional mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder educational success for students of color.

Moreover, integrating Gloria Ladson-Billings's concept of education debt with the insights provided by Dweck and Carter offers a nuanced perspective on the socio-economic and racial dynamics at play in the academic journeys of African American men in PWIs. Ladson-Billings (2006) shifts the focus from individual deficiencies to the historical, economic, and political debts that have systematically disadvantaged communities of color, offering a critical lens through which to view the educational disparities embodied by Stone's experiences. This theoretical framework deepens the analysis of Stone's struggles and situates them within a broader narrative of systemic inequality and the need for educational reform.

The scholarly conversation around resilience, persistence, and systemic barriers— enriched by the works of Dweck, Carter, and Ladson-Billings—provides a comprehensive

backdrop with which to understand Stone's academic endeavors and challenges. These interconnected themes underscore the complex web of factors that African American men navigate as they pursue higher education within PWIs. By drawing parallels between Stone's experiences and the broader intellectual debates framed by these scholars, one can better appreciate the intricate relationship between individual agency, socio-economic conditions, racial identity, and the structural inequalities that shape the educational landscapes of PWIs. This analysis highlights the personal resilience and persistence of students such as Stone and calls for concerted efforts to address the systemic inequities that impede African American men's academic success in higher education settings.

Summary

As this chapter concludes, it is important to reflect on the journey through the systemic barriers, cultural complexities, and academic challenges faced by African American men in PWIs, as epitomized by the experiences of Stone. His narrative, rich with the themes of academic struggle, resilience in the face of educational disparities, and the quest for equity, is a poignant microcosm of the broader challenges confronting African American students in higher education. The scholarly insights of Dweck, Carter, and Ladson-Billings, when interwoven with Stone's lived experience, explain the multifaceted nature of these challenges—ranging from the immediate hurdles of academic preparation to the deeper, systemic issues of socio-economic inequity and cultural capital disparities.

This connection underscores the personal determination and resilience of students such as Stone and highlights the critical need for systemic change within educational institutions. The discussion around the concept of education debt and the impact of socio-economic disparities on educational outcomes offers a compelling framework to understand the persistence of racial

inequities in higher education. It provides a reminder that the struggles faced by African American men in PWIs are not isolated incidents but are emblematic of a larger systemic failure to address the cumulative effects of historical injustice and socio-economic marginalization.

In moving forward, it is imperative that educational institutions, policymakers, and society at large recognize and actively address the complex web of factors hindering African American students' academic success. This process involves dismantling the visible barriers of inadequate preparatory education and cultural capital deficits and confronting the more insidious forms of bias and inequity that pervade grading and assessment practices. By fostering an academic environment that truly values diversity, equity, and inclusion, policymakers and powerholders can begin to repay the education debt owed to communities of color and create a landscape where every student can thrive.

African American men's journeys through the academic and personal challenges at PWIs call for a recommitment to the principles of equity and justice in education. It is imperative to carry forward the lessons learned from Stone's story and the scholarly discourse that frames it, reaffirming a collective responsibility to foster an educational system that truly reflects the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

Elijah Anderson's (2015) idea of White spaces serves as a lens with which to analyze the experiences of self-identified African American men entering majority-White colleges and universities. These predominantly White spaces resonate more deeply with the undertones of racial assumptions, expectations, and often unwritten codes of conduct. For an African American male student, the beginning of their college journey might involve deciphering these undertones. Understanding if these students are adequately prepared goes beyond academic readiness; it delves into their preparedness to navigate and engage with spaces that might signal unwelcomeness or alienation. The nuances of their everyday experiences—from group discussions, club participation, or even informal social interactions—involve ongoing negotiations with these "white spaces."

Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) theory on cultural capital provides theoretical backing to the White spaces' phenomenon. For many African American men, their cultural capital— stemming from upbringing, community, and personal experiences—might differ from what majority-White institutions value or recognize. A primary concern is whether these students see themselves as possessors of valuable cultural capital when they step into college. This perception plays a pivotal role in how they engage with their institution. If they feel that their cultural capital is undervalued or overlooked, it could potentially lead to feelings of inadequacy or

alienation. Conversely, recognizing and valuing diverse forms of cultural capital can foster a sense of belonging and encourage active engagement.

Given the backdrop of White spaces and cultural capital, self-identified African American men's perceptions of their interactions with majority-White institutions become paramount. Are these institutions merely passive backdrops to their college experience? Or do they actively engage, challenge, or even, at times, alienate them? The crux of this research question lies in understanding the nature of this two-way interaction. While the students navigate the institutional landscape, the institutions send back signals through their policies, faculty interactions, and peer engagements, either affirming or questioning these students' identities. As such, their preparedness is not just about their readiness to engage with the institution but also about how equipped they are to interpret, respond to, and potentially challenge the institution's responses.

However, experiences within White spaces are not monolithic. Two students with similar backgrounds might perceive and interact with their institution differently. While one might see challenges as insurmountable barriers, another might view them as opportunities for personal growth and resilience. Their reactions to the majority-White environment, influenced by personal experiences and levels of resilience, can determine their academic trajectories. An essential aspect of this research is the exploration of these diverse reactions. What factors contribute to resilience? How do past experiences shape current perceptions? How can institutions leverage this understanding to create more inclusive environments?

In bridging the gap between Anderson's (2015) concept of White spaces and Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) theory of cultural capital, the research emphasizes the pressing need for introspection within majority-White institutions. The goal is not to passively ensure diversity but

to actively engage with diverse identities, understand them, and create spaces that celebrate rather than merely tolerate them. Self-identified African American men's collegiate success hinges on this active engagement, when they and their institutions collaboratively shape their college experience.

Drawing from the rich qualitative data provided by the interviews with self-identified African American men, Anderson's notion of the White space can be conceptually grounded within the college experiences of these students at PWIs. Kincade's interview speaks to feeling unwelcome. He stated, "you know, you're constantly being watched or, or you're just not welcome," capturing the essence of navigating spaces that are not only racially but culturally coded as "White." These experiences manifest in a social geography that can feel alienating to Black students, often leading to a heightened sense of visibility and isolation within their educational environments.

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital becomes evident when students describe the academic transition and the recognition of institutional resources. Cultural capital, in the form of educational competencies and social assets, is highlighted when Chachi from Mountainview University emphasizes the significance of "utilizing their resources." In this case, Chachi discussed the significance of knowing when and where to look for resources and support as he transitioned to campus life. This individual reflects on the need to grasp and use available opportunities, aligning with Bourdieu's notion that possessing cultural capital is crucial for success within certain social spaces.

Likewise, Pedersen's (1995) five stages of shock could ostensibly apply to the experiences of Black students at PWIs, as suggested in the experiences of these young men. For instance, the surprise and adjustment to college life described in Chachi's interview, when he

notes the unexpected smallness of the campus, parallels the initial "honeymoon" and subsequent "negotiation" phases of culture shock. However, this linear model of cultural adjustment may not fully encapsulate the complexities these students face.

Du Bois' (1903) concept of double consciousness provides a more accurate counterpoint to the idea of culture shock, particularly for African American students in predominantly White settings. The sense of "twoness" that Du Bois describes captures a more persistent and encompassing cognitive dissonance than culture shock as experienced by Black men at PWIs. For example, Stone's statement, "You have to be two people," echoes Du Bois' theory, revealing an ongoing negotiation of identity that African American students must manage, which is not a temporary stage but a continuous aspect of their collegiate experience. These students must endure the internal and external pressure to conform to White norms as they negotiate their college experiences.

This enduring sense of double consciousness challenges the temporality suggested by Pedersen's (1995) five stages of culture shock. For African American men at PWIs, the concept of culture shock falls short, as it does not account for the racial dynamics deeply embedded in their everyday experiences. The culture shock model cannot fully explain the lived realities of Black students, who must perpetually navigate the duality of their racial and academic identities. This inability to explain Black students' realities is evidenced in Jowuan's reflection on the need to "act a certain way … to be accepted" or when Kincade mentioned that other students "look at you."

The predominantly White campuses can often represent White spaces where African American men may grapple with a sense of alienation and invisibility, as articulated by Anderson. The shared experiences across multiple participant interviews reflect the experiences

shared across the interviews. For instance, one participant from Dee mentioned, "You walk into a classroom … you're like one of the only Black faces." This acute awareness of racial composition within educational spaces mirrors the sense of "not belonging" that Black students may feel in PWIs, aligning with Anderson's depiction of White spaces as areas where Black presence is an anomaly.

This racial incongruity can be tied to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, where the norms, values, and behaviors rewarded in a particular social space—often those belonging to the dominant White culture—are internalized and expected of all students, regardless of their background. The feeling of needing to adopt these norms to succeed academically can resonate with the study by Lewis (2003), which explores the negotiation of racial identities within the educational system. The interviewee Chachi acknowledged a comparative self-assessment within the academic sphere, saying, "There is some stuff out where, you know, I tend to compare myself to other people." This internal comparison may also touch on Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) concept of "acting White," where academic achievement can be perceived as conforming to White cultural norms, thus impacting how Black students navigate their educational journeys.

Pedersen's (1995) five stages of culture shock suggests a temporary adjustment period to new cultural settings. However, applying this to African American experiences in PWIs may not capture the enduring racial dynamics at play. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness provides a more nuanced understanding. The feeling of needing to maintain dual identities to operate within White spaces is a continuous challenge rather than a transient state. Stone powerfully encapsulates this with the statement, "You have to be two people." This ongoing struggle of African American men to reconcile their racial identity with the pressures of assimilation in

White spaces is a refutation of the temporariness implied by culture shock, resonating with Du

Bois' assertion of a persistent, internal conflict.

The lived experiences of Black students on predominantly White campuses echo the

findings of DeLuca and Rosenblatt (2010), where better opportunities, like those presumed to

exist in PWIs, still come with the challenge of cultural adaptation and acceptance. As Burdick-

Will et al. (2011) have shown, environmental changes, such as moving to neighborhoods with

better resources (analogous to moving to PWIs), do not automatically translate to success

without considering the cultural and social implications of such transitions. Nunn (2014)

explored these themes further by positing that the definition of student success is deeply

entrenched within the school culture, which can be difficult to navigate for those who do not

naturally fit the cultural expectations of that environment.

Furthermore, the experiences of African American men at PWIs can be better understood

through a complex interplay of theories. Anderson's White space is palpable in their daily

experiences, Bourdieu's cultural capital is necessary for their academic navigation, and Du Bois'

double consciousness offers a poignant refutation to Pedersen's concept of culture shock. These

theoretical frameworks, alongside the referenced scholarly works, provide a multidimensional

understanding of the cultural and racial dynamics that shape the academic experiences of African

American men at PWIs.

Navigating the White space of PWIs requires African American men to employ various

strategies, as Anderson's concept outlines the sense of otherness that these spaces can impose.

African American students at PWIs often adapt to fit in or stand out. In his interview, Joseph

illustrated this adaptation through appearance, saying, "I make sure that when I step out … I'm

dressed a certain way so I'm not perceived as a threat." This concern with presentation suggests

an alignment with Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness, where self-presentation balances one's identity with external perceptions. This strategy is not just a matter of fitting in but a necessary navigation to avoid confrontations, resonating with the discussions in Pattillo's (2008) work on race and class in urban settings.

The complexities of navigating these spaces are compounded by the need to handle microaggressions and stereotypes. Kalil found the coping mechanism of seeking support: "I joined the Black Student Union … I found my community there." This idea reflects Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, where the social networks that students create act as resources to gain the necessary support to thrive in the PWI environment. Such communities serve as spaces of shared cultural capital, helping buffer against the culture shock Pedersen outlines. Yet, in this context, the shock is not temporary but part of a continuous experience, as Dumais (2002) notes in the interplay of cultural capital with gender and success.

Additionally, students actively decide how to navigate the tension between standing out and fitting in. Henry from Deer River University asserted, "I try to excel academically … to break the stereotype." This statement represents a conscious effort to challenge prevailing norms and confront racial inequalities in educational achievement, aligning with Tyson's (2011) analysis of Black students navigating post-*Brown v. Board* integration. It also opposes the concept of culture shock by suggesting a sustained effort to engage with and disrupt the norms of the PWI.

The issue of coping with overt racism also surfaces, requiring a deep level of resilience. For example, another participant, Kincade stated, "It's like you gotta be tough … you can't let it show that it's affecting you." This stoicism is a survival mechanism, a psychological armor against the continuous onslaught of racism, further demonstrating the inadequacy of the culture

shock model, which implies a temporary discomfort rather than an ongoing struggle, as described in Sharkey's (2013) examination of enduring racial inequality.

African American men must navigate the social consequences of their neighborhoods and how these intersect with their experiences at PWIs, as explored by Jencks and Mayer (1990). This concept is exemplified in Jowuan's interview, where he notes, "Coming from where I come from … it's a different world here." The juxtaposition of these worlds requires navigation that goes beyond Pedersen's stages, incorporating a more comprehensive understanding, as suggested by Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, where one's identity is constantly managed concerning the prevailing racial attitudes.

In essence, the navigation of White spaces by African American men at PWIs involves a complex interplay of self-presentation, seeking support, excelling despite stereotypes, and building resilience against racism. These experiences reflect the continuous negotiation of identity and cultural capital within the context of racial inequality, offering a more nuanced understanding than the concept of culture shock can provide. Through this lens, the theoretical frameworks of Anderson, Bourdieu, and Du Bois, along with the insights from the referenced scholarship, paint a comprehensive picture of these students' strategies and coping mechanisms.

The need to prove oneself within Anderson's conceptualization of the White space can be a significant burden for African American students at PWIs. Their capabilities and presence are often viewed with skepticism, prompting constant self-assertion. Stone captures this sentiment in his interview, stating, "It's like I'm constantly under a microscope like they don't expect me to be on the same level academically." Fanon (1965) discusses this idea, where the oppressed must constantly demonstrate their humanity and equality in a system designed to doubt them. Classroom experiences can particularly underscore these feelings. Dee recounted, "Whenever

we're discussing anything related to race, all eyes are on me like I'm the spokesperson for all Black people." This undue pressure reflects the "burden of representation" that Tyson dissects in *Integration Interrupted*, where Black students at PWIs not only have to prove their worth but also bear the weight of collective racial expectations.

Interactions with campus security also underline this perpetual state of proving oneself. Jowuan Pierce evidenced the idea of proving oneself when he shared, "There've been times when I've been stopped by security for no reason, while my White friends walked on by." This experience of being racially profiled is an illustration of the "White racial frame" that Feagin (2009) describes, where White people view blackness with suspicion. Social events are not immune to this dynamic either. As Kincade highlights, "At parties, I feel like I'm seen not as a fellow student but as an outsider." These moments of social othering tie into DeLuca and Rosenblatt's discussions on neighborhood effects and schooling opportunities, as the cultural capital gained from one's neighborhood can significantly influence how one is perceived in new environments. Kincade's sentiments and the existing literature underline how White culture becomes pervasive at PWIs. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is essential here, as these students' cultural resources are often devalued in the PWI context, further heightening the need to prove themselves. Dumais (2002) articulated how habitus—the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions one possesses due to their life experiences—can impact school success. For these students, habitus shapes their resilience in the face of constant scrutiny.

Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness is a poignant refutation of the concept of culture shock in this scenario. These young men are not merely experiencing temporary disorientation as described in Pedersen's (1995) five stages of culture shock; they are engaged in an ongoing process of reconciling their identity with the dominant cultural narratives of PWIs. In

his interview, Chachi describes it as "a daily challenge, balancing who I am with who they think I should be." This ongoing negotiation reflects the ideas in Lucas's *Theorizing Discrimination in an Era of Contested Prejudice* and Pager and Shepherd's *The Sociology of Discrimination*, where racial dynamics are complex and often covert. Furthermore, the scholarly work by Sharkey (2013), and Jencks and Mayer on the social consequences of growing up in a poor neighborhood also informs these experiences. The extant literature provides a backdrop to the students' encounters, suggesting that the effects of neighborhood disadvantage can follow students into the halls of higher education, requiring them to continually prove their place and counteract preconceived notions rooted in a broader societal context of inequality and discrimination.

African American men at PWIs often find themselves in positions where they not only navigate but also challenge cultural norms. These instances are not just acts of defiance but also assertions of presence and identity within spaces that have been historically exclusive. A compelling example comes from the conversation with Kalil, where he recalled an instance in a class, "I decided to speak up about the real urban experience instead of letting the textbook define it for everyone." Injecting authentic perspectives disrupts the monolithic narrative often found in academic settings, resonating with Bonilla-Silva's call to move towards a structural interpretation of race.

Establishing affinity groups is another significant way these students disrupt the racial norms on campus. Henry of Deer River University revealed, "We started a Black student alliance here … to make our voices heard and support each other." This initiative reflects Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) concept of "community forces," which posits that such communal entities act as buffers and sources of support against the pressures of assimilation. Directly challenging racial

stereotypes is another form of resistance. One student, Joseph, boldly stated, "When someone says something stereotypical, I don't let it slide. I question them, make them explain." Such confrontations are critical educational moments for all involved and align with the CRT espoused by Delgado and Stefancic (2012), where the norm is contested and dialogue is opened for deeper understanding. These students' actions can be viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's cultural capital as they leverage their knowledge, competencies, and social connections to challenge the status quo. As Dumais (2002) pointed out, the students' habitus informs their ability to navigate and sometimes transform the academic space. Their strategies reflect a conscious effort to assert their cultural capital within a system that often marginalizes it.

Again, Du Bois' (1903) theory of double consciousness provides a counter-narrative to Pedersen's (1995) five stages of culture shock in this context. Rather than experiencing culture shock as a transient adjustment period, these young men continually negotiate their identity within a space that implicitly questions their belonging. Chachi highlights this negotiation: "I'm always aware of being the 'other' in the room, but I'm also there to learn and educate." These instances of challenging norms are a testament to the resilience and agency of these students. Their actions disrupt the implicit racial norms on campus and carve out a space where their voices can be heard and their experiences acknowledged. These disruptions lay claim to their rightful place within the university, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of scholars such as Alba and Nee on assimilation and Blumer's sense of group position to assert their identity and reshape the narrative around race on campus. These students survive and thrive by challenging the prevailing racial inequalities, as described in the comprehensive scholarship of Tyson, Lewis, Carter, and Wacquant.

Navigating the White spaces of PWIs engenders a complex array of emotions for African American men, often heightening feelings of isolation and the sense of being perpetually under surveillance. Jowuan provided a visceral account: "You walk into a room, and it's like eyes are on you, waiting for you to represent your entire race." This omnipresent scrutiny elicits a psychological burden, a sentiment echoed in Blumer's foundational work. She articulates how race prejudice emerges from a sense of group position, where the majority group maintains a superior stance. The emotional impact of this dynamic is profound, as Dee suggested: "Sometimes, it's just exhausting … feeling like you're this spectacle that everyone is watching." Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital can help frame this fatigue, as these students constantly must negotiate the value of their cultural competencies in an environment that does not inherently affirm them.

Du Bois' theory of double consciousness refutes the notion that the experiences of these men can be adequately captured by Pedersen's (1995) five stages of culture shock. Kincade's conversation encapsulates this notion: "It's not just culture shock; it's life, man. It's always knowing you're not the norm." This ongoing consciousness of "twoness" is not a fleeting phase but a permanent state of being that precludes the temporary discomfort suggested by culture shock. Yet, amidst these challenges, moments of relief and authenticity emerge, as highlighted in Stone's interview. He stated, "Finding that group where I could just be me, laugh loudly, and not get 'the look' was like breathing for the first time." Such moments align with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) notion of the "burden of 'acting white,'" where the joy comes from escaping the pressure to conform to the majority's behavioral expectations.

Sociologically, this tension is indicative of a larger systemic issue, as described by Bonilla-Silva, where racism is not merely interpersonal but is entrenched in the structures of

society. Students responding to these structures, as in Chachi's case, "It's a daily struggle, balancing who you are with who they expect you to be," showcase the resilience required to navigate this landscape. The emotional and psychological toll of existing in a White space is, then, for African American men at PWIs, a constant negotiation of identity, cultural capital, and the right to authenticity. Leveraging the work of scholars such as Alba, Nee, and Carter, it becomes clear that these negotiations are imbued with the complexities of assimilation, differentiation, and the search for genuine community within the stratified terrain of higher education.

The self-identified African American male students at PWIs in my study have had to navigate the challenging terrain of White spaces, where their presence is often an exception and their actions disproportionately scrutinized. To combat this, participants speak about creating and seeking "counter-spaces" that offer refuge and a sense of community away from the microaggressions and structural barriers of their institutions. Kalil shared, "We made our own space in the student center, where we could just be. You know, take off that mask for a while." Creating a physical counter-space aligns with the notion of cultural capital, as these students carve out spaces that validate and celebrate their cultural assets and collective identity rather than having them devalued by the dominant culture.

In his discussion of creating social counter-spaces, Joseph stated, "We'd have these dinners with Black faculty … it was like a whole different world, like family." Such gatherings represent not just a physical but also an emotional and psychological sanctuary, countering further the concept of culture shock with intentional community-building. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness enables the understanding that the need for these counter-spaces arises from the exhausting duality of having to navigate the White-dominated environment while

retaining one's African American identity. Henry encapsulated this statement when he exclaimed, "I'm always code switching, man … but in those spaces, I could just speak and not think twice." Through the creation of counter-spaces, these students effectively challenge the marginalization posited by Delgado and Stefancic in CRT. As Jowuan puts it, "In those rooms, our voices and experiences mattered. We weren't just 'other' there."

Furthermore, aligning with Lewis and Carter's work, these counter-spaces are critical for survival and thriving, providing the necessary support to navigate the academic environment successfully. Stone stated, "Without that Black Student support office … I don't know if I'd have made it through." The participants describe the creation and utilization of counter-spaces as essential to their well-being and success at PWIs. These counter-spaces, often dismissed by the mainstream as unnecessary segregation, are, in fact, crucial for providing African American students with the cultural capital, community, and respite from the taxing performance of double consciousness required by their daily navigation of White spaces. They embody a powerful refutation of the notion of temporary culture shock and instead represent a permanent structural adaptation to the pervasive race prejudice (see Blumer 1958; Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Leaders of PWIs must employ comprehensive and multifaceted strategies to dismantle the fabric of White space within PWIs. As Chachi's interview articulated, "We need a curriculum that reflects all histories, not just the dominant narrative," suggesting that educational reform is essential. In alignment with this, PWIs can integrate a curriculum that is inclusive of Black histories and contributions, addressing the structural interpretation of racism (see Bonilla-Silva 2014; Du Bois' 1903). A curriculum that acknowledges and incorporates the richness of Black culture cultivates cultural capital among all students and challenges the status quo, often perpetuating a narrow, Eurocentric worldview.

On an administrative level, Kincade insisted on "policies that don't just look good on paper but actually make a difference in our daily experiences." This perspective speaks to the necessity of changing policies to actively support Black students rather than performative measures that offer no real change. It aligns with Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) work on the "burden of 'acting white,'" suggesting that policy reforms must consider the unique pressures faced by Black students in PWIs. Representation is equally critical, as Dee expressed, "Seeing people who look like me in positions of power … it changes how you see what's possible for yourself." To this end, PWIs must strive to increase the representation of Black individuals in faculty and administrative roles. Such representation not only provides role models for Black students but also infuses the institution with diverse perspectives, challenging Blumer's (1958) concept of race prejudice as a sense of group position.

Jowuan also stated, "We need more than a month or a week; awareness has to be a continuous effort." Continuous racial awareness programs for White students and faculty can help dismantle the ignorance that sustains White spaces. As Lewis's (2003) research suggests, awareness must permeate the schoolyard and beyond, impacting the color line in classrooms and communities. Furthermore, echoing Stone's words, "It's about understanding, not just knowledge. You gotta know me, not just about me." This statement emphasizes the importance of Pedersen's (1995) five stages of culture shock by promoting deep, empathetic engagement with different cultural backgrounds as a tool for combating prejudice. In implementing these suggestions, PWIs can progressively become spaces where Black students feel seen, heard, and validated—where leadership can recognize and leverage their cultural capital for success. Such transformation would signify a movement away from the alienation described by Du Bois (1903) toward a more inclusive educational environment. This approach is not a complete solution, but

it's a step toward the end of progress toward racial equality, as envisioned by Sharkey, Pattillo, and other scholars.

In concluding this investigation into the experiences of self-identified African American men entering predominantly White higher education institutions, it is critical to reflect on the complex interplay between individual agency and structural forces. Alba and Nee's (2009) discourse on assimilation underscores the pressures minority students may face to conform to mainstream cultural norms. Yet, our this reveals that the challenge is not simply about assimilation but navigating an educational terrain shaped by enduring legacies of White supremacy. As Bonilla-Silva (1997) suggests, racism has taken on more subtle, systemic forms, wherein African American men grapple not only with overt prejudices but also with institutional policies and practices that may not overtly discriminate but nonetheless perpetuate racial disparities. The narratives of these men, illuminated by their perceptions of interaction with their institutions, are not tales of shock but responses to a White-centric educational system that Du Bois (1903) and others have long critiqued for its exclusionary underpinnings.

These responses are informed by a profound understanding of the "burden of acting white," as described by Fordham and Ogbu (1986), wherein success in the academic realm can be seen as a betrayal of racial identity. This perception can lead to significant psychological conflict and impact educational engagement. However, Lewis (2003) and Carter (2005) provide a counter-narrative of resilience and "keeping it real," which points to the agency African American men can exert to affirm their racial identity while striving for academic success. This project has underscored the importance of recognizing African American male students' capabilities to navigate and negotiate their racial identities within the context of institutions that often fail to acknowledge the saliency of race. As Tyson (2011) argues, their success is

punctuated by the interruption of integration, wherein their presence in historically White spaces

is marked by continual resistance to structures that are not yet fully inclusive.

Examining these young men's experiences also invokes Sharkey's (2013) conception of

the enduring nature of racial inequality within urban environments, suggesting that educational

institutions can reflect the broader societal patterns of segregation and stratification. The

engagement of these students with their colleges reflects not only their preparedness but also

how the educational spaces have been structured—spaces that are often resistant to change and

slow to adapt to the needs of a diversifying student body. The findings echo Pattillo's (2008)

analysis of the politics of race and class in the city, extending into the microcosm of the college

environment, where political dynamics around race and class can deeply influence educational

outcomes.

Finally, this research underlines the urgent need for higher education institutions to

engage in a critical self-examination to dismantle the pervasive structures that uphold racial

disparities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). This call to action is not a new one—Fanon (1965)

articulated the necessity of revolutionary change to upend colonial structures, an analogy apt for

the transformation required in higher education today. If colleges and universities are to become

truly inclusive spaces that foster success for all students, they must move beyond surface-level

diversity initiatives to address the systemic inequalities that challenge the very students they aim

to serve. By understanding and supporting the lived experiences and identities of African

American men, policymakers and powerholders can begin to fulfill the promise of higher

education as a bastion of opportunity, equity, and justice.

Implications

To create more inclusive and supportive environments, institutions must recognize and

address the impact of social-emotional isolation and culture shock, as illuminated by the students' lived experiences and supported by the existing scholarly literature. This recognition should extend to acknowledging the diverse strengths, perspectives, and resilience that African-American men bring to their educational journeys. By doing so, institutions can empower these students to overcome challenges and leverage their unique experiences as assets in the learning process.

Implication 1: Double-Consciousness in Research Practices

The concept of double consciousness, as articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), provides a profound lens through which to examine the experiences of African American men in PWIs. This dual awareness of self as perceived through one's own eyes and through the eyes of a society that often harbors racial biases is central to understanding their journey. My research delves deeply into how these students navigate and resist the white-dominant cultural landscapes of PWIs. The implications for future research are vast and critically important for fostering environments that truly embrace and support diversity. This exploration will focus on understanding double consciousness in educational settings, institutional responses to this phenomenon, the role of faculty and curriculum, and the development of micro-communities within PWIs.

Firstly, expanding the conceptualization of double consciousness in educational contexts is imperative. Future research should explore how double consciousness manifests across different academic disciplines within PWIs. This includes investigating whether students in certain fields experience more intense pressures to conform to white-dominant norms and how this impacts their academic and social identities. Intersectionality should also be a focus, examining how racial identity interacts with other aspects of identity, such as sexuality,

socioeconomic status, or disability. Understanding these intersections can provide a more comprehensive view of the unique challenges faced by African American men in these settings.

Longitudinal qualitative studies that follow African American men throughout their college careers could offer invaluable insights. These studies would track how their experiences and identities evolve over time, providing a nuanced understanding of the persistent nature of double consciousness. Through in-depth interviews and participant observations, researchers could capture the lived realities of these students as they navigate different academic years and transitions, highlighting how their strategies and perceptions change.

Institutional responses to cultural shock and racial dynamics are another critical area for future research. There is a need to evaluate how PWIs structure their environments to respond to the cultural shocks experienced by African American men. This involves assessing the effectiveness of existing support systems, diversity initiatives, and mentoring programs. Research could compare these efforts across multiple institutions to identify best practices and areas needing improvement, ultimately helping institutions create more supportive environments.

Comparative research utilizing case study methodologies could be particularly effective. By examining multiple PWIs, researchers can assess the range and effectiveness of institutional strategies aimed at reducing cultural shock and supporting African American men. This comparative approach would help to identify which strategies are most effective in fostering an inclusive environment and which areas require significant improvement.

The role of faculty and curriculum in shaping student experiences is another area ripe for exploration. Investigating how faculty perpetuate or alleviate the challenges associated with double consciousness can provide critical insights. Studies could examine the impact of faculty diversity on student experiences and outcomes, as well as how inclusive curricula influence the

academic and social experiences of African American men. Understanding these dynamics can help institutions implement more effective policies and practices.

Quantitative studies analyzing the impact of having a diverse faculty on the academic success of African American men could be instrumental. Additionally, qualitative research into student perceptions of curricular inclusivity and its impact on their sense of belonging and identity negotiation could provide valuable insights. Such research would highlight the importance of representation and inclusivity in fostering a supportive academic environment.

The development and impact of micro-communities within PWIs is another crucial area for future research. Understanding how African American men create and utilize micro-communities to support their academic success and personal well-being can offer strategies for counteracting the effects of cultural shock and navigating racial and cultural identities. These networks are essential for promoting resilience and maintaining mental health.

Ethnographic research focusing on the formation, interaction, and role of these micro-communities could highlight how African American men build networks of support. Such studies could explore how these communities contribute to resilience and identity affirmation, providing insights into the strategies these students employ to thrive in challenging environments.

Moreover, understanding the long-term implications of double consciousness on students' academic persistence and mental health is crucial. Future research should examine how continuous negotiation of racial and cultural identities impacts their ability to persist in their educational journeys. This includes exploring the emotional and psychological costs of traversing white-dominant spaces and the support systems necessary to mitigate these impacts.

Researchers should also investigate the counternarratives to Eurocentric academic practices. This involves exploring alternative ways of being and learning that validate and affirm the cultural identities of African American men. Understanding how these students redefine success and academic engagement in ways that resonate with their cultural backgrounds can offer new perspectives on inclusivity in higher education.

John Jackson Jr.'s work at the University of Pennsylvania on reimagining dissertation defenses is an example of how academia can embrace diverse cultural practices. Future research should build on such innovative approaches, exploring how academic practices can be transformed to be more inclusive and reflective of diverse cultural identities. This would involve challenging traditional norms and creating spaces that recognize and celebrate the cultural contributions of all students.

Consequently, the complex emotional and cultural dynamics experienced by African American men in PWIs provide a substantial foundation for future research. Each proposed area not only deepens the academic inquiry into these experiences but also holds potential practical implications for policy and practice within higher education. By understanding and addressing the nuanced challenges faced by these students, educational institutions can move toward creating more supportive and inclusive environments that recognize and value the diversity of student experiences and identities. This research not only contributes to academic knowledge but also aligns with broader societal goals of equity and inclusion in higher education.

Implication 2: Building Agency: Leadership Development of Black Men

African American men at PWIs exhibit significant agency in reshaping their experiences and influencing university governance and policy reform through social action and organizing. Their involvement in governance, creation of supportive communities, and engagement in

activism highlight the importance of institutional support in fostering environments that not only acknowledge diversity but actively embrace and support it through comprehensive policy changes. This discussion explores the implications of these efforts for future research in sociology and the sociology of education.

Active participation in student governance allows African American men to play a crucial role in shaping institutional policies and practices. Their involvement often leads to significant changes that benefit the broader student body, such as the formal recognition of cultural events and the establishment of diversity initiatives. Research should investigate how this participation influences policy reform and institutional culture, potentially leading to more inclusive and equitable environments.

African American students often take the lead in organizing and advocating for policy changes that address their unique challenges. These efforts can result in the implementation of new policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, Henry's initiative to start a Black student alliance at Deer River University underscores the impact of student-led organizing on institutional reform. Future research should explore the long-term effects of such advocacy on institutional policies and the experiences of African American students.

Engagement in activism extends to challenging racial stereotypes and biases within academic settings. African American students often confront and educate their peers and faculty about racial issues, promoting a more inclusive and aware campus culture. For instance, Joseph's approach to addressing stereotypical comments highlights the proactive role these students play in fostering racial awareness and changing institutional norms. Studies should examine the effectiveness of these confrontations in altering campus climates and policies.

The presence of African American men in leadership positions within student governance and campus organizations is crucial for driving policy reform. These roles allow them to advocate for changes that directly impact their peers, such as improved support services and inclusive curricula. Research should investigate how leadership roles influence the development and implementation of policies that support African American students.

African American students' agency in creating supportive networks and communities is another vital aspect of their impact on university governance. These networks often serve as platforms for organizing and advocating for policy changes. For example, the formation of affinity groups and counter-spaces can lead to institutional recognition and support for these communities. Future studies should explore how these networks contribute to policy reform and the overall campus climate.

The practice of code-switching, where African American students adapt their behavior to fit into the dominant culture, often highlights the need for policy changes that promote inclusivity. This adaptation can lead to increased stress and feelings of inauthenticity. Research should investigate how policies that reduce the necessity for code-switching can improve the mental health and academic success of African American students.

Institutional support through comprehensive policy changes is essential for creating environments where African American students can thrive. Policies that genuinely promote diversity, equity, and inclusion can help dismantle structural barriers. Kincade's call for substantive policy measures that make a real difference in daily experiences highlights the need for meaningful reform. Future research should evaluate the impact of various policy initiatives on the experiences of African American students at PWIs.

The empowerment and resilience of African American men at PWIs also manifest in their efforts to advocate for inclusive curricula. Educational reforms that integrate diverse histories and perspectives can enhance cultural capital among all students and challenge the prevailing Eurocentric narratives. Research should explore the impact of inclusive curricula on student engagement and learning outcomes, as well as how these changes influence institutional policies.

The concept of "education debt," which emphasizes systemic obligations rather than individual deficits, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the challenges faced by African American students. This perspective can inform policy reforms that address the historical, economic, and political debts owed to communities of color. Future studies should examine how addressing the education debt can lead to more equitable outcomes and drive policy changes that support African American students.

African American students' active engagement in reshaping their academic environments underscores the need for continuous racial awareness programs for white students and faculty. These programs can help dismantle ignorance and promote a deeper understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby supporting policy reforms that foster inclusivity. Research should evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and their integration into the broader institutional culture.

Systemic biases in grading and assessment practices present significant challenges for African American men at PWIs. These biases often reinforce racial inequalities and necessitate policy changes to create fairer assessment practices. Investigating how these biases affect student outcomes and identifying strategies for equitable assessments can contribute to policy reforms that support academic success for African American students.

Finally, the intersection of racial identity and academic success presents a complex dynamic that requires nuanced policy interventions. The perception that academic achievement equates to "acting white" can create internal conflicts and affect student engagement. Future research should examine how policies that support cultural identity while promoting academic excellence can mitigate these conflicts and enhance the experiences of African American students.

Thus, the agency of African American men at PWIs in navigating institutional challenges through social action and organizing has profound implications for university governance and policy reform. Their efforts highlight the need for comprehensive research and targeted policy changes that promote inclusivity, equity, and support for diversity. By addressing these challenges through research and policy initiatives, institutions can create environments where African American students can thrive academically and personally, contributing to a more just and equitable society.

Implication 3: Establishing Microcommunites of Support

The formation of supportive networks and communities within PWIs is crucial for the well-being and success of African American students. These networks provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, mitigating feelings of isolation and alienation in predominantly white spaces. The importance of having Black faculty and mentors is emphasized, underscoring the need for systemic efforts to enhance diversity among faculty and staff. This discussion explores the implications of these supportive networks and communities for future research in sociology and the sociology of education.

African American students at PWIs often create and seek out counter-spaces, providing a refuge from the microaggressions and structural barriers they face daily. These spaces allow

students to express their cultural identities freely, offering emotional and psychological support. For instance, Kalil shared how his group in the student center provided a place to relax and "take off that mask for a while". Future research should explore the impact of these counter-spaces on students' mental health and academic performance, and how institutions can support their creation and sustainability.

The role of Black faculty and mentors is paramount in these supportive networks. Their presence can provide students with role models and advocates who understand their experiences and challenges. Joseph Harris emphasized the importance of dinners with Black faculty, describing them as an "emotional and psychological sanctuary". Studies should investigate the impact of Black faculty and mentors on student outcomes and how institutions can increase their representation in academic and administrative positions.

Engagement in cultural and identity-based organizations also plays a significant role in fostering a sense of belonging. Kalil's involvement with the Black Student Union was pivotal in his academic journey, providing a platform to share experiences and advocate for his needs. Research should examine the effectiveness of these organizations in supporting African American students and how institutions can encourage their development.

Digital support networks have become increasingly important, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. These networks offer a space for connection and support amidst physical isolation. Pierce's formation of a group chat for Black freshmen is a testament to the power of digital communities in fostering belonging. Future studies should explore the role of digital support networks in the academic and social integration of African American students at PWIs.

The concept of racial battle fatigue, as discussed by scholars like Smith et al. (2007 and 2011), highlights the psychological toll of navigating predominantly white spaces. This ongoing

struggle necessitates robust support systems. Stone's reliance on the Black Student support office underscores the need for institutional resources dedicated to African American students' well-being. Research should focus on the long-term benefits of such support offices and how they can be effectively integrated into institutional structures.

Representation in curricula is another critical aspect of fostering supportive academic environments. Inclusive curricula that reflect diverse histories and contributions can help validate students' cultural identities and promote a sense of belonging. Chachi's call for a curriculum that reflects all histories, not just the dominant narrative, highlights the importance of educational reform in this area. Studies should examine the impact of inclusive curricula on student engagement and learning outcomes.

Systemic efforts to enhance diversity among faculty and staff are essential for creating inclusive and supportive academic environments. Seeing individuals who share their racial and cultural backgrounds in positions of authority can inspire students and affirm their potential for success. Research should explore the impact of diverse faculty on student outcomes and how institutions can effectively recruit and retain faculty of color.

The formation of supportive communities often involves students taking on leadership roles within these organizations. Dee's involvement in a student-led initiative aimed at uniting students of color is an example of how African American students exercise agency to foster inclusive environments. Future research should explore the impact of student leadership on the development of supportive communities and institutional culture.

The challenges of navigating classroom dynamics in predominantly white spaces can be mitigated by supportive networks and mentors. These resources provide students with the confidence and support needed to participate fully in academic settings. Kincade's experience

highlights the importance of forming diverse friendships and finding allies within the academic community. Studies should investigate strategies for fostering inclusive classroom environments that support the participation of African American students.

The psychological toll of racial stereotyping and prejudice underscores the need for comprehensive support systems. These systems should address not only academic needs but also the emotional and mental health challenges faced by African American students. Research should focus on the development and implementation of such support systems within PWIs.

Finally, the need for increased representation of diverse voices and cultures within PWIs is a recurring theme. Such representation bridges the gap between the predominantly white culture of PWIs and the diverse backgrounds of African American students. This creates a more inclusive atmosphere and provides role models and mentors who can guide students through their academic journeys. Future studies should explore the impact of diverse representation on student outcomes and how institutions can effectively implement policies to enhance diversity.

Therefore, the formation of supportive networks and communities within PWIs is vital for the well-being and success of African American students. These networks provide crucial emotional support and a sense of belonging, mitigating feelings of isolation and alienation. The presence of Black faculty and mentors, engagement in cultural organizations, and systemic efforts to enhance diversity are all essential components of these supportive networks. Future research in sociology and the sociology of education should continue to explore these themes, focusing on the development of inclusive and supportive academic environments for African American students.

Implication 4: Diversifying the Pedagogy

The experiences detailed in the final chapters of the dissertation underscore the urgent

need for PWIs to undertake comprehensive, systemic reforms that address the nuanced challenges faced by African American men. A critical component of this reform is the development of new curricula that are inclusive and specifically designed to address the needs of Black male students. This discussion explores the implications of such curricular reforms for future research in sociology and the sociology of education.

Inclusive curricula that reflect diverse histories and contributions are essential for creating an educational environment where Black male students feel seen and valued. By integrating Black histories, cultures, and perspectives into the curriculum, institutions can help foster a sense of belonging and validation. Research should investigate how these curricular changes impact the academic engagement, performance, and sense of belonging among Black male students.

Curriculum development should also focus on the representation of Black male experiences and achievements in various fields. Highlighting the contributions of Black scholars, scientists, artists, and leaders can provide role models and inspire Black male students to pursue their academic and professional goals. Studies should examine the effects of such representation on students' motivation and academic outcomes.

The inclusion of courses that address systemic racism and social justice issues is another critical aspect of curricular reform. These courses can equip all students with the knowledge and skills to understand and challenge racial inequities. For Black male students, this can provide a framework for understanding their own experiences and empower them to become advocates for change. Future research should explore the impact of social justice education on students' activism and engagement in institutional governance.

Culturally responsive teaching practices are essential for delivering an inclusive curriculum. Educators must be trained to recognize and address the unique challenges faced by Black male students and to create classroom environments that are supportive and affirming. Research should investigate the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy in enhancing the academic experiences and outcomes of Black male students.

Developing interdisciplinary courses that connect African American studies with other disciplines can also enrich the curriculum. Such courses can provide a holistic understanding of the Black male experience and highlight the interconnectedness of various social, political, and economic issues. Studies should examine how interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum design affect students' critical thinking skills and overall academic development.

The inclusion of experiential learning opportunities that connect classroom learning with real-world applications is crucial. Internships, service-learning projects, and community-based research can provide Black male students with valuable skills and experiences that enhance their academic and professional trajectories. Future research should explore the impact of experiential learning on the career readiness and personal development of Black male students.

Curriculum development should also address the need for mental health and wellness education. Courses that focus on mental health awareness, stress management, and resilience can help Black male students navigate the psychological challenges associated with systemic racism and discrimination. Research should investigate the impact of mental health and wellness education on the well-being and academic success of Black male students.

Institutions should also consider developing mentorship programs as part of the curriculum. These programs can connect Black male students with faculty, alumni, and professionals who can provide guidance, support, and networking opportunities. Studies should

examine the effectiveness of mentorship programs in enhancing the academic and career outcomes of Black male students.

The integration of technology in curriculum design can also play a significant role in making education more accessible and engaging for Black male students. Online courses, digital resources, and virtual learning environments can provide flexible learning options and support diverse learning styles. Research should explore how the use of technology in education affects the academic engagement and performance of Black male students.

Developing a curriculum that includes critical self-reflection and dialogue about race and identity can help Black male students better understand their own experiences and those of others. Such courses can foster a supportive community where students feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics and sharing their perspectives. Future research should investigate the impact of reflective and dialogic pedagogy on the personal and academic growth of Black male students.

Finally, continuous assessment and feedback mechanisms should be integrated into the curriculum to ensure it meets the evolving needs of Black male students. Institutions should regularly collect and analyze data on student experiences and outcomes to identify areas for improvement. Studies should explore the effectiveness of feedback-driven curricular reforms in enhancing the educational experiences of Black male students.

In conclusion, the development of inclusive and responsive curricula is essential for addressing the needs of Black male students at PWIs. By integrating diverse perspectives, promoting social justice, and providing experiential learning opportunities, institutions can create educational environments where Black male students can thrive academically and personally. Future research in sociology and the sociology of education should continue to explore these

themes, focusing on the design and implementation of curricula that support the success and well-being of Black male students.

Summary

My dissertation engages the multifaceted experiences of self-identified African American men navigating PWIs. By analyzing these experiences through the lenses of Baldwin (1993), Du Bois (1903) and Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2003) theory of educational debt, we gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges these students face. These theoretical frameworks reveal the pervasive influence of systemic racism and the ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging that African American men must undertake in these educational settings. The insights from this study underscore the urgent need for PWIs to implement inclusive and supportive policies and curricula that recognize and celebrate the diverse backgrounds of all students.

Baldwin's poignant letter addresses the harsh realities of racial prejudice and the struggle for dignity and self-worth in a society that often devalues Black lives. His argument sheds light on the emotional and psychological challenges African American men encounter in PWIs, where their presence is frequently questioned, and their identities scrutinized. Baldwin's insights emphasize the necessity for institutions to foster environments where these students feel genuinely valued and understood.

Du Bois' concept of double consciousness further explores the duality experienced by African American men, who must navigate their identities within a predominantly White cultural landscape while maintaining their authentic selves. This continuous negotiation is not merely an adjustment phase but a persistent state that influences their academic and social experiences.

Recognizing this duality is crucial for institutions aiming to support African American students effectively.

Ladson-Billings' theory of educational debt highlights the cumulative disadvantages that African American students face due to historical and systemic inequities in education. This concept shifts the focus from individual shortcomings to the broader societal and institutional responsibilities in addressing these disparities. Understanding educational debt is essential for developing policies and practices that promote equity and inclusivity in higher education.

The research findings highlight several critical areas for future exploration. One key implication is the need to further examine the concept of double consciousness within educational settings, particularly how it impacts African American students across various academic disciplines and intersectional identities. Longitudinal qualitative studies tracking students' experiences over time can provide a deeper understanding of their evolving strategies and perceptions. Additionally, the role of faculty and curricula in shaping student experiences warrants further investigation, focusing on how inclusive teaching practices and diverse representation can enhance the academic and social outcomes of African American men.

Another significant area for future research is the impact of institutional policies on the well-being and success of African American students. Evaluating the effectiveness of support systems, diversity initiatives, and mentoring programs across multiple institutions can help identify best practices and areas needing improvement. Furthermore, the development and impact of supportive micro-communities within PWIs should be explored, with a focus on how these networks contribute to resilience and academic success.

Curriculum development is also crucial for creating inclusive educational environments. Research should investigate the effects of integrating diverse histories and perspectives,

culturally responsive teaching practices, interdisciplinary courses, and experiential learning opportunities on student engagement and outcomes. Additionally, the inclusion of mental health and wellness education, mentorship programs, and the use of technology in curriculum design are vital areas for future exploration.

In closing, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the students who participated in this study. Their willingness to share their experiences and insights has been invaluable in making this research possible. Their narratives not only highlight the challenges faced by African American men at PWIs but also showcase their resilience, agency, and determination to succeed despite systemic barriers. This dissertation is a testament to their strength and a call to action for educational institutions to create more equitable and inclusive environments where all students can thrive. Thank you for your contributions and for being a crucial part of this important work.

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VITA

As a dedicated scholar-practitioner, my journey in academia and beyond has been driven by a steadfast commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. I began my academic pursuit with a BA in English and Communications from Denison University, followed by an MA in Sociology from Roosevelt University. My scholarly journey culminates with the imminent completion of my PhD in Sociology from Loyola University, where my dissertation examines the impact of institutional dynamics on African American attrition in higher education.

Throughout my career, I have served in various capacities that intertwine my academic interests with practical applications in promoting equity for historically marginalized communities. My roles have spanned across student services, advising, mentorship, teaching, research, and community outreach, each reinforcing my dedication to fostering inclusive environments. At North Park University, I led efforts to support first-generation and underrepresented students, developing strategic initiatives to enhance student success and retention.

My tenure at Loyola University as Diversity Coordinator allowed me to spearhead diversity training and inclusive programming, laying the groundwork for my subsequent role as Director of Development & Diversity at UChicagoGRAD. Here, I have been instrumental in designing and implementing programs that support graduate students and postdoctoral trainees from diverse backgrounds, ensuring their successful navigation through academia.

In my teaching, I strive to integrate frameworks of Critical Race Theory, Social Justice Theory, and Intersectionality, fostering a sense of belonging for students from marginalized

202

backgrounds. My courses on race and ethnicity, gentrification and displacement, and advocacy reflect my commitment to praxis and the empowerment of students through critical inquiry and engagement.

My research endeavors have been equally diverse, ranging from ethnographic studies on community dynamics to quantitative analyses of housing policies. These projects, often conducted in collaboration with esteemed colleagues, underscore my ability to evaluate complex social phenomena and advocate for systemic change.

Beyond academia, my work as the Chief Operations Officer at Citizen Group Media, LLC, has honed my skills in strategic communication and community engagement. Leading social media campaigns and developing grassroots initiatives, I have successfully bridged the gap between scholarly insight and practical impact, driving communal and civic engagement.

In sum, my professional narrative is one of relentless advocacy, strategic innovation, and scholarly rigor. As Dr. Butler, I continue to champion the causes of equity and inclusion, leveraging my academic expertise and practical experience to foster environments where all individuals can thrive. My journey is a testament to the transformative power of education and the enduring impact of inclusive practices in shaping a more just society.