

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE STUDENTS AND ACHIEVEMENT IN SCHOOL  
MATHEMATICS: A CRITICAL POSTMODERN ANALYSIS OF AGENCY

by

DAVID WAYNE STINSON

(Under the direction of Dr. Denise S. Mewborn)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the schooling experiences of African American male students who embraced school, academics, and mathematics. In particular, the study examined the influence of sociocultural discourses on the agency of 4 African American men in their early 20s who demonstrated achievement and persistence in school mathematics. *Agency* in this context was defined as the participants' ability to accommodate, resist, or reconfigure the available sociocultural discourses that surround African American males in order for them to effectively negotiate these discourses in their pursuit of success.

The study used qualitative action research methodology (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998) located within a critical postmodern theoretical frame (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). More specifically, the participants of the study were asked to read, reflect on, and respond to current research literature regarding the schooling experiences of African American male students. Their responses were analyzed using an eclectic theoretical framework that included poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical (postmodern) theory. Poststructural theory provided a frame for rethinking and redefining key concepts such as person, agency, and power, among others. Critical race theory provided a frame for understanding how the discourse of race and

racism operates within U.S. social structures. And critical (postmodern) theory provided a frame for discussing the purposes of education research.

The reporting and analysis of the data revealed that the participants had acquired robust mathematics identities (Martin, 2000), identities that positively impacted their sense of agency. How the participants acquired such uncharacteristic mathematics identities for African American male students was to be found, in part, in how they understood the sociocultural structures and discourses of U.S. society and how they accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured the specific discourses that surround African American males. Although at times the responses from the participants were similar, their responses were never monolithic—not across participants, and not even within participants. Present throughout the responses from each participant, however, was recognition of himself as a discursive formation (Foucault, 1969/1972) who could actively accommodate, resist, or reconfigure sociocultural discourses as a means to subversively repeat (Butler, 1990) his constituted “raced” self.

INDEX WORDS: Academic Success, Action Research, African American Male Students, Critical Postmodern Theory, Mathematics Success, School Success, Student Agency

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DEDICATION

To all the students of Keeling High School who I taught and in return taught me—thank you for transforming my world.

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## FORWARD

As I engage the reader in this research study, I begin by revealing my positionality as a teacher and education researcher by providing a brief discussion of my evolving philosophy of education. In doing so, I believe that the choices that I made for this study in topic, theoretical framework, and methodology will be made clear for the reader. I am committed to the idea that to ethically engage in education research, which should have as its chief aim improving education for all children, requires that the researcher engage in the task of developing a philosophy of education. In the following discussion, I first provide a working definition of *philosophy*, followed by an argument for the need of a philosophy of education. I then highlight three scholars who have been influential in my evolving philosophy. I conclude the discussion with an explanation of the process of developing my philosophy of education.

Dewey (1934/1989) provided a working definition of philosophy from a cultural point of view. He defined philosophy as a critique of basic and widely shared beliefs and values that are attached to customs and institutions within a social and historical milieu. Dewey argued that from this perspective “the chief role of philosophy is to bring to consciousness, in an intellectualized form, or in the form of problems, the most important shocks and inherent troubles of complex and changing societies” (p. 30). When philosophy serves this function, he suggested, systems “divide into the conserving and the revolutionary” (p. 30). He claimed that some thinkers will “preserve the values that are already embodied in the traditional, relatively established order...by setting forth their rational justification,” while “other thinkers, sometimes the most important of an entire generation, [who] are acutely conscious of the deficiencies and

corruptions of the existent order” will fashion their thinking in a manner that demonstrates the “necessity of radical changes and to pointing out the character of needed reforms” (p. 30). In other words, Dewey believed that although philosophy has served the purpose of preserving the existing social order, it should also, and more importantly, motivate radical change.

As Dewey (1934/1974) explicitly argued for a philosophy of education in his essay entitled “The Need for a Philosophy of Education,” he stated:

While the educator must use results that have already been accomplished he cannot, if he is truly an educator, make them his final and complete standard. Like the artist he has the problem of creating something that is not the exact duplicate of anything that has been wrought and achieved previously. (p. 7)

I, too, believe that what is needed in education is the creation of something new and less duplication. My reflective readings of philosophers and education scholars—past and present—coupled with life experiences, undergraduate and graduate coursework, and collegial discussions have provided me the opportunity to develop a philosophy of education that aims at achieving an education that has not been wrought or achieved previously. In doing so, I clearly understand that developing a philosophy of education means making choices among different, and often conflicting, perspectives about the purposes of education (Dewey & Childs, 1933/1989).

Consequently, while choosing the perspectives that have been instrumental to my developing philosophy of education, I acknowledge the complexity of the issue of impartiality.

Dewey and Childs (1933/1989) argued that

the scheme of education itself cannot be impartial in the sense of not involving preference for some values over others. The obligation to be impartial is the obligation to state as clearly as possible what is chosen and why it is chosen. ...It will be helpful if those who disagree in practice, in the courses of action they are following, will also clarify and expose the grounds for their policies: in short, develop and formulate *their* philosophies of education. (p. 78)

In other words, when making education choices I do not have the means of being impartial. That is, the reasons for making the choices that I, or anyone for that matter, make are always shaped and informed by her or his positionality, experiences, and morals and values. I argue that as those who are engaged in the profession of education debate various perspectives regarding the purposes of education that the debates should not be centered around whose perspective is “right” or “wrong,” but rather around what are the ontological, epistemological, and ethical bases, that is, the philosophical basis, (Paul & Marfo, 2001) for why one perspective is chosen over another. Engaging in debates of this sort requires the formulation of a philosophy of education, as suggested by Dewey and Childs, resulting in more productive debates in education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Professor G. M. A. Stanic (personal communication, March 4, 2004) and I had a lengthy debate regarding the validity of this train of thought. It could be argued that Dewey and Childs (1933/1989) were suggesting that since choice is always present one has impartiality in making choices if when one makes choices the choices are reasoned, reflective, and intelligent. Dewey and Childs, however, earlier in the same essay, remarked: “Nevertheless intelligent choice is still choice. It still involves preference for one kind of end rather than another one which might have been worked for” (p. 78). To illustrate how even reasoned, reflective, and intelligent choice lacks impartiality, which supports my argument that choice is always based on one’s positionality, experiences, and morals and values no matter how reasoned, reflective, or intelligent the choice might appear to the one making the choice, I provide two extracted statements from Thomas Jefferson:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (The Declaration of Independence as cited in Current, Williams, and Freidel, 1979, p. iii)

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they [blacks] are equal to the whites; in reason, much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination, they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. It would be unfair to follow them to Africa for this investigation. We will consider them here, on the same stage with the whites, and where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed. (T. Jefferson as cited in Tate, 1995, p. 191)

I often wonder if Jefferson had been challenged on the philosophical grounds, that is, the ontological, epistemological, and ethical grounds for making the second statement, if he would have even made the statement. This challenge is, I believe, what Dewey and Childs’s argument regarding impartiality and the formulation of a philosophy of education is refereeing to. In other words, bringing the various perspectives about what are the purposes of education into philosophical debates would reveal the impartiality of perspectives, clearly revealing how some perspectives are solely based on protecting one’s positionality and advocating one’s morals and values. Bringing the conversation regarding the purposes of education into such philosophical debates would not necessarily change perspectives, but it would reveal the grounding for various perspectives, resulting in more productive debates in education.

The scholarship of Dewey, Freire, and Foucault has been instrumental in the formulation of my philosophy of education. Their scholarship made available new languages that have assisted me in making sense of my life experiences. Dewey (1933/1989) provided the language of *reflective thinking*: “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends” (p. 118). Freire (1970/2000) provided the language of *critical thinking*: “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). And Foucault (1969/1972) provided the language of *divergent thinking*: “The description of the events of discourse poses a quite different question: how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?” (p. 27). This acquisition of new languages has provided me with the ability to engage in critical reflections on my life experiences, resulting in the rewording of my world (Freire, 1970/2000). The consequence of rewording my world with the language of reflection, critique, and difference has been clearer and different understandings of my experiences. This rewording of my world has also resulted in my rethinking the purposes and possibilities of education, amending my evolving philosophy of education.

While providing a means of rethinking education by contributing new languages, the scholarship of Dewey, Freire, and Foucault has also contributed by providing specific critiques on three aspects of education: the purpose of schools, the role of pedagogy, and the nature of knowledge, respectively. In making the foregoing statement, I do not intend to suggest that Dewey only critiqued education with regard to the purpose of schools; Freire, only with regard to the role of pedagogy; and Foucault, only with regard to the nature of knowledge. Clearly, the philosophy of each of these three scholars is comprehensive and complex, addressing not only

the concepts that I have mentioned but also much of human thought and action. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this discussion that aims to shed some light on the effect that each of these scholars has had on my developing philosophy of education, I have limited the discussion to these three concepts.

Dewey's philosophy has significantly affected how I think about the purpose of schools. He argued that the chief theme for consideration of the problem of education should be for schools to attain "clarity concerning the concrete significance of democracy" (Dewey 1937/1987, p. 416). Dewey suggested, rather than take "democracy for granted," thinking and acting as if the forefathers had founded it once for all, that the ideal of democracy "has to be enacted anew in every generation" (p. 416). And, for Dewey, the concept of enacting anew the ideal of democracy meant directing social change toward a more equitable and just society. While acknowledging the powerful forces outside the school that affect the possibility of enacting anew this ideal, Dewey vehemently argued that although school is not a "sufficient condition, it is a necessary condition" (p. 414) in directing social change. Earlier, Dewey (1934/1974) had explicitly stated:

Unless the schools of the world can engage in a common effort to rebuild the spirit of common understanding, of mutual sympathy and goodwill among all people and races, to exercise [sic] the demon of prejudice, isolation and hatred, the schools themselves are likely to be submerged by the general return to barbarism. (p. 14)

I agree with Dewey's argument to make the chief theme in schools creating anew the ideal of democracy while rebuilding the spirit of common understanding, mutual sympathy, and goodwill among all people and races.

Freire's philosophical perspective has provided the frame for my rethinking the role of pedagogy. He strongly criticized the most often used form of pedagogy, which he identified as the "'banking' concept of education" (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 72). This concept of education

positions students as passive and empty receptacles eagerly awaiting the teacher's deposits of knowledge. Freire, on the other hand, argued for a problem-posing pedagogy in which Subjects<sup>2</sup> "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" (p. 83). A problem-posing pedagogy is dialogical, reconfiguring the "traditional" teacher-student roles of pedagogy. In a problem-posing pedagogy, Freire claimed that

the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for the process in which all grow. . . . Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other. (p. 80)

I agree with Freire's challenge to teachers and students to develop learning environments in which teachers and students alike become teachers and learners. Freire suggested that the dialogical nature of problem-posing pedagogy affirms subjects (teachers and students) "as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality" (p. 84). Freire's reconfiguration of the roles of pedagogy resonates with my own thinking. Pedagogy should facilitate the development of reflective and critical life-long learning by teachers and students alike. Freire believed, as I do, that this reconfiguration of pedagogical roles transforms education into a liberating praxis—reflection followed by an action, followed by reflection, and so on—resulting in the humanization of teachers and students.

Foucault's philosophy has been instrumental in my rethinking the nature of knowledge. Foucault (1969/1972) replaced the concept of the "nature" of knowledge with the "discursive formation" (p. 38) of knowledge. In other words, Foucault rejected the "natural" concepts of knowledge found in humanism, such as Descartes' dualism of mind-body, which argues that the thinking subject is the authentic author of knowledge, or Comte's positivism, which rejects

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<sup>2</sup> Freire (1970/2000) defined Subjects, with a capital S, as "those who know and act in contrast to *objects*, which are known and acted upon.—Translator's note" (p. 36).

knowledge produced within the realms of theology and metaphysics in favor of a scientific knowledge gained from methodologically observing the sensible universe (St. Pierre, 2000). Foucault uncovered knowledge as a discursive formation through the means of performing an archeological analysis. The methodology of an archeological analysis examines the history of a discourse; but rather than being concerned with uncovering the “truth” by an examination of facts and dates, it is concerned with the “historical conditions, assumptions, and power relations that allow certain statements, and by extension, certain discourses to appear” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 496). To clarify discursive events, Foucault wrote:

The field of discursive events...is a grouping that is always finite and limited at any moment to the linguistic sequences that have been formulated; they may be innumerable, they may, in sheer size, exceed the capacities of recording, memory, or reading: nevertheless they form a finite grouping. (p. 27)

In effect, knowledge viewed as a discursive formation no longer maintains its privileged status as an “objective” reality, but knowledge itself becomes subjected to and limited by the very historical and sociocultural assumptions, conditions, and power relations against which natural knowledge within the humanist tradition claimed immunity.

As I have singled out the scholarship of Dewey, Freire, and Foucault, the reader should not infer that these are the only scholars who have influenced my thinking, for there have been many; but these three scholars have had substantial impact. Nor is the discussion intended to suggest that the aspects of the concepts that I have highlighted reflect a complete picture of how each of these scholars reconceptualized these human concerns. Furthermore, the reader should not infer from the discussion that I currently agree with all aspects of their philosophies or that I will in the future. My philosophy is changing concurrently with my understanding of theirs. In deed, the attributes of change and growth, and contradiction, are reoccurring aspects found in their philosophies—as well as in mine. But we are in good company: “Nietzsche...argued that

consistency in a thinker is more a symptom of a disease than a theoretical virtue” (Orton, 1995, p. 227).

In view of the fact that I have implied that the attributes of change, growth, contradiction, and even inconsistency are positive attributes found within my philosophy of education, one might ask: What then is the purpose of a philosophy of education? Dewey & Childs (1933/1987) argued that the purpose, or “business,” of a philosophy of education is

to make clear what is involved in the action which is carried on within the educational field, to transform a preference which is blind, based on custom rather than thought, into an intelligent choice—one made, that is, with consciousness of what is aimed at, the reasons why it is preferred, and the fitness of the means used. (p. 78)

With Dewey and Child’s (1933/1987) remark in mind, what I have developed within the context of a philosophy of education is a philosophical *statement* of education. This statement is similar to the mission statement of an organization, which ideally is meant to reflect its vision and drive its actions. This statement of education acts as a guide as I make choices that abandon the restraints of what is “customarily” done in schools, in order to embrace intelligent possibilities—that is, possibilities that are consistent with my evolving philosophy of education—of what might be achieved in and through schools. In other words, it serves as a checkpoint to ensure that the choices I make within the context of education are intelligent choices rather than choices that are blind—based on custom rather than thought. If I perceive a contradiction between my actions and statement, I make an assessment as to the soundness of the actions, the statement, or both, making modifications in them when ethically necessary.

This constant assessment as to the ethics of my actions against my philosophy of education keeps my philosophy of education in motion. In other words, although this discussion attempted to present the development of my philosophy of education in a linear fashion, in actuality it has no beginning or end, just a middle (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). Or

understood in another way, it will always be a work in progress. Each time I read and reread a book, essay, or interview by Dewey, Freire, or Foucault (and others) I am impelled into critical reflection—rethinking my rethinking. And ever since Foucault entered into the picture, I attempt to think the unthought. St. Pierre suggested that we get smarter as we read, and as we reread we will always find something different because we have changed since the last reading (E. A. St. Pierre, personal communication, fall 2002). But then again, as I read and reread text, I no longer have “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin”; but rather, I think about how the text offers a different way of seeing, trying “to pass beyond man and humanism” (Derrida, 1978, p. 292). Presently, I am reconciling old and discovering new contradictions concurrently within my philosophy; nevertheless, my continued intimacy with Dewey, Freire, and Foucault will unendingly influence my ever-evolving philosophy of education.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through the feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. (Du Bois, 1903/1989, pp. 1–2)

I begin this chapter with an abbreviated description of the study, supplying a snapshot of the study's participants. I then present the background for the study, which is embedded in a description of my experiences of teaching high school mathematics. This description is followed by my rationale for conducting the study, which is supported by a brief synthesis of equity research in mathematics education. I conclude the chapter by presenting the problem statement and research questions for the study, bringing the purpose of the research into sharp focus.

#### The Study and Its Participants

This study is a retrospective story telling and analysis of the schooling experiences of four academically successful, young, African American<sup>3</sup> men, couched within the context of their secondary mathematics education. Professionally, the 4 research participants were a teacher and a future preacher, doctor, and lawyer. The teacher completed a Bachelor of Science degree in

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<sup>3</sup> The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout this study to describe an individual of African descent who claims the “cultural identity” of the United States. And throughout this study, when using the term *young man*, *male student*, *adolescent*, or *boy* I am referring to male African Americans less than 25 years of age. Furthermore, as I acknowledge the historical negative connotations of the term *boy* within the African American community, I strategically use the term on occasion to remind the reader that unjust schooling policies and teaching practices are inflicted on defenseless children.

mathematics at a prestigious historically black college and university (HBCU), earning academic awards while also playing football for 4 years. He was at the time of the study in his 1st year of teaching high school mathematics in a midsize urban school district in the southern United States. The future preacher completed his undergraduate studies at a prestigious HBCU earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology with a minor in politics, and at the time of the study had begun his 1st year as a graduate student at a theological seminary in the nation's capital. The future doctor completed a Bachelor of Science degree in biochemistry and microbiology with honors at a top-ranked public research-one university, and at the time of the study was preparing for admission to medical school. And lastly, the future lawyer completed a Bachelor of Science degree in economics at a top-ranked public research-one university, and at the time of the study was completing his 3rd year of law school at a prestigious private university. My relationship with these academically successful, young men did not begin with my role as an education researcher but with my role as one of their high school mathematics teachers.

### Background

I began thinking about this research project in 1997. That year was my 2nd year of teaching mathematics at Keeling High School,<sup>4</sup> which was an “urban high school located in a suburban community”(description found on the school's internet cite), 10 miles from a large city in the South. Keeling High had approximately 1,300 students, with 99% of the students being identified by race/ethnicity as Black by the school system. Although the student population was homogenous racially, it was very diverse socioeconomically—ranging from the working poor to the middle upper class. The community of Keeling High was predominantly an African American community, in that the neighborhoods, schools, shopping malls, and churches were

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<sup>4</sup> Keeling High School is a pseudonym as are all proper names throughout to protect the identity of my research participants. I taught at Keeling High School in the academic years of 1995/96–1999/00.

majority African American. Keeling High was the mathematics and science magnet school for Newberry County, providing students with opportunities to enroll in accelerated and advanced mathematics and science courses (e.g., accelerated Honors Algebra II and Honors Geometry, Number Theory, Biochemistry, and Advanced Placement Calculus, Statistics, Computer Science, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics). Within the school, approximately 25% of the students were enrolled in the magnet program. To be enrolled in the program students had to perform satisfactorily in an initial testing and interview process, maintain a 75% or better on all academic work, and commit to completing either eight mathematics courses and four science courses or vice versa through their 4 years of high school. Keeling High could be characterized as a “typical” high school. In that, it experienced problems ranging from teacher shortage to student absenteeism and had students who performed at all levels of academic achievement.

Although most Black children’s schooling experiences include at least one instance of being taught by a White teacher,<sup>5</sup> teaching mathematics to Black children as a southern, middle-class, White man was a new experience for me. I began my 1st year of teaching at Keeling High in midyear, just weeks after finishing my student-teaching practicum. The newly hired mathematics teacher that I replaced had left in December during the winter break. My 1st year course schedule included two sessions of Pre-algebra, one session of Fundamentals of Algebra, and two sessions of Senior Algebra II. In effect, my first teaching experience with the students at Keeling High was with students, from ninth to twelfth grade, who had previously struggled with school mathematics.

Even though the more than 50 students in the two sessions of Senior Algebra II had struggled in school mathematics, many had excelled in other academic subjects and most

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<sup>5</sup> Using national data from the 1999/00 academic year, the U.S. Department of Education (2003) identified 84.3% of the teachers in public and private elementary and secondary schools as White, and 74.9% as female.

achieved a level of mathematics success in my class. Most of these students embraced schooling as demonstrated by their active participation in school academics<sup>6</sup> and extracurricular activities, and more than half of the students were planning to attend college after graduation. These students, who were enrolled in school mathematics at the minimal level required for postsecondary education (i.e., algebra 2), were a stark contrast to the students in my other three classes—the two sessions of Pre-algebra and the one session of Fundamentals of Algebra. The students in these classes, with a few exceptions, most often appeared to reject schooling as demonstrated by their lack of active participation in academics and extracurricular activities. Their perceived rejection of schooling was also reflected in their excessive absenteeism.

In my 2nd year of teaching at Keeling High, I taught two sessions of Algebra I-Concepts I,<sup>7</sup> two sessions of Fundamentals of Statistics, and one session of Advance Placement (AP) Statistics. The Fundamentals of Statistics course was for eleventh-grade students who would be taking Senior Algebra II the following year, and the AP Statistics course was for the “mathematically advanced” students who were most often in the mathematics magnet program. Similar to my 1st year of teaching, I noticed a stark contrast between the students in both the statistics classes as opposed to those in the algebra concepts classes. The students who were achieving the minimal or advanced level of mathematics education needed for postsecondary education appeared to embrace schooling, while those that were not appeared to reject schooling; again, there were a few exceptions.

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<sup>6</sup> I broadly define the concept *active participation in school academics* using Jackson’s (2003) “critical set of behaviors” that he identified as being necessary for school success: “completing homework, reading independently, studying seriously for tests, striving for good grades, mastering and using proper [Standard] English, paying attention to the teacher, asking questions and getting help, signing up for specific academic courses, and choosing to obey loosely enforced rules” (p. 581).

<sup>7</sup> This course was part of a sequence designed to provide the Algebra I curriculum in 2 years of instruction rather than 1 (i.e., Algebra I-Concepts I and Algebra I-Concepts II).

In my 3rd, 4th, and 5th years at Keeling High, I taught only magnet and “honors” students, in courses such as Magnet Algebra I, Accelerated Honors Geometry and Honors Algebra II, Honors Pre-calculus, and the AP mathematics courses—Calculus and Statistics. The students that I taught in these courses were most often magnet students who were actively involved in school academics and extracurricular activities. These students appeared to embrace school, academics, and mathematics.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, many of them were radically above the statistical achievement norm for African American students.<sup>9</sup> In fact, a statistical analysis of measurements of academic achievement would have classified many of these students as statistical outliers. Given that most of the education literature has focused on African American students who appear to reject school and academics (and mathematics), I was puzzled by the African American students who embraced school and academics—Where were their stories in the education literature? I specifically became interested in the young African American male students who embraced school, academics, and mathematics, because discussions about African American male students who excel in school, academics, and mathematics are rarely (if ever) found in the literature.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, these types of discussions are rarely found in teacher-

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<sup>8</sup> The embracing of school, academics, and mathematics also held true for the students in my AP Statistics class during my 2nd year of teaching.

<sup>9</sup> The calculation of *norms* in education is, I think, problematic because they are often used incorrectly, normalizing the *individual* based on a specific *group*'s statistical average. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that past and current education practices normalize student achievement toward an expected numerical value based on gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status with regard to the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and Scholastic Assessment Test scores and students' grade-point averages.

<sup>10</sup> There were many African American female students who excelled mathematically in my classes as well; however, this study focused on the successful academic achievement of African American male students only. While focusing on African American male students, Professor White cautioned me about an erroneous perception often employed within the African American community, a perception that suggest if the concerns of African American men are addressed, all of the concerns within the African American community are addressed (D. Y. White, personnel communication, March, 3, 2004). I, however, clearly understand the flaw in this train of thought, understanding that patriarchy runs amuck within the African American community just as briskly as it does within society in general. I acknowledge that many of the concerns of African American women are very different from those of African American men. Understanding this very clear and distinct difference is what led me to narrow the study's focus to

education programs, school board meetings, the hallways of schools, or teachers' lounges. In other words, discussions about African American male students who excel academically are virtually absent within the discourse of education (and society). I argue that if discussions about African American male (and female) students who excel in school, and specifically in mathematics, were included in the discourse of education, these discussions would assist the education community in understanding the academic achievement "gap" between Black students and their White counterparts.

### Rationale

The academic achievement gap, and specifically the mathematics achievement gap, between Black students and their White counterparts have been well documented with numerical facts (Sable & Pinkerton Computer Consultants, 1998; Strutchens, Lubienski, & McGraw, in press). Although a recent Education Trust study using National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data documented that U.S. students were improving in their academic performance, it also noted that the performance gap between Black and White students was growing (Gewertz, 2003). This growth was evident in the eighth-grade NAEP mathematics test, where the Black-White gap grew from 33 points in 1990 to 39 points in 2000 (Gewertz, 2003). Even as the mathematics education community knows that the achievement gap exists (and is growing), it does not fully understand the complexities of why it exists. I believe, however, that Lubienski and Bowen's (2000) analysis of equity research within mathematics education might provide an explanation for this lack of understanding. In their essay, "Who's Counting? A Survey of Mathematics Education Research 1982–1998," they concluded, "One gets the impression that

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African American male students. Nevertheless, what is learned from this narrow focus, I suppose, could be loosely applied to all students who are constructed outside the dominant culture.

researchers look primarily at outcomes of these equity groups [ethnicity or class] and rarely examine how schooling experiences contribute to these outcomes”(p. 631).

In an attempt to supplement and trouble the discussion of the achievement gap problem, this research study examined the schooling experiences of mathematically successful African American male students. To provide justification for this study, I will briefly review a variety of scholarship from the past 2 decades that offers methodological suggestions and appeals for research that specifically addresses the mathematics achievement and persistence of African American students.

Scholarship that has been cited often within the mathematics education equity literature is that of Reyes and Stanic (1988). Even though their research was conducted nearly 2 decades ago, their argument for engaging in equity research in mathematics education still resonates today.

They wrote:

Clearly, we live in a society where racist, sexist, and classist orientations exist in institutions and individuals. What is not clear is how such ideas are transmitted to and through school, how the ideas are mediated by the democratic ideals of equality and equality of opportunity, and the extent to which teachers and students accept and resist the ideas. More specifically, we do not yet fully understand how these ideas affect the teaching and learning of mathematics. (p. 27)

Reyes and Stanic provided a theoretical framework that identified six factors that should be considered when conducting equity research in mathematics education: societal influences, teacher attitudes, school mathematics curricula, student attitudes and achievement-related behavior, classroom processes, and student achievement. They concluded that their model presented a “helpful guide” for future research and that there was “clearly much work to be done to prove that group differences in mathematics achievement we now see do not reflect the natural order of things” (p. 40).

Strutchens (1993) applied Reyes and Stanic's (1988) model in framing her study about African American students and mathematics. She suggested that for more than 2 decades researchers had been puzzled by the mathematics achievement and persistence problem of African American students when compared to White students because in many cases African American and White students attended the same schools, had the same teachers, and had access to the same school counselors. She argued, "What appears to be dumbfounding on the surface may be consequential results shaped by past and current events" (p. 1).

To provide details of the past and current events that might shape mathematics achievement and persistence among African American students, Strutchens (1993) presented five case studies of sixth-grade African American students in which she examined societal and ethnic factors. The societal and ethnic factors that she identified were (a) family status (including socioeconomic status, parents' education, and community standing); (b) parents' involvement and expectations; (c) students' self-perceptions and expectations; (d) students' peer group expectations; (e) teacher expectations; (f) African American definitions of group membership; and (g) how other ethnic groups viewed African Americans. She suggested that researchers should conduct additional studies to examine the interaction of societal factors and mathematics performance; undertake a longitudinal study of African American students who are successful in mathematics; and examine the effects of individual agency and peer pressure on the mathematics success and failure of African American students.

Martin (2000) also applied Reyes and Stanic's (1988) model in framing his study of success and failure among African American students in mathematics. He, too, was puzzled about why African Americans remained underrepresented in mathematics and why large numbers of African American students achieved below their potential regardless of their

socioeconomic status, their family background, or the type of school they attended. Martin's initial plan for his study was to follow the conventional formats of mathematics education research by focusing on the mathematical content, curriculum, and problem-solving behaviors that existed inside the mathematics classroom. After a few weeks of observing student behaviors that he thought could not be explained by this conventional focus, however; Martin realized that if he wanted to understand the mathematics achievement and persistence problem among African American students, he would have to expand the sphere of his research to include sociohistorical context, community and school forces, and individual agency.

Martin's (2000) analysis of sociohistorical context included an examination of the social and historical policies and practices of racism and discrimination that prevent "African-Americans from becoming equal participants in mathematics and other areas of society" (p. 29). His analysis of community and school forces included an examination of how African American students' beliefs about mathematics and about African Americans as learners of mathematics are influenced by the beliefs and expectations held by community members and school personnel. And lastly, his analysis of agency included an examination of mathematically successful African American students as they responded to community and school forces. Martin suggested that a further analysis of mathematically successful African American students could provide insight into how students negotiated community and school forces and "how these forces can serve as barriers or springboards to success" (p. 125).

Several other scholars have suggested expanding the sphere of research on equity in mathematics education. Secada (1995) emphasized the need for including minority "voice" within mathematics education equity research. He suggested that the mathematics education community should "listen to how diverse groups perceive their educational status in general and

their mathematics education in particular. ...[And that how they] recount the experiences, beliefs, and values embedded in their stories should be regarded as an important...source of information” (p. 157). Moody (1997) echoed Secada, writing, “The more we know about different voices and understand the complexity of voice, the better equipped we will become to improve the mathematics education of African American students” (p. 120). Ladson-Billings (1997) noted that what was “lacking is the documentation of successful practice of mathematics for African American students” (p. 706). She called for research that examined not the mathematics failures but the mathematics successes of African American students.

As illustrated by the aforementioned scholarship, scholars within the mathematics education community have suggested expanding the sphere of equity research to more fully understand the schooling and mathematics outcomes of African American children. Reyes and Stanic (1988), Strutchens (1993), and Martin (2000) argued for expanding the sphere into the sociocultural arena. Their arguments support Weissglass’s (2002) assertion that the historical context and the sociocultural structures that mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning are embedded have a significant impact on the mathematics learning and performance of students—especially on students that have been historically marginalized. Secada (1995) and Moody (1997) expanded the sphere by arguing for the inclusion of minority voice within mathematics equity research. They believed that African American students, and other historically marginalized students, have a great many complex, insightful, and informative ideas about their own mathematics education, and education in general, if someone is willing to listen. And finally, Strutchens (1993), Martin (2000), and Ladson-Billings (1997) suggested that the sphere needed to incorporate studies of African American students who embraced schooling and mathematics, implying that the really interesting and informative stories could be derived from

those African American students who successfully negotiate the (White) structures of U.S. schools (and society). Therefore, using arguments provided by these scholars and others (e.g., see Atweh, Forgasz, & Nebres, 2001; Boaler, 2000; Gates & Cotton, 1998; Secada, Fennema, & Byrd, 1995), this study expands the sphere of mathematics education equity research by documenting the voices of African American male students who were successful in school mathematics as they reflect on and talk about the sociocultural factors that impacted their schooling and mathematics experiences.

### Problem Statement and Research Questions

Using qualitative action research methodology located within a critical postmodern theoretical frame, I examined the influence of sociocultural discourses on the agency of 4 African American men in their early 20s who demonstrated achievement and persistence in school mathematics.

*Agency* in this context is defined as the participants' ability to accommodate, resist, or reconfigure the available sociocultural discourses that surround African American males in order for them to effectively negotiate<sup>11</sup> these discourses in their pursuit of success. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How did participants define success? What sociocultural factors did they attribute to their school and academic success?
2. What discourses about African American males shaped participants' perception of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students? How did they accommodate, resist, or reconfigure those discourses?

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<sup>11</sup> The intended meaning of the term *negotiate* throughout the study is its more robust definition, defined as: to deal with some matter or affair that requires the ability for its successful handling (i.e., to manage); to arrange for or bring about through conference, discussion, and compromise (i.e., to reconfigure); or to successfully travel along or over (i.e., to navigate) (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1999).

3. How did participants define agency and how does it function in their lives? What relationship did participants perceive between their achievement in school mathematics and agency?

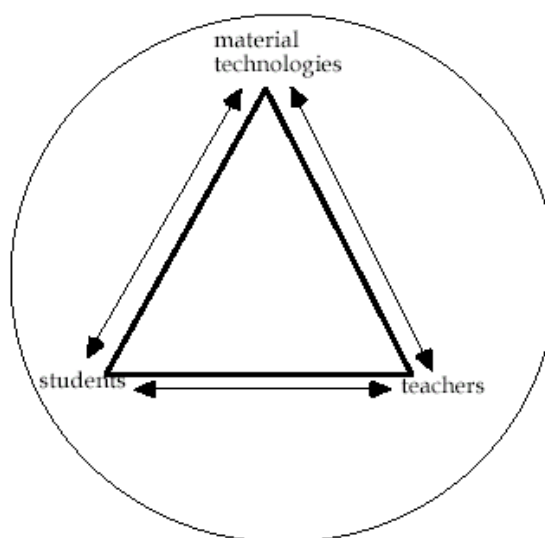
I clarify the foregoing problem statement and research questions further for the reader here and in subsequent chapters. First, an explanation of a *critical postmodern theoretical frame* will be provided in chapter 3. Chapter 3 provides complete details of the eclectic theoretical framework employed for this study, which includes poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical (postmodern) theory. Likewise, an explanation of *qualitative action research methodology* will be provided in chapter 4.

Second, the term *sociocultural* broadly defined is inclusive of the societal and ethnic factors identified by Strutchens (1993) and the community and school forces identified by Martin (2000), both noted earlier. The emphasis of this study, however, was not on identifying particular sociocultural influences on the participants' success in mathematics, but on *how* particular sociocultural discourses affected participants' agency as they accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured those discourses in their pursuit of school and mathematics success.

Third, the terms *discourse* and *agency* are elaborated in chapter 3; the criteria for *demonstrated achievement and persistence in school mathematics* are outlined in chapter 4. And when using the term *mathematics learners* I am borrowing Martin's (2000) concept *mathematics identity*, defined as "one's beliefs about his or her mathematics abilities, one's beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, one's beliefs about the opportunities and constraints that exist to participate in mathematics, and one's motivations to obtain mathematics knowledge" (p. viii).

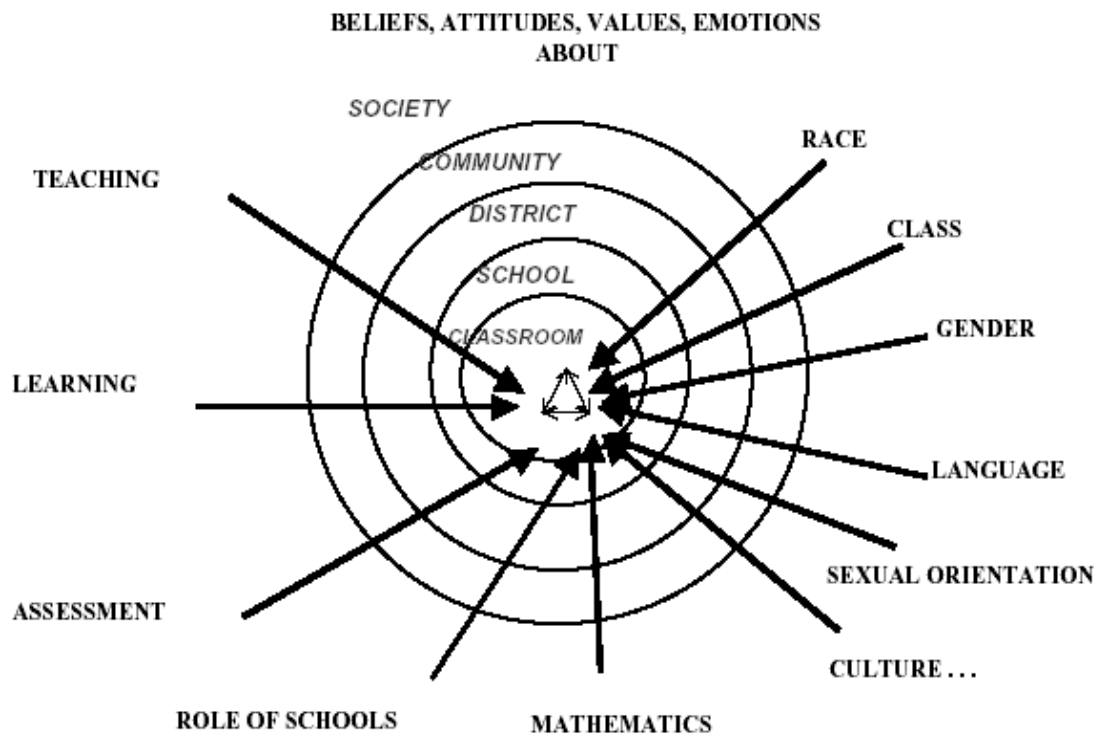
And lastly, I reiterate the belief made previously that the historical context and sociocultural structures that mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning are embedded have a significant impact on the mathematics learning, and achievement, of students. When Weissglass (2002) made this assertion, an assertion that I fully embrace, in his essay “Inequity in Mathematics Education: Questions for Educators” he provided a diagram to illustrate his point. In that diagram, I argue that Weissglass appropriately positioned the Cohen and Ball (1999; also see National Research Council, 2001, p. 314) instructional triangle (see Figure 1) in its proper perspective (see Figure 2).<sup>12</sup> That is, for critical postmodern researchers who are focused on issues of equity and social justice within education, and specifically in the mathematics classroom, the discourses of critique become much broader than those that are found within the confines of the *students*  $\Leftrightarrow$  *teachers*  $\Leftrightarrow$  *material technologies* (e.g., mathematics curriculum) instructional triangle.

*Figure 1: Instructional triangle (Cohen & Ball, 1999, p. 3)*



<sup>12</sup> Weissglass (2002) never specifically identified the triangle he referenced in his essay as the Cohen and Ball (1999) instructional triangle, but rather stated, “Many years ago I encountered a diagram...that may be familiar to you” (p. 34) and then proceeded to provide a diagram. I made the inference to Cohen and Ball.

Figure 2. The many factors that affect student learning (Weissglass, 2002, p. 35)



While agreeing with Weissglass's (2002) critique of the instructional triangle, I do not mean to imply that I reject, nor do I suppose that Weissglass did either, the usefulness of Cohen and Ball's (1999) framework in understanding and implementing reform in instruction, and specifically in mathematics instruction. Throughout the construction of their framework, Cohen and Ball consistently made reference to the environmental context in which the instructional triangle is embedded, which I inferred included the historical and sociocultural context. In the conclusion of their report, they noted, "Our theoretical frame assumes that the environments of instruction are critical to intervention: to intervene in instruction is to somehow manage those environments" (p. 28).

I argue that to somehow manage those environments requires not just an examination of how the instructional triangle is constructed as a whole and embedded in an environment, but

also an examination of how each of the vertices, in turn, is constructed before it enters into the instructional triangle. Gates and Vistro-Yu (2003) claimed that

those involved in mathematics education (as teachers, researchers, curriculum developers and so on) do need to look internally for many of the solutions to the problems of underachievement. However, while this is a necessary condition, it is by no means sufficient. We also need to adopt a degree of social consciousness and responsibility in seeing the wider social and political picture. (p. 63)

Such an adoption of social consciousness and responsibility greatly broadens the dimensions of the examination, delving deeper into how the social, political, economic, and cultural structures and discourses of society in general affect the construction of students, teachers, and mathematics.<sup>13</sup> An examination of this sort originates outside the realm of “traditional” mathematics education philosophy and theory, in that it is rooted in anthropology, social psychology, sociology (Lerman, 2000b), and sociopolitical critique.

Lerman (2000b) identified the interest in social theories within mathematics education as “the *social turn* in mathematics education research” (p. 23). He contended that this growing interest in social theories is due to the fact that most of the philosophical and theoretical focus in mathematics education has been on the *individual* acquiring mathematics knowledge and understanding, oftentimes slighting the dynamics of the social context—inside and outside of the classroom—in which it has been learned. In the conclusion to his argument, Lerman noted:

Perhaps the greatest challenge for research in mathematics education...from perspectives that can be described as being within the social turn is to develop accounts that bring together agency, individual trajectories (Apple, 1991), and the cultural, historical, and social origins of the ways people think, behave, reason, and understand the world. (p. 36)

This study is just one account of bringing together agency, historical and sociocultural influences, and mathematics. Thus, as this retrospective study engaged young African American men in reflective conversations about their schooling experiences, it did not examine details of

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<sup>13</sup> The concepts of structure, discourse, and construction are explained in chapter 3.

their individual mathematics instruction, but rather examined the historical and sociocultural context in which their agency and their relationship with mathematics—a discipline that carries vast cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1998)—were constructed and understood.

Furthermore, as an educator of a discipline that carries vast cultural capital, I would be less effective in transforming the instructional practices and the sociocultural discourses of that discipline if I acted as though mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning occurred in a vacuum, untouched by concepts such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, hegemony, oppression, power, privilege, language, structure, truth, capitalism, socialism, democracy, peace, war, and so on. As Sztajn (2001) wrote:

To discuss reform in mathematics education and the mathematics education of all children, we have to move beyond the discussion on *what* teachers teach and *how* they do it, to include issues such as *why* teachers teach, *where*, and *to whom* they teach. We need to move beyond the discussion on teachers' beliefs about mathematics and its teaching-learning experience, to include their ideological vision of the world.

In effect, this study aims to engage mathematics educators in different conversations regarding those *whom* they teach—examining ideological beliefs about who is or is not mathematically capable and how the sociocultural structures and discourses in which they, their discipline, and their students are embedded are often at the root of these ideological beliefs.

Through a critical postmodern analysis of agency, this study intended to provide learning opportunities for the participants and me, the researcher, to more fully understand the participants' successes in school, academics, and mathematics. In turn, sharing these understandings with the larger education community, I trust, will provide learning opportunities for existing and future (mathematics) educators to examine their ideological beliefs about the more than 4.1 million<sup>14</sup> Black boys in U.S. elementary and secondary schools, as well as their

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<sup>14</sup> See U.S. Department of Education (2001) for details of school-aged children (5 to 17 years of age) in the United States by gender and race.

ideological beliefs of the world in general. I am fully aware that in the context of mathematics education, moving the discussion of mathematics teaching and learning into this broader sociocultural arena—an arena where the (mis)perceived black and white of mathematics can only fade into infinite shades of gray—will, undoubtedly, bring about the sensation of discomfort for most mathematics educators. Nevertheless, there is no growth without discomfort. And the human act of mathematics teaching and learning is, I argue, too crucial to the development of an equitable and just democracy for it to remain static.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 42)

I begin this chapter with a brief historical outline of slavery and racism, providing a frame for the literature review. This outline is followed by a review of relevant literature for the study, organized around three broad categories. I provide summaries of the literature reviewed in each category at the end of each specific category.

#### Framing the Review

On July 30, 1619, in the Jamestown church, Virginia colonists marked the future of a new republic as community delegates met as the House of Burgesses to consider the enactment of laws for the colony (Current, Williams, & Freidel, 1979). This event was followed by another event, only days later, that would have equally large ramifications for the future of the new republic: It was “about the latter end of August” when a Dutch ship brought in “20 and odd Negroes” (Rolfe as cited in Current et al., 1979, p. 27). It is argued that these black persons were brought into Jamestown not as slaves, but as indentured servants that were to be held for a term of years and then freed, similar to the White servants with whom the landowning colonists were already familiar (Current et al., 1979). Nevertheless, no matter what the conditions or the intentions of how these 20 and odd Negroes found themselves at the harbor of Jamestown “a

start had been made toward the enslavement of Africans within what was to be the American republic” (Current et al., 1979, p. 27).

Even though this Dutch ship made dock on the shores of Virginia nearly 400 years ago, the repercussions of the ship’s “cargo” to the development of the American republic still loudly reverberate today, in both positive and negative ways. Marable (1994) noted, “Recent historical research indicates, the development of what was to become the United States was accomplished largely, if not primarily, by African slaves, men and women alike” (p. 70). The contributions of Africans to the early development of the new American republic are numerous, ranging from being the first to cultivate wheat on the continent to serving as troops in the earliest “Indian” battles and the American Revolution (Marable, 1994). Gates and West (2000) in the introduction to their book *The African-American Century: How Black Americans Have Shaped Our Country* wrote, “The African-American Century sits at the center of the American Century just as black culture constitutes an essential element of American culture” (p. xiii). Nevertheless, despite the fact that Africans and the African experience of slavery were woven into the very fabric that constituted the new American republic and the fact that Africans moved from American slaves to African American United States citizens, making significant contributions to the development of the nation along the way, the negative consequences of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination have continued to inflict “a variety of harsh injustices on African-Americans in the United States, especially on males” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 1).

The consequences of the harsh injustices of racism and discrimination inflicted specifically on African American males are highlighted in countless U.S. government and private consortium research reports, scholarly and popular press books and articles, and are often even the topic of discussion on mass media television and radio talk shows. In effect, in the United

States it is virtually impossible for one to escape hearing about the “plight” of the African American male, a plight that includes unemployment, underemployment, education deficits, higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, higher rates of a variety of health problems such as heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes, delinquency, crime, imprisonment, and on and on and on (Majors & Gordon, 1994b). The over abundance of sources that recount—often superficially—the plight of the African American male frequently leads to the portrayal in the popular media and the characterization by the public in general of African American males as “punks, troublemakers, dope addicts, gang-bangers, lazy, and hostile” (Majors & Gordon, 1994b, p. xi). Recently, however, there has been a slight shift in how the popular media and the public in general characterize African American males, in that, stories that illustrate the complexities of their lives and the multiple roles they play—historically and currently—in the United States have been made available. Accompanying this slight shift, is a growing body of scholarly literature that examines not only the consequences of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination but also examines how most African American males (and females) manage the consequences of such injustices, with many achieving success in school and society in spite of these injustices (e.g., see Fordham, 1996; Taylor-Griffin, 2000; Majors & Billson, 1993; Majors & Gordon, 1994a; Perry, Steel, & Hilliard III, 2003; Polite & Davis, 1999).

#### Organizing the Review

This literature review is inclusive of the growing body of literature noted. It is organized around three broad categories: (a) literature that examines the consequences of racism and discrimination, often placing blame on the “culture” and “genetics” of African Americans; (b) literature that examines the coping strategies against racism and discrimination employed by African Americans, strategies in which it is claimed that African Americans reject the dominate

culture or their own culture; and (c) literature that examines the achievement of African Americans in spite of racism and discrimination. For the purpose of this study, I have narrowed the categories by roughly identifying three discourse clusters surrounding discussions regarding the schooling experiences of African American children that correlate with these three broad categories: the discourse of deficiency, the discourse of rejection, and the discourse of achievement. In the following discussion, I describe and critique each discourse cluster, specifically relating each cluster to the schooling experiences of African American male students. Included in the critique is an examination of how the discourse impacts communities, schools, teachers, and the achievement of African American students. The reader should take note that in the discussions under the headings *Discourse of Deficiency* and *Discourse of Rejection* much of the literature that is reviewed corresponds to literature in which the participants of the study were requested to read, reflect on, and respond to. Complete details of this methodological procedure are provided in chapter 4.

#### Discourse of Deficiency

The discourse of deficiency focuses on the perceived deficient cultural, schooling, and life experiences, in general, of Black children. School administrators and teachers who participate in this discourse often claim that the “lower” academic achievement of many Black students exist because Black children experience higher rates of poverty, high-crime communities, unstable single parenting, and minimal parental involvement, as well as suffer from the negative effects of slavery, segregation, racism, and discrimination.<sup>15</sup> And a few individuals have even claimed that

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<sup>15</sup> I do not intend to suggest that these characteristics are not significant problems that national statistics illustrate are often found in the experiences of African American children (Sable & Pinkerton Computer Consultants, Inc., 1998), nor that these characteristics do not impact student achievement and attitudes. What I am suggesting is, however, that these over generalized characteristics permeate U.S. society leading many school administrators and teachers to make unsubstantiated claims about African American children resulting in unjust schooling experiences for these students.

the lower academic achievement of Black students is natural and genetically inscribed (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994a). Ogbu (1978b) provided a historical summary and critique of theoretical perspectives that attempted to explain the lower academic achievement of Black students, and specifically the Black-White achievement gap.<sup>16</sup> I have located these perspectives in the discourse of deficiency: the cultural deprivation theory, the culture conflict theory, the institutional deficiency theory, the educational equality theory, and the heredity theory.

### *Cultural Deprivation Theory*

The cultural deprivation theory claims that Black children perform less well academically than White children because they are “culturally deprived,” coming to school “from home and neighborhood environments that do not provided them with adequately organized stimulation for normal development” (Ogbu, 1978b, p. 44). Ogbu dismissed the cultural deprivation theory, noting that it fails to explain why some students who are not culturally deprived do poorly in school or why some students who are culturally deprived do well in school. He also noted that the measurements of school achievement used within the theory are based on White, middle-class, cultural values, arguing that “by these standards most of the world is culturally deprived, and in need of enrichment programs” (Spradley as cited in Ogbu, 1978b, p. 46). And most

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<sup>16</sup> Ogbu (1978b) dismissed most of the theoretical perspectives located in the discourse of deficiency as not fully explaining the Black-White achievement gap and, similarly, the core curriculum and multicultural education perspectives discussed later in this chapter (Ogbu, 1992). As he did so, the reader should be mindful that Ogbu was laying the groundwork for his *minority education and caste theory* reviewed in the discourse of rejection section of this chapter (J. E. Morris, personal communication, May 28, 2004). For a different viewpoint on how many of the theories Ogbu critiqued, and dismissed, operate in the current schooling experiences of African American students see Darling-Hammond’s (2000) essay “New Standards and Old Inequalities: School Reform and the Education of African American Students,” or Irvine’s (1991) book *Black Students and School Failure*, or Kozol’s book *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* (1992); or yet for another viewpoint see Delpit’s (1995) book *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. I limited my review of literature under the heading *Discourse of Deficiency* to Ogbu’s critique for a pragmatic reason: Chapter 2, “Black-White Differences in School Performance: A Critique of Current Explanations,” in his book *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (1978a) provided an accessible, comprehensive, yet condensed discussion of the deficiency theories for the participants of this study to read, reflect on, and respond to; a methodological procedure described in chapter 4.

important, he dismissed the cultural deprivation theory because it “embodies the assumption that children who are failing in school are to be blamed for their failure, not the school or society (Spradley 1972: 17–18)” (p. 46).

#### *Culture Conflict Theory*

The culture conflict theory has two variants that explain why Black children perform less well academically than White children. One variant emphasizes the failure of the Black community to equip Black children with the White, middle-class skills necessary for school success, and the other variant emphasizes the failure of the schools to fully utilize the unique experiences of Black children. Ogbu (1978b) claimed that the culture conflict theory is inadequate in explaining the differential in achievement between Black and White students because it fails “to explain why the conflict should exist at all” (p. 48). Furthermore, he argued, “The existence of cultural differences does not automatically lead to conflict or to school failure” (p. 48).

#### *Institutional Deficiency Theory*

The institutional deficiency theory claims Black children perform less well academically than White children because the very institution of school is organized to favor “middle class and upper class, non-minority children and to suppress the aspirations of children from disadvantaged groups” (U.S. Senate, Select Committee 1972 as cited in Ogbu, 1978b, p. 48).

Ogbu dismissed the institutional deficiency theory, claiming that it fails to acknowledge schools as “agents of a caste society” (p. 51).

#### *Educational Equality Theory*

The educational equality theory claims that Black children perform less well academically than White children because the schooling opportunities and experiences of Black children are not equal, regardless of the fact that “equal educational opportunity has been one of the main tenets

of public school education” (Ogbu, 1978b, p. 49). Ogbu dismissed this theory, noting that it fails to examine the cumulative effects of historically unequal education opportunity or the impact of historically unequal access to jobs on education achievement.

### *Heredity Theory*

The heredity theory claims that the achievement gap between Black and White students exists because Black students “have inferior genetic endowments for certain kinds of intellectual skills” (Ogbu, 1978b, p. 55).<sup>17</sup> Ogbu completely dismissed the heredity theory, citing numerous methodological and data distortions in the theory.

### *Summary of the Discourse of Deficiency*

In all of the theories located in the discourse of deficiency, African American children, and specifically African American male students, are often characterized as incapable of measuring-up to the predetermined goals and objectives of schools and lacking the behavioral and social skills and life experiences to be academically successful. Ogbu (1978b) specifically implicated the cultural deprivation theory as erroneously labeling many aspects of African American children’s experiences as “pathological” (p. 46). The labels *at risk learner* and *special needs learner*, which have developed out of the discourse of deficiency, are terms that permeate discussions within this discourse about Black children, and specifically about Black boys and Black male adolescents. Davis (2001) argued that society perpetuates this discourse because Black male images are “negatively constructed and perceived in the media and in everyday life...portray[ing] the young Black male as violent, disrespectful, unintelligent, hyper-sexualized, and threatening” (p. 171).

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<sup>17</sup> Sadly, the heredity theory experienced a revival in the mid 1990s with the publication of Herrnstein and Murray’s 1994 book the *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. The media frenzy that surrounded the release of their book, I think, illustrates the permanency, either overtly or covertly, of the heredity theory within the minds and actions of many Americans.

The community and school efforts to improve the education outcomes of Black students, and specifically Black male students, located in the discourse of deficiency are intervention strategies—strategies that are designed to “fix” the deficiency (Ogbu, 1978a). Examples of such interventions include “at risk” curricula, pullout programs, and culture development programs. Although these strategies are intended to improve student performance, they most often essentialize<sup>18</sup> the experiences of Black male students, and thus have minimal positive impact. The labels *at risk learner* and *special needs learner* have tracked many African American male students out of the advanced mathematics track, placing them in disproportionate numbers into lower-track and special education classes (Harry & Anderson, 1999; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990). This discourse also negatively affects individual teacher’s achievement and behavioral expectations (Cousins-Cooper, 2000; Strutchens, 2000). Irvine’s 1988 synthesizes of several empirical studies on teacher expectations and student race concluded “that teachers, particularly white teachers, have more negative expectations for black students than for white students” with regard to “such variables as personality traits and characteristics, ability, language, behavior, and potential” (Irvine, 1991, pp. 56–57).<sup>19</sup>

The pedagogy derived out of the discourse of deficiency is an anti-intellectual “pedagogy of poverty” (Haberman, 1991). Haberman described the pedagogy of poverty as routine teaching acts of giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving test, reviewing test, assigning homework, reviewing

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<sup>18</sup> Leistyna, Woodrum, and Sherblom (1996) defined essentialism as ascribing a fundamental nature or a biological determinism to humans (i.e., men are naturally aggressive, and women are naturally nurturing) through attitudes about identity, experience, knowledge, and cognitive development. Within this monolithic and homogenizing view, categories such as race and gender become gross generalizations, and single-cause explanations about individual character. (p. 336–337)

<sup>19</sup> Irvine (1991) also provided a caveat to this conclusion: “These conclusions do not ignore the fact that some white teachers are excellent teachers of black children or that some black teachers are ineffective with black children, treating them with disdain and hostility” (p. 61).

homework, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance, marking papers, and giving grades (p. 291). He identified four syllogisms that undergird the pedagogy of poverty:

1. Teaching is what teachers do. Learning is what students do. Therefore, students and teachers are engaged in different activities.
2. Teachers are in charge and responsible. Students are those who still need to develop appropriate behavior. Therefore, when students follow teachers' directions, appropriate behavior is being taught and learned.
3. Students represent a wide range of individual differences. Many students have handicapping conditions and lead debilitating home lives. Therefore, ranking of some sort is inevitable; some students will end up at the bottom of the class while others will finish at the top.
4. Basic skills are a prerequisite for learning and living. Students are not necessarily interested in basic skills. Therefore, directive pedagogy must be used to ensure that youngsters are compelled to learn their basic skills. (p. 291)

In the context of mathematics education, Moses (2001) characterized this type of anti-intellectual pedagogy as one that provided poor students and students of color with a “sharecroppers” education.

Cose (2002) provided an example of the effects of the discourse of deficiency on Black males by presenting the results of a 1998 Gallup poll, which inquired into why Black male students perform less well on standardized test than most White students. The poll results reported that 19% of the Black respondents and 9% of the White respondents believed that “African-American males are born with less ability” (p. 84). African American male students become actively engaged in this discourse as they react to low teacher expectations and resist the labels *at risk learner* and *special needs learner*. The negative consequences of this reaction and resistance is evident by Garibaldi’s 1992 analysis of New Orleans Public Schools: “African American males accounted for 58% of the nonpromotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the dropouts, while accounting for only 43% of the school population”

(cited in Polite, 1999, p. 104). Garibaldi's analysis provides just one example of empirical evidence that illustrates the detrimental end results of the discourse of deficiency on African America male students.

Located in the discourse of deficiency are theories that support, in varying degrees, a perspective of deficiency in African American children. This perceived deficiency takes on many forms: culturally, educationally, or even genetically. The effect of the perceived deficiency on school administrators and teachers often leads to lower achievement and behavioral expectations for African American students, and specifically for African American male students. In a large part, the discourse of deficiency gave birth to the concepts *at risk learner* and *at risk programs*; both concepts most often essentialize the experiences of African American children. Statistically, the devastating consequences of the discourse of deficiency on African American male students can be seen through the insignificant percentages of African American male students included in school honors and advance placement courses compared to the rather significant percentages of African American male students included in school nonpromotions, suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts. Even though the discourse of deficiency might not be discussed as openly within the hallways of the academy and public schools as it once was during the early 1900s through the 1980s, its damaging effects still linger as evident by the reporting of statistical data:

Nationally, barely a quarter of the 1.9 million black men between 18 and 24—prime college-going years—were in college in 2000, according to the American Council on Education's most recent report on minorities in higher education. By comparison, 35 percent of black women in the same age group and 36 percent of all 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in higher education. (Arenson, 2003, ¶ 7)

## Discourse of Rejection

The discourse of rejection broadly focuses on the systematic rejection<sup>20</sup> of school and academics by African American students, and specifically by African American male students; or on the systematic rejection of cultural-specific Black behaviors by African American students, and again, specifically by African American male students. Both forms of rejection are argued to be coping strategies employed by African Americans in managing the negative effects of racism and discrimination. In the following discussion, I review five prevailing theories found in the literature that I locate in the discourse of rejection—three theories that explore the rejection of schooling and academics: Majors and Billson’s cool pose theory (Major & Billson, 1993; Majors, Tyler, Peden, & Hall, 1994), Claude Steele’s stereotype threat theory (Steel, 1997, 1999), and John Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory<sup>21</sup> (Ogbu, 1978a, 1992)—and two theories that explore the rejection of Black behaviors: Fordham’s raceless persona theory (Fordham, 1988, 1996) and Fordham and Ogbu’s burden of “acting White” theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

### *Cool Pose Theory*

Majors and Billson’s (1993) cool pose theory suggests that some Black males develop ritualized forms of masculinity that allow them to cope and survive in an environment of oppression and racism.<sup>22</sup> They claimed, “Being male and black has meant being psychologically

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<sup>20</sup> The term *rejection* is used here to differentiate it from the critical theory concept *resistance*. In this context, *rejection* is referring to an act of refusing or discarding, most often followed by negative consequences. Whereas *resistance* is understood as a legitimate and often positive response to domination, assisting individuals or groups to resist the negative forces of oppression as part of a larger political struggle that works toward social justice (Leistyna et al., 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Ogbu (1978a, 1992) never appeared to identify his theoretical perspective by label but rather identified his perspective in broad terms such as *minority education and caste or understanding cultural diversity and learning*. Osborne (1999), however, identified Ogbu’s theory as a “cultural-ecological perspective” (p. 555); a label I use throughout the study.

<sup>22</sup> In the preface of their book, Major and Billson (1993) explicitly stated:

castrated—rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated” (p. 1). Cool pose, then, is a coping mechanism that is materialized in ritualized forms of masculinity, which “entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (p. 4). These ritualized forms of masculinity physically manifest themselves through cultural specific demeanors, gestures, stances, walks, handshakes, and so on; and through cultural specific clothing, hair, and other “fashion” styles.

Majors et al. (1994), drawing from the work of Goffman, stated that symbolically cool pose suggests that “meaning is not inherent in social interaction but rather, meaning must be ‘negotiated’ by individuals in a given situation” (p. 248). This negotiation process brings about Black males adherence to particular roles, ideas, values or norms that are often in opposition to, or reject, the dominant culture (and school culture<sup>23</sup>). These oppositional behaviors work “to keep whites off balanced and puzzled about the black man’s true feelings” (Major & Billson, 1993, p. 9). Majors and Billson’s claimed:

When white people observe black males displaying cool pose, being aloof and seemingly fearless, they may see them as mysterious and imperturbable. But then they may also see them as irresponsible, shiftless, and unmotivated. What the black male regards as cool, the white person may define as an attitude problem. (p. 53)

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We stress that cool pose—which certainly characterizes the style of *some* black males, some of the time—does not apply to all black males, all of the time. Cool pose is a strategy *available* for use in the black community but is only one of many coping strategies developed within the American context. (p. xii)

I urge the reader to be mindful of this caveat as they read all of the theories discussed in the various discourses outlined in this literature review.

<sup>23</sup> I acknowledge that schools are riddled with many student subculture groups (and individuals) that are often in opposition to or reject the dominant school culture, all purporting a unique “style” (Hebdige, 1979/2001, p. 3). Hebdige defined *style in subculture* as “transformations [that] go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’...[providing] a speech which offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus” (p. 18). I argue that the *style* of cool pose (Major & Billson, 1993) is somewhat different from other subculture styles; given that, cool pose is claimed to have begun and evolved in direct response to the injustices of racism and discrimination inflicted—historically and currently—on Black boys and Black male adolescents within the structures of school, and on Black males in U.S. society generally.

Majors et al. (1994) identified cool pose norms as ranging from behaviors that enhance self-esteem among Black males, such as stylish dress, athletic feats, and unique handshakes, to compulsive masculinity behaviors that can lead to health problems and violence, such as toughness, sexual promiscuity, manipulation, and thrill seeking. Majors et al. argued that these compulsive masculinity behaviors result in higher incidents of domestic abuse, gang activity, and violence in general within the African American community.

In the context of schools, Majors et al. (1994) noted that there is often a conflict between the cool pose behaviors adopted by Black boys and Black male adolescents and their White teachers:

Quite simply, white middle-class teachers and school authorities often perceive provocative walking styles, “rapping,” use of slang, expressive hairstyles, excessive use of jewelry, wearing hats (and wearing hats backwards), wearing the belt unbuckled, untied sneakers, and so on as arrogant, rude, defiant, aggressive, intimidating, threatening, and, in general, behaviors not conducive to learning (Foster, 1986). (p. 255)

Majors et al. claimed that because White teachers often misinterpret, overreact to, and become frightened by these Black male cultural-specific behaviors, Black male students are physically punished and suspended and recommended for remedial and special education classes more often than any other identifiable group of students.

Majors et al. (1994), building from the work of Oliver, suggested an Afrocentric cultural ideology or worldview could assist African Americans, and specifically African American male students, in mitigating the adverse effects of racism and discrimination more productively than adopting a cool pose stance. An Afrocentric cultural ideology is not anti-White, but encourages African Americans to reclaim the traditional African values of oneness with nature, spirituality, and collectivism—juxtaposed against the Eurocentric values of controlling nature, materialism, and individualism (Major & Billson, 1993). Various rites-of-passage programs facilitate the

development of an Afrocentric worldview (Major & Billson, 1993; Major et al. 1994). These programs provide Black boys and Black male adolescents development and training “in the importance of enacting appropriate roles for son, husband, and father; Black history and cultural enrichment; sex education; educational reinforcement; political awareness; community service; and life-skills management” (Major et al., 1994, p. 257).

### *Stereotype Threat Theory*

Steele’s (1997) stereotype threat theory centers on how societal stereotypes about specific groups “can influence the intellectual functioning and identity development of individual group members” (p. 613). For instance, stereotype threat is manifested in the lower than expected test scores of African Americans on standardized assessment tests or in the lack of enrollment of mathematically talented women in advanced mathematics courses. In effect, stereotype threat is a “social-psychological threat,” a threat that occurs “when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies” (p. 614). This situation threatens one with being negatively stereotyped, with being treated stereotypically, or with the possibility of conforming to the stereotype. Or understood in another way, stereotype threat is a “situational threat...that, in general can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists (e.g., skateboarders, older adults, White men, gang members)” (p. 614). Steele claimed that this threat affects (some) members of any group who have been atypically stereotyped, such as female students who are successful in advanced mathematics or African American students who are successful in school.

In the case of school-identified (i.e., successful) African American students, the theory begins with the assumption that to sustain school success one must self-identify with school and school achievement, and to self-identify with school and school achievement one must feel that

one belongs and is valued in the domain. Stereotype threat becomes self-threatening when a member of a group begins to strongly self-identify with a behavior that has been atypically stereotyped for that specific group, such as the case for school success for an African American. Consequently, one neutralizes the self-threatening effects of stereotype threat by “disidentification” (Steel, 1997, p. 614), which is a reconceptualization of one’s self-identity so as to remove the atypically stereotyped behavior from one’s basis of self-evaluation (Steele, 1997). In other words, stereotype is no longer a threat for a school-identified African American, if that school-identified African American removes, or rejects, school success from her or his self-identity. Or simply stated in another way, “Pain is lessened by ceasing to identify with the part of life in which the pain occurs” (Steel, 1999, p. 46).

Steele (1997) believed that stereotype threat has an abiding effect on school achievement, which explains three situations that empirical evidence has demonstrated are present in the experiences of school-disidentified students: “the resilience of self-esteem to stigmatization; the relationship between stigmatized status and school achievement; and, among ability-stigmatized people [e.g., African American students], the relationship between their school performance and self-esteem” (p. 622). First, drawing from the work of Crocker and Major, Steele claimed that if the student did not identify with the domain (e.g., school success) to start with, being negatively stigmatized in the domain will not impact the student’s self-esteem. Second, through reporting the results of Ogbu’s studies, Steele contended that many castelike minorities (e.g., African Americans) often find themselves relegated to a “lower” status in the structure of schools, and in society in general; therefore, their intellectual abilities are stigmatized—“sowing the seeds... of their school disidentification” (p. 623). And lastly, citing the work of several scholars (e.g., Porter & Washington; Rosenberg; Wylie), Steel claimed that disidentification toward school

success explains why Black students who often performed less well than White students on measures of academic achievement still report a slightly higher peer-group self-esteem than White students.

Steele (1997) provided some “wise”<sup>24</sup> (p. 624) schooling policies and practices that are intended to reduce the negative effects of stereotype threat theory. He provided three categories of strategies. The strategies for both school-identified and school-disidentified students included optimistic teacher-student relationships, challenge over remediation, and stressing the expandability of intelligence. The strategies for school-identified students included affirming the belongingness, valuing multiple perspectives, and providing role models. And the strategies for school-disidentified students included non-judgmental responsiveness and building self-efficacy. Steele and his colleagues’ preliminary findings of enacting wise policies and practices demonstrated “that wise practices can reduce Black students’ underachievement in a real-school context and, as important, that unwise practices seem to worsen it” (p. 627).

### *Cultural-Ecological Theory*

Ogbu’s (1978a, 1992) cultural-ecological theory asserts that the American racially stratified caste system contributes to the academic underachievement of specific “racial” minorities in U.S. schools. Ogbu (1978b) argued that the deficiency theoretical perspectives of the 1960s and 70s (identified earlier in this chapter) were inadequate in their attempts to explain and alleviate the underachievement experienced by some minorities. Similarly, Ogbu (1992) later argued that the core curriculum and multicultural education perspectives of the 1980s and 90s (and 2000s) were also inadequate. He believed that the core curriculum perspective is inadequate because it fails to

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<sup>24</sup> Steele (1997), drawing from the work of Goffman, noted that the term *wise* was borrowed from gay men and lesbians of the 1950s who identified “heterosexuals who understood their full humanity despite the stigma attached to their sexual orientation” (p. 624) as wise. Likewise, Steele argued for wise schooling policies and practices; policies and practices that understand the full humanity of stereotyped threaten students.

address the complex nature of minority cultural diversity, inside and outside the context of schools. And the multicultural education perspective is inadequate because it fails to recognize minority students' own responsibility for their academic achievement; to base multicultural education theories and programs on reliable cultural studies; and to separate out minority groups that are able to successfully crossover cultural and language boundaries.

In response to these limiting theoretical perspectives, Ogbu (1978a, 1992) suggested his caste theoretical perspective, arguing that the “crucial issue in [understanding] cultural diversity and learning is the relationship between the minority cultures and the American mainstream culture” (1992, p. 5). In organizing the various minority relationships that exist in the American caste system, Ogbu classified racial minorities into three types: (a) autonomous minorities, people who are minorities primarily based on a numerical sense (e.g., Jews); (b) immigrant or voluntary minorities, people who move or immigrate to the United States voluntarily (e.g., Chinese); and (c) castelike or involuntary minorities, people who were brought to the United States against their will and who had been conquered or colonized (e.g., Blacks, Native Americans, and Hawaiians). The different types of minorities are characterized by cultural differences. Primary cultural differences characterize the voluntary minorities and secondary cultural differences characterize the involuntary minorities (autonomous minorities' cultural differences are not discussed in this literature review).

Primary cultural differences as they relate to schooling are identified as language and custom differences. Ogbu (1992) believed that the structures of schools enables voluntary minorities to learn to overcome these cultural “barriers” and that voluntary minorities do not interpret such learning as threatening to their own culture, but as “instrumental and as additive” (p. 9). Secondary cultural differences as they relate to schooling are similarly identified; that is,

language and custom differences, but rather than the schools being facilitators in overcoming these barriers, they exacerbate the differences. Involuntary minorities perceive cultural differences as part of their collective identity, differences that have evolved over time as coping strategies to combat oppressive conditions. The differences therefore are not to be overcome, but maintained.

Ogbu (1992) suggested that secondary cultural differences motivate “cultural inversion” (p. 8). *Cultural inversion* is the rejection of certain forms of behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings by involuntary minorities because they are characterized as White, resulting in involuntary minorities adopting cultural behaviors, events, and so forth that are often in opposition to the dominant culture (Ogbu, 1992). Ogbu believed that the school’s role in intervention into the secondary cultural differences of involuntary minorities leads to performance rejection (i.e., underachievement) by these minorities. In effect, the involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, view school success as a White cultural norm and thus create the negative student label “acting White” (p. 10) when involuntary minorities demonstrate (school) success. Ogbu claimed *acting White* presented a “dilemma for involuntary minority students,” a dilemma in which

they have to choose between “acting White” (i.e., adopting “appropriate” attitudes and behaviors or school rules and standard practices that enhance academic success but are perceived and interpreted by the minorities as typical of White Americans and therefore negatively sanctioned by them) and “acting Black,” “acting Indian,” or “acting Chicano,” and so on (i.e., adopting attitudes and behaviors that the minority students consider appropriate for their group but that are not necessarily conducive to school success). (p. 10).

In addition to the concepts of cultural inversion and acting White, Ogbu (1992) noted that involuntary minorities lacked instrumental factors that motivate voluntary minorities toward achievement, such as the belief of a “payoff later” for hard work due to the limited examples of

where hard work has paid-off within involuntary communities (e.g., professional limits and ceilings for involuntary minorities). This limiting payoff experienced by involuntary minorities is juxtaposed against voluntary minorities who compare their payoff for hard work in the United States with that of their peers' hard work back home.

To neutralize the negative effects of cultural inversion and acting White, Ogbu (1992) recommended that school administrators and teachers should (a) recognize that involuntary minority children come to school with cultural norms that are not only different from White norms, but also might be oppositional; (b) study the histories and cultural adaptations of involuntary minorities; (c) provide special counseling and related programs to combat accusations of acting White; and (d) teach involuntary minorities accommodation without assimilation strategies.<sup>25</sup> He further suggested that the involuntary, middle-class community take an active role in providing involuntary youth with “concrete evidence” that “school success leads to social and economic success in later adult life” and to rethink its role in dealing with involuntary youth, going “beyond programs, advocacy, and institutional representation to reaffiliate with the community socially” (p. 13).

### *Raceless Persona Theory*

Fordham's (1988, 1996) raceless persona theory contends that African American students who achieve school and academic success are often conflicted, feeling the need to reject their racial and cultural identity in the process of achieving school and academic success. Fordham argued:

Despite the growing acceptance of ethnicity and strong ethnic identification in the larger American society, school officials appear to disapprove of a strong ethnic identity among Black adolescents, and these contradictory messages produce conflict and ambivalence in the adolescents, both toward developing strong racial and ethnic identities and toward performing well in school. (p. 55)

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<sup>25</sup> Ogbu (1992) defined Gibson's 1988 *accommodation without assimilation theory* as when a student adopts the approved cultural norms of the school while maintaining their own cultural norms when at home and in the community.

Fordham began setting forth her argument by borrowing the anthropological concept *fictive kinship*, defined as “a kin-ship connection between and among persons in a society, not related by blood or marriage, who have maintained essential reciprocal social or economic relationships” (p. 56). She suggested that fictive kinship within the African American community is a learned cultural symbol that denotes a Black collective identity, resulting in community terms such as “brother,” “sister,” and “blood.” Similar to Ogbu’s (1978a, 1992) notion of castelike involuntary minorities, Fordham claimed that members of the Black collective identity develop cultural norms that are often oppositional to the norms of White America. She suggested that resisting, or rejecting, school and academic success is often considered part of the Black collective identity because it is perceived to be in opposition to the White identity. Fordham noted that even though Black students who assimilate to the White school norms have a better chance of school and academic success, they either consciously or unconsciously distance themselves from the Black collective—developing a raceless persona.

Fordham (1988) found her raceless high-achieving African American female research participants to be unequivocally committed to the values and beliefs of the dominant culture, which included a belief in an egalitarian meritocracy. She claimed that the internalized values, beliefs, and ideals that are taught and learned in school became part of the female students’ behavior patterns within their family and community. Raceless persona distanced Fordham’s high-achieving female students from their less successful peers, enabling them to pursue goals and objectives that might be severely criticized by the Black collective. Fordham argued that assimilating to school norms and distancing themselves from the Black collective “appear to be mandated by the school—the price they pay if they desire to achieve vertical mobility” (p. 74).

Like her female research participants, Fordham (1988) found her raceless high-achieving African American male participants to be committed to the ideal of an egalitarian meritocracy. But unlike the female students, the male students appeared to be “much more victimized in the school context by the ‘double consciousness’”(p. 74). Later, Fordham (1996) clarified the use of double consciousness by suggesting that the dicta for successfully rearing African American male children are more complex and complicated than those suggested for rearing female children. She claimed that African American parents teach their male children “to embrace a twofold contradictory formula: to concurrently accept subordination and the attendant humiliation (for survival in the larger society) and preserve gender domination (for survival in the Black community)” (p. 148). In other words, Fordham believed that African American parents teach their male children to simultaneously hold conflicting socially defined race and gender roles. As a result of this twofold contradictory formula, Fordham’s high-achieving male participants illustrated greater tensions than her female participants between the norms of school and academic success and the Black collective. These intensified tensions did not prevent successful schooling outcomes for these male students, however.

Fordham (1988) claimed that a raceless persona results in internalized conflict and anxiety as Black students juggle their school and community personae, arguing that it is a “clear example of internalizing oppression” (p. 80). She believed that the decision of whether raceless persona is a “pragmatic strategy or Pyrrhic victory can and should be determined only by Black Americans” (p. 82). In other words, does raceless persona provide Black students entrée into a successful future or are the costs of distancing themselves from the Black collective too great for what might be gained in return? Only Black Americans should decide. Fordham concluded by

charging Black Americans to “define explicitly their relationship to the larger society, and hence their expectations for their children in the school context” (p. 82).

### *Burden of Acting White Theory*

Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) burden of acting White theory is a coupling and extension of Fordham’s concept *fictive kinship* and Ogbu’s concept *acting White*. This theory attempts to explain how African American students who are high-achievers or perform satisfactorily, although well below their potential (i.e., underachievers), in schools manage the burden of acting White. Fordham and Ogbu claimed that few Black students have learned coping strategies that assist in resolving the tensions between success in the White identity of schools and the fictive-kinship of the Black collective. Their analysis of successful students who had learned coping strategies demonstrated that students camouflaged their success by being actively involved in athletics, “which are regarded as ‘black activities’” (p. 202), or by becoming the class clown; while others acquired the protection from the school “bullies” and “hoodlums” in exchange for assistance in schoolwork and homework. They concluded that the learning and performance problems of African American students is not only “from a limited opportunity structure and black people’s responses to it, but also from the way black people attempt to cope with the ‘burden of ‘acting white’” (p. 201).

Within the burden of acting White theory, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) noted an additional burden present for successful male students—the burden of being taunted as “gay.” They claimed that resisting, or rejecting, school and academic success is linked to Black male masculinity and sexuality; thus, adding an additional burden to Black boys and Black male adolescents in schools (see also Fordham, 1996).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) claimed that their analysis has implications at several levels regarding the schooling of Black children. First, they stated that their analysis demonstrates the need to change the existing opportunity structure, both in school and in the labor force. Second, they believed that their analysis confirms the negative effects of the subtle barriers found within schools that must be eliminated. And lastly, they stated that the additional burden of acting White experienced by academically successful Black students should become a target of educational policies and remediation efforts, noting that both school officials and members of the Black community have roles to play in this regard. School officials should make attempts to understand fictive kinships and develop programs that divorce school and academic success from the idea of acting White. Likewise, members of the Black community need to develop similar programs, as well as begin an internal examination of the Black community's perception and interpretation of school learning.

#### *Summary of the Discourse of Rejection*

In the five previously presented theoretical perspectives, located in the discourse of rejection, Black children, and specifically Black boys and Black male adolescents, with varying degrees, are perceived to either reject schooling and academics or the Black collective identity. When Black male students reject schooling and academics, the community and school efforts to improve their educational outcomes are similarly identified as they were in the discourse of deficiency—intervention strategies. The intervention strategies in this discourse, however, have as their primary goal the nurturing and development of Black boys and Black male adolescents—rather than the “fixing.” These strategies include after-school manhood development programs as well as mentoring and rites-of-passage programs found in the larger community (Alford, McKenry, & Gavazzi, 2001; Harvey, 2001; Kunjufu, 1995; Majors,

Wilkinson, & Gulam, 2001). Other strategies attempt to create inclusive education environments such as African American immersion schools that work toward reducing the dominant Eurocentric perspective that prevails in U.S. schools (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2001).

When young Black male students reject the Black collective identity, the community and school efforts to improve their educational outcomes become focused on developing programs for Black youth that teach the message that school and academic success are “not synonymous with one-way acculturation into a white cultural frame of reference or acting white” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 203). These programs, however, need to be accompanied with a reexamination of the perceptions and interpretations of schools and school learning held by the Black community in general, given that it has been argued that the concept *acting White* originated in the larger Black community (Fordham, 1988, 1996; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu 1978b, 1992).

Despite the fact that the intervention strategies such as those mentioned in the first case of rejection (i.e., rejection of school and academics) have shown success the danger of essentialism is still present. Additionally, the availability of such intervention programs is limited, resulting in minimal impact on the total African American male student population.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, unless the classroom teacher is actively involved in an intervention strategy, teacher achievement expectations and pedagogy in the discourse of rejection maintains the pedagogy of poverty, given that the lack of academic achievement from the student is perceived to be a student choice. Indeed, syllogism number 1, teachers and students are engaged in different tasks, relieves the teacher of any responsibility for the rejection of school and academics by Black male students; and syllogism number 3, an inevitable ranking, continues to track Black male students out of advanced mathematics classes. And in the second case of rejection (i.e., rejection of the

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<sup>26</sup> There are several economic, political, and personnel obstacles in implementing rites-of-passage programs and African immersion schools (e.g., see Kunjufu, 1995; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2001).

Black collective), there is insufficient empirical evidence regarding education programs and changes in the Black community at large as to make an educated assessment of the community and school efforts.

Although it has been argued that theoretical perspectives located in the discourse of rejection, such as the cultural-ecological theory, were developed to move education away from the discourse of deficiency (Ogbu, 1978b), these perspectives provide no substantial plan for moving African American students away from acts of “rejection” or school structures toward acts of inclusion. Furthermore, even though the discourse of rejection might explain the schooling experiences of some African American students, the discourse regarding rejection in the first case continues to place the blame for the lower academic achievement of the Black child, on the Black child, rather than on the structure of U.S. schools and society.

#### Discourse of Achievement

The discourse of achievement seeks to explain the achievement in school and academics by African American children, and specifically African American male students. Polite and Davis (1999) stated, “At the core of African American males’ experience in school and society is persistence and triumph—one that has been overshadowed by the literature and discourse that focus primarily on the social pathology of African American men” (pp. 2–3). The discourse of achievement has been the least researched and theorized discourse. Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s there has been a sprinkling of research studies that have attempted to examine the achievement of historically marginalized students (e.g., see Bergin & Cooks, 2000, 2002; Hébert & Reis, 1999; Martin, 2000; O’Connor, 1997).<sup>27</sup> Much of this research has brought into question theories and practices located in the discourses of deficiency and rejection.

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<sup>27</sup>The research listed has not exclusively focused on academically successful African American male students, but all had academically successful African American male students as research participants.

Hébert and Reis (1999) analyzed a culturally diverse group of high-achieving and successful students from an urban high school who experienced circumstances in and out of school that have been hypothesized as inhibiting academic achievement. Their participants were successful in spite of the negative aspects of their urban environments. Hébert and Reis identified specific factors that enabled these urban youths to be successful: a belief in self, supportive family members and adults, an interactive network of high-achieving peers, extracurricular activities, challenging classes such as honors classes, and personal characteristics such as motivation and resilience. They argued that their study illustrated the resiliency of students and offered justification for why urban high schools should provide enrichment and extracurricular activities and advanced placement and honors courses.

O'Connor's (1997) low income, high-achieving African American high school research participants also experienced circumstances in and out of school that have been hypothesized as inhibiting academic achievement. In addition to the factors identified by Hébert and Reis (1999) as promoting achievement, O'Connor documented that her high-achieving African American students had a positive racial identity and high awareness of race and socially structured racism. She claimed that even though these students understood the structural constraints of racism they did not believe them to be "indomitable structures which could not be defied, negotiated, or in fact altered" (p. 623). O'Connor believed the perspectives of these students contradicted Ogbu's (1978b, 1992) ecological-theory. She wrote, "Though it is beyond the scope of this project to indicate whether these student were 'acting White' in the classroom...they certainly were not 'thinking White'" (p. 614). O'Connor found that these students had a language for explaining the relationship between social structures and agency and a disposition toward collective struggle

that “may have disposed them ‘toward political action to transform society’ (MacLeod, 1995, p. 257)” (p. 625).

Bergin and Cooks (2000) found a high-level of competition for grades and recognition among students in a predominantly Black inner-city high school, and they noted that their research participants perceived academic competition as beneficial. Additionally, after an investigation of the concept *acting White* with average to high-achieving students of color, Bergin and Cooks (2002) concluded that they “did not hear a single comment from students admitting that they had altered their behavior, reduced their effort, or earned poor grades in order to avoid accusations of acting white” (p. 132). Bergin and Cooks believed that harassment about acting White was more likely to occur when students showed “‘proper speech,’ or ‘white dress,’ or preference for other ‘white’ things” (p. 131), rather than from projecting school or academic success.

The findings from Martin’s (2000) analysis of 35 high-achieving African American mathematics students corroborated the findings of the previously presented studies. Like the participants from the other studies, Martin’s participants experienced a multiplicity of obstacles in and out of school that are believed to prevent student success; however, they navigated their way through these obstacles achieving academic and mathematics success. Martin’s high-achieving students “consistently placed themselves in the ‘good kids’ group and did not care about negative labels that their peers tried to assign them” (p. 166). He claimed that these successful students had incorporated a positive mathematics identity within their larger academic efforts for success.

*Summary of the Discourse of Achievement*

The community and school efforts that explain the educational outcomes of Black male students located in the discourse of achievement can only be hinted at because of the limited amount of research within this discourse. What has been documented is that efforts such as mentoring programs, summer enrichment programs, and opportunities to enroll in advanced academic courses appear to have positive impacts on success, as do student characteristics such as motivation, resilience, ability to navigate, self-awareness, racial-identity, and agency. Social factors such as supportive families, teachers, and community members, and an interactive high-achieving peer group have been identified as having a positive impact on success as well.

Some of the community and school efforts that have been documented as beneficial in the discourse of achievement can also be found in the discourse of rejection, for example mentoring programs. Nevertheless, what remains unclear within this discourse is how to facilitate the development of the student characteristics and social factors that have been documented as beneficial. In other words, we do not know: How do successful Black male students become motivated? How do successful Black male students develop resiliency? How do successful Black male students learn to navigate? How does self-awareness and racial-identity influence successful Black male students? How do successful Black male students understand agency? How do families and communities influence successful Black male students? How do teachers influence successful Black male students? How do high-achieving peer groups influence successful Black male students?

Although determining plausible answers to these questions would provide additional information to the education community regarding the schooling of African American male students, it still remains uncertain if these are even the right questions to be asking. In effect, we

do not even know what questions could or should be asked because of the limited amount of research that has focused on academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students.

But we do know “that students who reject academic achievement and students who embrace academic achievement exist side by side in schools throughout the United States” (Bergin & Cooks, 2002, p. 133). My experience as a high school mathematics teacher exposed me to young Black male (and female) students who not only performed just as well as White students on measures of academic achievement, but (also) in many cases performed better than most Whites. It is time education researchers begin to inquire about those African American male (and female) students who embrace academic achievement in order to provide helpful suggestions to schools administrators and teachers regarding the education of their African American students. I trust that this study, which spotlights African American male students who embraced school, academics, and mathematics, will lend a hand in this endeavor as well as assist in filling a void in the education literature. What is learned from this inquiry, I hope, will provide insights into achieving successful schooling, academic, and mathematics outcomes for all students.

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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 other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, 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. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 3)

I begin this chapter with a brief explanation of how I selected theoretical frameworks, noting the need for a philosophical foundation when making such selections. This explanation is followed by a discussion that provides the details of the eclectic framework employed in the study, which includes poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical (postmodern) theory. I conclude the chapter with an explanation of why the study is positioned within a critical postmodern theoretical framework

#### Selecting Theoretical Frameworks

Paul and Marfo (2001) suggested that as education researchers make their theoretical paradigm selections they should engage in an analysis of the ontological, epistemological, and ethical perspectives that underpin alternative paradigms. They claimed that without an analysis of this sort researchers are “likely to find themselves mired in simplistic conceptions and choices of methodological preferences, informed, at best, by the same tradition that has perpetuated the inquiry-as-technique mindset in quantitative research” (pp. 537–538). Agreeing with Paul and Marfo’s suggestion, as I examined the numerous theoretical frameworks available to social scientists, I attempted to understand not only the methodological implications of each paradigm

but also its philosophical foundations. Throughout my examination, it was imperative that the philosophical underpinnings of the frameworks match my evolving philosophy of education as well as provide ethical and effective methodological procedures for highlighting the mathematics schooling experiences of successful African American male students. I believe that the theoretical frameworks that were selected for this study achieved both stipulations.

#### Why an Eclectic Theoretical Framework

Recall, as Martin (2000) suggested expanding the sphere of mathematics education research into the sociocultural arena, he also called for a further examination of the individual agency of African American students. Specifically, he called for an analysis of how successful students negotiate community and school forces as they resist or oppose those forces that they perceive to be negative or as obstacles that stand in the way of their success. After his initial analysis of 35 mathematically successful African American students, Martin claimed, “Students are capable of recognizing and responding to these forces in ways that help them resist the negative forces and to take advantage of the positive forces that they encounter” (p. 185). I argue that a study that aims at exposing the multifaceted variations of how students resist, oppose, or even reconfigure negative sociocultural forces as they embrace those forces that are positive requires a “somewhat eclectic” (Sfard, 2003, p. 354) theoretical approach.

Sfard (2003) defended the necessity of having a somewhat eclectic theoretical approach as she attempted to understand the multifaceted variations of mathematics teaching and learning. She stated: “Educational theories, like practical solutions, respond badly to being left alone. They can thrive only in the company of other theories” (p. 355). She further argued that controversies within different theoretical frameworks “are very often, if not always, an outcome of differences between underlying metaphors,” suggesting that rather than viewing educational theories as

incompatible they should “be viewed as either *complementary*—that is, concerned with different aspects of the same phenomena—or *incommensurable*—that is, speaking different languages rather than really conflicting with each other” (p. 355). The theoretical framework of this study thrives by borrowing complementary and incommensurable tenets from poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical theory.<sup>28</sup> Poststructural theory provides a frame for rethinking and redefining key concepts such as person, agency, and power, among others. Critical race theory provides a frame for understanding how the discourse of race and racism operates within U.S. social structures. And lastly, critical (postmodern) theory provides a frame for discussing what, I argue, should be the purposes of education research. In the following discussion, I highlight specific aspects of the three frameworks that drove the topic selection and methodological choices for this study, and provide an over-simplified discussion that locates each framework in its social historical context.

### Poststructural Theory

Before engaging in a discussion of post-structuralism, it is necessary to provide a brief explanation of structuralism. The beginnings of structuralism can be traced to various schools of thought and disciplines throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology, among others, and individuals such as Marx (1818–1883), Lévi-Strauss (1908–), and Piaget (1896–1980) contributed to the development of structuralism and to its critiques. Although the sources and individuals who contributed to

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<sup>28</sup> While borrowing complementary and incommensurable tenets of these three theoretical frameworks, I do not intend to suggest that they share similar philosophical foundations; a caution noted by Lerman (1996, 2000a) regarding such positions as purported by Sfard (2003). I clearly understand that the ontological, epistemological, and ethical considerations of these frameworks are different; however, for the purpose of this study I am following Sfard’s suggestion and viewing these differences as complementary or incommensurable.

structuralism are varied, all held the similar chief perspective of contesting the philosophical and theoretical positions of empirical positivism.<sup>29</sup>

As Crotty (1998) attempted to simplify the historical development of structuralism, he acknowledged Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), a French sociologist, “as at least the precursor of structuralism” (p. 196). Durkheim (1914/1973) noted that both the psychological and sociological are needed when examining “what is most specifically human in man” (p. 150). He wrote:

We can say, therefore, with assurance and without being excessively dogmatic, that a great number of our mental states, including some of the most important ones, are of social origin. In this case, then it is the whole that, in a large measure, produces the part; consequently, it is impossible to attempt to explain the whole without explaining the part—without explaining, at least the part as a result of the whole. (p. 149)

Durkheim perceived the structures of social origin as equally important as psychology in understanding man as human. In fact, he believed that the sociological contributions to understanding the human condition surpassed those provided by psychology, stating, “It is only by historical analysis that we can discover what makes up man, since it is only in the course of history that he is formed” (p. 150).

This deterministic feature of the idea that the structures of social origin form or “determine” man is the simplest way to characterize the structuralist perspective. Crotty (1998) provided the following definition of structuralism from Milner:

For our purpose and very broadly, structuralism might well be defined as an approach to the study of human culture, centered on the search for constraining patterns, or structures, which claims that individual phenomena have meaning only by virtue of their relations to

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<sup>29</sup> Lather (1991) provided four basic assumptions of positivism:

1. the aims, concepts and methods of the natural sciences are applicable to the social sciences;
2. the correspondence theory of truth which holds that reality is knowable through correct measurement methods is adequate for the social sciences;
3. the goal of social research is to create universal laws of human behavior which transcend culture and history; and
4. the fact/value dichotomy, the denial of both the theory-laden dimensions of observation and the value-laden dimensions of theory create the grounds for an “objective” social science. (p. 172)

other phenomena as elements within a systematic structure. (1991, p. 61) (as cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 198).

Crotty believed that it was this deterministic feature of structuralism that motivated many of its critiques; Althusser (1918–1990) provided one of those critiques.

Althusser's Marxist critique and interpretation of structuralism claimed that Marx had "eliminated the human subject from social theory and constructed a 'new science'" on different levels of the human practices of economics, ideology, politics, and science that were "inscribed in the structure of a social totality" (Bottomore, 1983/2001, p. 527). This structure of social totality was "overdetermined" (Althusser's concept). In effect, reality was believed to be infinite with multiple overlapping causations with no one explanation claiming to be the "true," "absolute," or "objective" explanation; likewise, the dimensions of social structures were infinite with social change having an infinity of causes and consequences (Wolff, 2002). This Marxist critique and interpretation of structuralism advanced the influence of structuralism on the scholarly works of many social scientists and philosophers during the 1960s and 70s (Sarup, 1993). Nonetheless, the Student and Worker's Revolt of 1968 in Paris dramatically changed the frame of structuralist philosophy (Rapaport, 1997), significantly impacting Foucault (1926–1984), Deleuze (1925–1995), Guattari (1930–1992), Derrida (1930–), and Lyotard (1924–), among others who later became known as post-structuralists.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> None of the philosophers listed claimed the label of structuralist, post-structuralist, or even postmodernist, with the exception of Lyotard who claimed the label postmodernist. Rajchman (1987) noted that the term *postmodernism* "is what the French learned the Americans were calling what they were thinking" (p. 49). Specifically, he claimed, "Foucault rejected the category; Guattari despises it; Derrida has no use for it; Lacan and Barthes did not live, and Althusser was in no state to learn about it; and Lyotard found it in American" (p. 49). Rajchman's claim is verified throughout the works of these philosophers. For example, Foucault (1983/2003) in an interview remarked, "I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a Marxist, and I have never been a structuralist" (p. 84). And later in the same interview he sarcastically asked, "What are we calling postmodernity? I'm not up to date" (p. 92).

The failed 1968 Revolt brought about a rethinking and ultimately an abandonment by many scholars of the Marxist structuralist critique with its analysis of a social structure of totality. Gordon (1980), a Foucauldian scholar, characterized

the years around 1972–1977 in France as an unusual and fascinating, albeit confused period, during which new lines of investigation and critiqued emerged on the intellectual scene in a relationship of mutual stimulation with new modes of political struggle conducted at a multiplicity of distinct sites within society. (p. ix)

These new lines of investigation and critiqued replaced the structuralist critiques with post-structuralist critiques, such as Foucault’s critique of the discursively constituted subject and *pouvoir-savoir* (i.e., power and knowledge) and Derrida’s deconstruction of language and cultural practices (Sarup, 1993).

These “post” critiques of the discursive subject and power and knowledge and the deconstruction of language and cultural practices provide a framework for poststructuralism. Similar to structuralism, poststructuralism rejects the philosophical and theoretical perspectives of empirical positivism. They differ, however, in that while structuralism is embedded within humanism,<sup>31</sup> poststructuralism makes concerted efforts to remove itself from humanism—attempting “to pass beyond man and humanism” (Derrida, 1978, p. 292). Moreover, while structuralism eliminates the individual from social theory, poststructuralism inserts the discursively constituted subject into social theory (Foucault, 1969/1972). They also differ in that poststructuralists are not searching for constraining patterns or structures that provide meaning to human phenomena. Rather, within poststructuralism there is an “incredulity toward

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<sup>31</sup> Woodhouse (1980) provided a direct definition of *humanism*: “The view that nature and experience, rather than, say, God’s will or social custom, ought to be the basis of our religious, moral, social, and political values and ideals. Humanism is often associated with self-realizationist philosophies and psychologies” (p. 118). Foucault (2003) connected *humanism* to “a set of themes that have reappeared on several occasions, over time... always tied to value judgments” (p. 52). St. Pierre (2000), drawing from the work of Flax, identified some of these themes as the premise that language is transparent; that a stable coherent self exist; that reason and science provides an objective foundation for knowledge; that reasoned knowledge will be “true”; that conflicts between truth, knowledge, and power are resolved through reason; and that freedom is obedience to laws established as a result of reasoned true knowledge.

metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1979/1984, p. xxiv); emphasis is not on the presence of meaning but the absence of meaning—that which escapes meaning (Derrida, 1974/1997). St. Pierre (2000) stated:

Once we begin to shift our understanding and consider that language is not transparent, that the thing itself always escapes, that absence rather than presence and difference rather than identity produce the world, then the fault line of humanism’s structure becomes apparent. At that point, we must begin to use language differently and ask different questions that might produce different possibilities for living. (p. 484)

In effect, poststructuralism offers a different theoretical perspective and language that redefines concepts found in humanism, such as person, discourse, experience, agency, power, and marginalization, among many others.<sup>32</sup>

Before engaging in the following discussion regarding the different theoretical perspective of poststructuralism, the reader should be mindful of St. Pierre and Willow’s (2000a) caveat offered in their edited book *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education*. They noted that a discussion around poststructuralism is not intended to establish an oppositional structural binary between poststructuralism and humanism that privileges poststructuralism. They argued, however, that such a human practice is difficult to avoid given that “we are always speaking within the language of humanism, our mother tongue, a discourse that spawns structure after structure after structure—binaries, categories, hierarchies, and other grids of regularity that are not only linguistic but also very material” (St. Pierre & Willow, 2000b, p. 4). St. Pierre and Willow further explicated their argument, writing:

Poststructuralism, then, does not assume that humanism is an error that must be replaced—i.e., humanism is evil because it has gotten us into this fix; poststructuralism is good since it will save us. It does not offer an alternative, successor regime of truth, it does not claim to have “gotten it right,” nor does it believe that such an emancipatory outcome is possible or even desirable. Rather, it offers critiques and methods for

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<sup>32</sup> The outline of the following discussion about poststructuralism was modeled after St. Pierre’s (2000) essay “Poststructural Feminism in Education: An Overview.”

examining the functions and effects of any structure or grid of regularity that we put into place, including those poststructuralism itself might create. (p. 6)

These critiques and methods of examination found within poststructuralism offer a different theoretical perspective and language that redefines concepts found in humanism, as previously noted, such as the term *individual*. The language of poststructuralism redefines the person as a subject rather than as an individual. The term *individual* is a humanist term that implies that there is an “independent and rational being who is predisposed to be motivated toward social agency and emancipation—what Descartes believed to be the existence of a unified self” (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996, p. 341). Poststructuralism rejects this humanist notion of an essential unified self who is always present, because it minimizes the force of social structures on the person. This humanist perspective of the person virtually denies that social structures have any impact at all on the formation of the individual. On the contrary, a poststructural perspective identifies the person as a subject that is subjugated, but not determined, by the social structures, and discourses, that constitute the person,—a “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1969/1972, p. 38)—mapping out a “territory...in which structure and agency are not either-or but both-and and, simultaneously, neither-nor” (Lather, 1991, p. 154).

These structures and discourses are historically and socially situated and constructed. The concept of discourse includes “language, complex signs, and practices that order and sustain particular forms of social existence...and can work to either confirm or deny the life histories and experiences of the people who use them” (Leistyna et al., 1996, p. 336). Foucault (1969/1972) claimed that discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (p. 49); consequently, “one remains within the dimension of discourse” (p. 76). He joined power and knowledge through discourse, identifying discourse both as an “effect of power” and as providing “a point of resistance” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 101):

Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable...but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. ... We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (pp. 100–101)

In effect, Foucault suggested that although discourses structure knowledge their lack of uniformity and stability make them vulnerable to resistance, providing for the occasion of developing different discourses. This poststructural analysis of discourse allows for the understanding of “how knowledge, truth, and subjects are produced in language and cultural practice as well as how they might be reconfigured” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 486).

The elaboration of the concept of discourse also comes into play when redefining the concept of experience. Scott (1992) redefined the concept of experience, claiming that

it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. Experience in this definition then becomes not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced. (p. 26)

In other words, the person is not an individual whose lived experiences have formed the basis of her or his knowledge and actions, but rather a discursively constituted subject who can only explain her or his experiences through the discourses that are made available to her or him (Foucault, 1969/1972). Thus, it becomes the available discourses that form the basis of the subject’s knowledge and actions rather than the life experiences in and of themselves.

Although it might appear that the concept of available discourses denies the discursively constituted subject the ability to act, the subject of poststructuralism does possess agency—albeit a different conceptualization of agency than that which is found within a humanist frame. St. Pierre (2000) claimed that a humanist conceptualization of agency positions it as an inherent

attribute of humans. She noted that humanists believe that all persons have agency and can escape to freedom away from oppression due to this inherent attribute of agency that wills persons to be free. Within the humanist frame, it is believed that “man” with his unlimited free will (i.e., agency) and rational intellect can free “mankind” from confusion and oppression, and that those who confront and overcome obstacles become heroes and models for the rest of mankind.<sup>33</sup> St. Pierre declared that the individual of humanism who possess this unlimited agency “remains the dominant fiction of Western philosophy” (p. 501).

In contrast to the individual of humanism, St. Pierre (2000) claimed that the discursively constituted subject of poststructuralism does not possess unlimited agency. Agency, however, does not disappear but rather is re-theorized. She suggested that the re-theorized agency of the subject produces both a restricting effect on the production of knowledge and actions, and an enabling effect on the production of different kinds of knowledge and actions. For example, although the knowledge and actions of women have been restricted due to the limiting discourses of patriarchy, feminists have reconfigured these discourses developing knowledge and actions that are not available in the dominant discourse. St. Pierre identified this phenomenon as a “double move” (p. 502) in the construction of the subject. She contended that a subject exhibits agency when it constructs itself by taking up the discourses and cultural practices that are available, while at the same time being forced into subjectivity by those same discourses and practices. She claimed that agency within the poststructural frame is “up for grabs, continually reconfigured and renamed as is the subject itself,” arguing that “agency seems to lie in the subject’s ability to decode and recode its identity within discursive formations and cultural

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<sup>33</sup> Within the humanist tradition, it could be argued that patriarchy runs amuck, as illustrated by the over representation of humankind with the terms of *man* and the male pronouns *he* and *his*, implying that knowledge is (re)produced by the male human only. Furthermore, the male of humanism is most often recognized as a White, Christian, heterosexual male of bourgeois privilege.

practices” (p. 504). In other words, the discursively constituted subject is not dead, but rather “has been opened up to the possibility of continual reconstruction and reconfiguration” (p. 502).

Agency theorized in this manner does provide freedom to act. It is, however, not freedom to do whatever the subject wills but rather freedom to constitute oneself in an unexpected manner—to decode and recode one’s identity. Butler (1990) identified this action as “subversive repetition” (p. 32). Subversive repetition signifies that even though the subject is subjected to repeating oneself through the available discourses the discourses themselves are “open to intervention and resignification” (p. 33), allowing the subject to repeat herself or himself in a rebellious manner (or not). As noted earlier, discourses are open to intervention and resignification because they are historically and socially constructed. In other words, there is no origin, or understood in another way, no center to discourses. Derrida (1978) argued that accepting discourse as having no center allows discourse to be open for the “movement of play” (p. 289). He defined play as the “disruption of presence” (p. 292). In this context, play rejects the totalization of humanism with its “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play” (p. 292). This movement of play provides more freedom for the discursively constituted subject and this freedom allows for more subversive repetition. Thus, freedom might be reinterpreted as play since play becomes generative because subversive repetition resignifies the discourse and a resignified discourse allows a different repetition, and so on.

Comprehending the concept of subversive repetition requires a rethinking of power in conjunction with the re-theorizing of agency. St. Pierre (2000) claimed that power, similar to agency, within the humanist tradition is perceived as a human attribute that all individuals possess; consequently, it can be deployed, shared, taken away, and so on. She suggested that power in this context is seen as inherently evil or as a negative repressive force; therefore, those

that are concerned with social justice often “give” power away to avoid domination as they attempt to “empower” others who are less fortunate.

In contrast, power in a poststructural frame becomes both a repressive and liberating force, “found in the effects of liberty as well as in the effects of domination” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 491). Foucault (1975/1995) stated:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘mask’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (p. 194)

This Foucauldian perspective theorizes power not as an object that can be shared, deployed or taken away, but as a dynamic and productive event that exist in *relations*. Therefore, rather than speaking of power, Foucault (1976/1990) spoke of “relations of power” or “power relations” (p. 94). He identified four facets of power relations. Power relations were to be understood as a multiplicity of force relations that operate and constitute their own organization; as a process of struggles and confrontations that transforms, strengthens, or reverses the relations; as the points of support or resistance of a system; and lastly, as the strategies that design and maintain social structures and discourses.

Foucault (1976/1990) believed, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (p. 93); claiming, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (p. 95). He believed that power relations are dependent on a “multiplicity of points of resistance,” arguing that these points

play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (pp. 95–96)

In his characterization of resistance Foucault did not deny that there were no “great radical ruptures” or “massive binary divisions,” but that more often one observed “mobile and transitory points of resistance” (p. 96). He suggested that these mobile and transitory points of resistance produced shifting cleavages in society that fractured unities and effected regroupings, “furling across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds” (p. 96).

The rethinking of the concepts of agency and power are implicated in the construction and deconstruction of the marginalized subject.<sup>34</sup> A marginalized subject within a poststructural frame could be identified as any person on the right side of the following binaries: White/non-White, male/female, rich/poor, Christian/non-Christian, able/disable, young/old, heterosexual/non-heterosexual, citizen/non-citizen, educated/non-educated, and so on.<sup>35</sup> There is nothing “real” about these binary features. That is, there is no biological or “scientific” explanation for these binaries. Then again, these are very real features, in that they are historically and socially constructed features located within societal discourses that assist in dividing and differentiating subjects, often leading to unjust social practices.<sup>36</sup> Clearly subjects

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<sup>34</sup> Although I acknowledge that subjects are members of groups that possess group identity, throughout the remainder of the argument I will only refer to subjects.

<sup>35</sup> This discussion of the construction and deconstruction of marginalized subjects is based on class lectures from Professor E. A. St. Pierre at The University of Georgia during the summer 2001, fall 2002, and spring 2003 semesters. Much of the material in these lectures was derived from the philosophy of poststructural and feminist scholars, specifically Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler.

<sup>36</sup> The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in 1998 adopted the organization’s official statement on race that disputed the concept of race as any biological human taxonomy. The Board, however, securely positioned race as an influential and powerful social and political construct that “distorts our ideas about human differences and group behaviors, [stating that] ...scientists today find that reliance on such folk beliefs about human differences in research has led to countless errors” (AAA, 1998, ¶ 9). They concluded their statement by asserting:

The “racial” worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth. The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded and all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans, Native Americans, and peoples of African descent. Given what we know about the capacity of normal humans to achieve and function within any culture, we conclude that present-

live at intersections of these binaries; therefore, which binary feature is most significant to a person at any given moment depends on the context in which the person is located. For example, the binary feature of *woman* for a Black educated female, could be the significant feature within the African American community, whereas the feature of *Black, woman*, or both could be the significant feature(s) within the academy. In other words, the different binary features that a subject might possess could be the source of injustices depending on the context.

Poststructuralism provides a means for de-constructing these binary oppositions through Derrida's (1974/1997) deconstruction of language and cultural practices. The deconstruction of binaries identifies the first term, that is the "privileged" term, as being dependent on its identity by the exclusion of the other term, demonstrating that primacy really belongs to the second term, that is the subordinate term, instead (Sarup, 1988). In deconstruction it is not enough to just neutralize the binary oppositions but one must reverse and displace the binaries. Sarup noted that there is a violent hierarchy within binaries in that one of the two terms controls the other, holding a superior position. Therefore, the first move in deconstruction is to overthrow this hierarchy with the other term, then displacing this term—now the first term—by putting it under erasure,<sup>37</sup> revealing what was always already present. Spivak (1974/1997) characterized deconstruction in a "nutshell" as

to locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed. (p. lxxvii)

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day inequalities between so-called "racial" groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances. (§ 12) Judith Butler (1990) offered a similar argument regarding the construct of gender; likewise, Michel Foucault (1976/1990; 1984/1988; 1984/1990) offered an argument regarding the construct of sexuality.

<sup>37</sup> Spivak (1974/1997) explained Derrida's (1974/1997) *sous rature*, that is, under erasure, as learning "to use and erase our language at the same time" (p. xviii). She stated that Derrida is "acutely aware... [of] the strategy of using the only available language while not subscribing to its premises, or 'operat[ing] according to the vocabulary of the very thing that one delimits' (MP 18, SP 147)" (p. xviii).

Deconstruction then “is not about tearing down but about rebuilding...looking at how a structure has been constructed, what holds it together, and what it produces” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 482).

Deconstruction acknowledges that the world has been constructed through language and cultural practices; consequently, it can be deconstruct and reconstruct again and again (St. Pierre, 2000).

Earlier, when I stated that different binary features lead to injustices, I did not intend to suggest that the injustices that different marginalized subjects experience are equivalent—I understand that they are different. There is, however, a commonality in these binary identity labels, in that marginalized racial, ethnic, and cultural groups are often oppressed within social structures and discourses that have been designed and maintained by people who hold a White, Eurocentric, patriarchal, Christian, heterosexual, middle-class ideology. McLaren argued that the contemporary U.S. ideology regarding race and culture had “mutated” into a xenophobic nationalism that he characterized as the recognition of only “one universal subject of history—the white, Anglo, heterosexual male of bourgeois privilege” (cited in Torres, 1998, p. 178). The maintenance of this xenophobic ideology results in hegemony. Hegemony as characterized by Gramsci is the manner in which imposed ideology results in the reproduction of social and institutional practices and discourses that enable dominant groups to not only maintain their positions of power and privilege, but also have consensual support from the “Others” (Leistyna et al., 1996).

Many of those Others who wish to participate in the dominant culture with an awareness of the effects of hegemony have had to develop a “double-consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 3). Ladson-Billings (2000) argued that double-consciousness allows those that have been marginalized to “see and understand positions of inclusion and exclusion—margins and mainstreams...[and] applies not only to African Americans but to any people who are

constructed outside of the dominant paradigm” (p. 260). (Du Bois’s definition of double-consciousness can be found in the quote at the beginning of this chapter.) Although Du Bois, who was a humanist, theorized the concept of double-consciousness long before the development of poststructuralism (*circa* 1960), it can be argued that the discursively constituted subject of poststructuralism resonates with Du Bois’s concept of the double-consciousness.<sup>38</sup> I argue that those who are constructed outside of the dominant paradigm and have developed a double-consciousness are capable of subversively repeating their discursively constituted selves, continuously opening up new space for play.

Therefore, this research study begins with the acknowledgment of research participants—characterized as discursive subjects, not as individuals—that I believe negotiated societal discourses regarding African American males through an unconscious (or not) developed doubled-consciousness. This acknowledgment, I believe, frees the stories of the participants from being essentialized to the often told Horatio Alger Jr. story—*Oh, look how these young Black boys overcame society’s racial injustices and became successful, pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps*—to stories that more respectfully and accurately explain how these young men achieved success—*Oh, look how these young Black men negotiated society’s racial injustices and became successful through subversively repeating their constituted “raced” selves.*

### Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an explanation of how the discourse of race and racism operates within U.S. social structures. Tate (1997), in his literature review of CRT, noted that CRT grew out of the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement of the 1970s. CLS scholars, known as legal realist, were a small group of legal scholars who argued against the belief that judicial

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<sup>38</sup> Noblit (2004), drawing from the scholarship of Murrillo, noted: “Postmodernity has a racial face. People of color have had to live postmodernity for some time, but only recently has it come to privileged Whites and intellectuals” (p. 193).

proceedings could be built on a finite set of determined rules. This finite set of determined rules perspective of law had dominated U.S. legal practice since the 1920s and 30s. Legal realists, building on the philosophies of pragmatism, instrumentalism, and progressivism, contended that legal rules were limited and could not guide judicial proceedings (Tate, 1997). Additionally, legal realists believed that the prevailing legal scholarship denied the impact of social forces on legal discourse, suggesting applications of behavioral science and statistical methods to legal study (Tate, 1997). In summary, CLS attempted to critically “analyze legal ideology and discourse as a mechanism that functions to re-create and legitimate social structures in the United States” (p. 207).

In this analysis of the legitimation of U.S. social structures, race was left out of the discourse. This omission prompted the development of CRT as an outgrowth of CLS by legal scholars of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998), such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado. The origin of CRT is rooted in the civil rights and social struggles of the 1960s and 70s and as a scholarly movement is traced back to a student boycott and alternative course organized at Harvard Law School in 1981 (Tate, 1997). Tate noted that CRT borrows theories and methodologies from liberalism, law and society, feminism, Marxism, and poststructuralism, providing for a more complete analysis of “raced” people and their (schooling) experiences.

Within CRT, there are four central principles that differentiate it from other social theories. The first, and most crucial, is the argument that race is a permanent and endemic component of U.S. society and culture. Bell (1992) presented this principle, writing:

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. (p. 12)

Second, CRT allows and finds value in the “story” telling of the individual experience. Third, CRT maintains a critique on liberalism and argues for radical solutions. And fourth, CRT claims that “Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 12). There are no “common” or agreed upon doctrines or methodologies of CRT; however, CRT scholars are united in two common goals: to understand the construction and perpetuation of the hegemonic White ideology of the United States and to radically disrupt the bond between law and racial power (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

To illustrate how the debates in education are reconfigured within a CRT frame, Tate (1997) provided educators with the following new questions: (a) How do federalism, standards, and traditional values serve to reify the White hegemony of schools, while limiting and binding the education opportunities of students of color? (b) Do multiculturalism and critical theory ensure the best teaching practices for students of color? (c) How can multiculturalism and critical theory be reinterpreted to serve students of color? (d) Do multicultural and critical theory programs in school uncover the fallacy of the color-blindness and objective meritocracy of schools? (e) Do educators question the ahistorical treatment of education, equity, and students of color? The common theme to these questions is the troubling of the hegemonic White ideology that prevails in U.S. schools. Tate suggested that CRT provides “novel and innovative ways of exploring educational policy, research, and practice” (p. 236) as it relates to race, equity, and social justice.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) connected CRT to education by illustrating the ineffective results of the Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). They claimed that U.S. students of color are “more segregated than ever before” by providing the statistic that “although African Americans represent 12 percent of the national population, they

are the majority in twenty-one of the twenty-two largest (urban) school districts” (p. 55). They challenged the color-blindness and objective meritocracy of schools, connecting race with property as a method of discussing CRT within an education framework.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), building from the work of Harris, connected race with property by correlating the legal rights of property ownership provided in U.S. law, such as the right of disposition, the right to use and enjoy, reputation and status property, and the absolute right to exclude, to the ownership of Whiteness. Through identifying Whiteness as property they illustrated how the rights of ownership of Whiteness functions within U.S. schools (a) rights of disposition, is when White students are rewarded because they conform to the (White) ideology of schools; (b) rights to use and enjoy, is when White students are provided entrée into the cultural, political, and social structures of schools and society; (c) reputation and status property, is when cultural symbols are used to privilege Whiteness over the Other (e.g., suburban school and urban school); and (d) the absolute right to exclude, is when Whiteness provides the authority to exclude the Other (e.g., academic tracking and advanced placement programs). Ladson-Billings and Tate claimed these four functions of ownership of Whiteness create socially and structurally unjust education inequities. They concluded their discussion with a CRT critique of multiculturalism, arguing that rather than “creating radically new paradigms that ensure justice, multicultural reforms are routinely ‘sucked back into the system’” (p. 62) offering no radical change to the status quo.

Although I question what might be perceived as a pessimistic attitude toward school reform and social change that is implicit in CRT, I embrace the way CRT positions the discourse of race in U.S. society. This position suggests that the acknowledgment of the power of racism is an act of ultimate defiance. And when I use *power* in this context I am invoking the Foucauldian

characterization of power relations identified earlier. Additionally, because CRT positions the discourse of race as a significant determinant in social inequities it implies that race is a significant determinant in school inequities as illustrated by Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) analysis of Whiteness as property in schools. Therefore, this research study begins with the acknowledgment of school inequities based on the power of racism and with participants who, I believe, demonstrated resistance toward the negative power relations of racism as an act of ultimate defiance.

### Critical Theory

While poststructural theory provided the language to redefine key concepts and CRT established that the discourse of race is a permanent and endemic component of U.S. society and culture, critical theory provides the philosophical foundation for engaging in this research project. The origin of critical theory is synonymous with the origin of the Frankfurt School (*circa* 1920), whose membership included Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993), Theodor Adorno (1903–1969), and Jürgen Habermas (1929–), among many others. The Frankfurt School held a Marxist theoretical perspective, critiquing and subverting domination in all its forms (Bottomore, 1983/2001). As these critiques, which were derived from philosophy, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines, evolved they became known as critical theory.

The philosophical and theoretical perspectives of critical theory are as varied as the scholars and disciplines that have contributed to its development. Nevertheless, in the most general sense, critical theory maintains sociopolitical critiques on social practices and ideology that mask “systematically distorted accounts of reality which attempt to conceal and legitimate asymmetrical power relations” (Bottomore, 1983/2001, p. 209). Included in these critiques is an

examination of how social interests, conflicts, and contradictions are expressed in thought and produced and reproduced in systems of domination (Bottomore, 1983/2001). Critical theory contends that an examination of these systems of domination will bring about an awakening of consciousness and awareness of social injustices, motivating self-empowerment and social transformation.

The concepts of self-empowerment and social transformation are reoccurring themes found in the scholarship of Paulo Freire (1921–1997), a contemporary critical theorist. It is Freire's (1970/2000) popularization of the concept of *conscientização* that provides the frame for this research study. He defined *conscientização* as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). The goal of Freirian research is to blur the distinctions between research, learning, and action by providing the researcher and the participants opportunities to collectively engage in the struggle toward social justice (Lather, 1986a, 1986b, 1991). The methodology used encourages reciprocity, turning participants into co-researchers while providing the means for researcher and participants' empowerment (Lather, 1986a, 1986b, 1991).

Empowerment in this context is defined as one's ability to perform a critical analysis regarding the causes of powerlessness, the ability to identify the structures of oppression, and the ability to act as a single subject, group, or both to effect change toward social justice (Lather, 1991). Empowerment, then, is a learning process one undertakes for oneself; “it is not something done ‘to’ or ‘for’ someone” (Lather, 1991, p. 4). In effect, empowerment in the context of critical theory is *self*-empowerment, providing the subject with the skills and knowledge to make sociopolitical critiques about her or his surroundings and to take action (or not) against the oppressive elements of those surroundings.

Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) in their survey essay summarizing critical theory conjoined aspects of critical theory and postmodern theory.<sup>39</sup> They provided the following basic assumptions that critical (postmodern?) theorists researchers accept:

- that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted;
- that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription;
- that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption;
- that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (both conscious and unconscious awareness);
- that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable;
- that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one form of oppression at the expense of others (e.g., class oppression versus racism) often eludes the interconnections among them; and finally
- that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. (pp. 139–140)

Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) argued, “A postmodernized critical theory accepts the presence of its own fallibility as well as its contingent relations to progressive social change” (p. 151). In other words, a postmodernized critical theory needs to be placed under critique, including its principal function of working toward social change. They also argued, however, that engaging in a postmodern critical theory did not annihilate the concepts of emancipation,

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<sup>39</sup> Often the words *postmodernism* and *poststructuralism* are used interchangeable in the literature; however, there are acknowledged differences in the terms (for a brief discussion see St. Pierre, 2000, pp. 506–507). Within the context of Kincheloe and McLaren’s (1994) essay they intended the term *postmodern theory* to be an “umbrella term” (p. 143) for postmodernism and poststructuralism.

empowerment, hope, justice, oppression, praxis, and so forth from the research process. On the contrary, they suggested that within a postmodern critical frame these concepts from critical theory become objects of critique, while providing postmodern theory a foundation that precludes it from being perceived as nihilistic or inactive. Kincheloe and McLaren concluded their survey, stating:

To engage in critical postmodern research is to take part in a process of critical world making, guided by the shadowed outline of a dream of a world less condition by misery, suffering, and the politics of deceit. It is, in short, a pragmatics of hope in an age of cynical reason. (p. 154)

Nevertheless, since the mid-to-late 1990s there has been an unfortunate stormy separation of scholars into either-or camps: either critical theory or postmodern theory. This stormy separation has resulted in education scholars making comments such as: “In many parts of the capitalist world, postmodern politics still attests to contemporary relevance. Indeed, it claims to be the only politics available. The authors of this book collectively discern a need to clear the decks of such junk theory and debilitating ‘political’ posturing because of the urgent tasks ahead for socialist” (G. Rikowski & P. McLaren as cited in Butin, 2003, ¶ 1); “Freire! No one reads Freire anymore”<sup>40</sup> (E. A. St. Pierre, personal communication, spring 2003). This “intellectualized” dichotomous posturing, held by some scholars, of two important theoretical frameworks has obstructed the possibilities that both theoretical perspectives could have in contributing to the development of more equitable and just public schools for all children. Like Sfard (2003), who argued the need to use the dichotomized education theories of Piaget and

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<sup>40</sup> In fairness, Professor St. Pierre’s statement regarding Freire was made directly to me during a rather heated class discussion in a course entitled *The Postmodern Turn: Theories and Methods* in which she was the instructor. Throughout two prior courses and many one-on-one conversations, Professor St. Pierre has been diligent in cautioning me about the dangers present within the discourse of emancipation, which I have heeded. Nonetheless, I know for a fact that in her survey course on qualitative research Professor St. Pierre assigns (or makes available) readings by Freire and she has also read many of his works. I use her statement regarding Freire, taken out of context, for demonstrative purposes only to illustrate the dichotomous positioning, either implicitly or explicitly, of critical theory and poststructural theory that is present in much of the education discourse.

Vygotsky to better understand mathematics teaching and learning, I argue the need to use the currently dichotomized theories of critical theory and postmodern theory to better understand the school and mathematics success of historically marginalized students. The most recent dichotomizing of these two theoretical perspectives, I think, has been motivated by scholars who have forgotten the chief purpose of education research: To assist in the development of a more equitable and just schooling experience for all children.

### Why a Critical Postmodern Framework

I have positioned myself within this larger critical postmodern theoretical frame because of my own experience of being designated as the “Other” by the dominant culture. I am a White man who has enjoyed, participated in, and benefited from the power, privilege, and agency that these two characteristics bring an individual who has been reared in a society that unjustly values these characteristics first and foremost. I hold no remorse or guilt for this possession—it made life easier. (I also acknowledge that class and religion are key factors in differentiating and dividing; and again, I am on the privileged side of these binaries.) Nevertheless, being gay excludes me from nearly all social institutions such as education, family, government, industry, religion, and so forth. Only small portions of these institutions have acknowledged my existence and value as a contributing human to society and citizen of a democracy (e.g., the U.S. Supreme Court has only recently *de-criminalized* my private intimate adult relations, see *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas* 2003). I am not equating my experiences as a gay man with those of other marginalized subjects; however, I do believe that when one has been Othered it provides one with the possibility of seeing how dangerously pervasive the unjust hegemonic discourse of White patriarchal ideology operates within U.S. social structures and discourses. To say that my marginalized status is different from others is very true. Just as I will never “know” what it is

like to be a woman, Black man, Jew, or Mexican migrant worker, and so forth these individuals will never know what it is like to be a southern, middle-class, White, Christian, queer,<sup>41</sup> gay man.

Ladson-Billings (2000), drawing from the work of Wynter, argued, however, that for the benefit of moving toward social justice, marginalized groups must acknowledge their differences while recognizing their common perspective advantage and enter into dialogue with one another, including those from the dominant group. Dialogue is a loving, humble, hopeful, trusting, critical, and horizontal relationship between persons, a “relation of ‘empathy’ between two ‘poles’ who are engaged in a joint search” (Freire, 1969/2000, p. 45). This research study is, I believe, a joint search, a joint search by co-researchers (me, the *researcher*—a southern, middle-class, White, Christian, queer, gay man—and the *participants*—academically successful, young African American men) who as discursively constituted subjects with developed double-consciousnesses are jointly attempting to trouble the discourse of the achievement gap problem between Black students and their White counterparts by telling the “other side of the story.” This attempt aims to self-empower participants and me with deeper understandings of the participants’ successes in school, academics, and mathematics. These deeper understandings, I hope and believe, will motivate *conscientização* as the study informs the community of (mathematics) educators with the stories of African American male students who were successful in school and academics. Highlighting these stories could transform the inequitable and unjust schooling policies and teaching practices found in many U.S. public schools to policies and practices that are more equitable and just. I am engaged in this joint search because I have an allegiance to equity and social justice in U.S. public schools, and specifically in the mathematics classroom.

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<sup>41</sup> “‘Queer’ can function as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case is defined against the ‘normal’ or normalizing” (Spargo, 1999, pp. 8–9).

Compassion is one of the principal things that make our lives meaningful. It is the source of all lasting happiness and joy. And it is the foundation of a good heart, the heart of one who acts out of a desire to help others. Through kindness, through affection, through honesty, through truth and justice toward all others we ensure our own benefit. This is not a matter for complicated theorizing. It is a matter of common sense.  
(Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV, 1999, p. 234)

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all. Or perhaps, having already reached conclusions in our own minds, we are loth to have them disturbed by facts. And yet how little we know of these millions,—of their daily lives and longings, of their homely joys and sorrows, of their real shortcomings and the meaning of their crimes! All this we can only learn by intimate contact with the masses, and not by wholesale arguments covering millions separate in time and space, and differing widely in training and culture. (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 95)

I begin this chapter with a brief explanation of how I selected research methodology, noting the need for linking the methodology employed for a study to its theoretical framework. I then provide an account of my researcher subjectivity within a critical postmodern frame. This account is followed by a discussion that provides the details of the methodological procedures for the study, linking these procedures to the critical postmodern framework presented in chapter 3. I conclude the chapter with an explanation of my researcher ethics.

#### Selecting Methodological Procedures

Understanding that theoretical framework and methodology are “inextricably linked” (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993, p.116), throughout this study I maintained a constant state of crosscheck, crosschecking theoretical frameworks and methodological procedures. LeCompte et al., drawing from the work of several scholars, stated “that research designs are improved radically—in applicability and generalizability, in credibility and validity, and in precision and reliability—by explicit attention to the influence of theory throughout the design and implementation process” (p. 137). As I searched for, and took note of, consistencies and inconsistencies, convergences and divergences within and between various theoretical

frameworks and methodological procedures, I also critically examined the compatibility of various methodological procedures with my evolving philosophy of education. Effectively, I replicated the action took during the process of selecting theoretical frameworks. In other words, as suggested by Paul and Marfo (2001), my ontological, epistemological, and ethical beliefs not only drove the selection of theoretical frameworks of the study, but the selection of methodological procedures as well. This constant crosschecking and critical examination, I believe, resulted in selecting, developing, and implementing methodological procedures that maintained a creditable level of compatibility with the theoretical framework of this study and my evolving philosophy of education.

By and large, the methodology employed for this study can be characterized as participative inquiry. Reason (1994), in his survey essay, reviewed three approaches to participative inquiry: co-operative inquiry, rooted in humanistic psychology suggests that persons can, with help, choose how they live their lives, free from the distress of restrictive sociocultural discourses; participatory action research, rooted in sociopolitical critique suggests that persons by means of education and sociopolitical action can become self-empowered and transformative subjects; and action science and action inquiry, rooted in cognitive models of practice and outcomes suggests that persons through “effective” action can contribute to the transformation of organizations and communities toward greater justice. Reason noted that all three forms of inquiry (a) emphasize the systematic testing of theory in live-action contexts, resulting in changed lived experiences for all those engaged in the inquiry; (b) emphasize the fundamental importance of experiential knowing, acknowledging that people can learn to be, and learn from being, self-reflexive about their world and their lived experiences; and (c) emphasize

an extended epistemology, suggesting that experiential knowing arises through engagement with others (p. 333).

In particular, I characterize the methodology employed for this study as a version of participatory action research, as outlined by Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998, see also Torres, 1995). Although they noted “a spiral of self-reflective cycles,”<sup>42</sup> which this study in its current form does not contain, they also noted six equally important features of participatory action research that are present in this study. Participatory action research is (a) a social process that explores the relationship between persons and the social; (b) a participatory process that engages people in critically examining their sense of identity and agency; (c) a practical and collaborative process that engages people with others in critically examining the actions that link them to each other and to the social; (d) an emancipatory process that aims to assist people in recovering and unshackling themselves from unjust social structures; (e) a critical process that aims to assist people in recovering and unshackling themselves from unjust discourses and power relations; and (f) a recursive process that aims to assist people in investigating “reality” in order to change it, in order to reinvestigate it in order to rechange it, and so on (pp. 23–24). In short, Kemmis and Wilkinson contended that participatory action research was a “learning process whose fruits are the real and material changes in what people do; how they interact with the world, and with

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<sup>42</sup> Kemmis and Wilkinson’s (1998) “spiral of self-reflective cycles” included:

- planning a change
- acting and observing the process and consequences of the change
- reflecting on the these processes and consequences, and then
- re-planning, and so forth. (p. 21)

The goal of this study, as noted in chapter 1, was to provide learning opportunities for participants and me to develop deeper understandings of the participants’ successes in school, academics, and mathematics, and, in turn, learning opportunities for existing and future (mathematics) educators to examine their ideological beliefs about Black boys. The first goal, I believe, was achieved in the present study. The second goal will be achieved when I, along with the participants, develop and implement a plan of action for disseminating the conclusions of the study to the larger education community. This development and implantation process, an extension of the current study, will achieve Kemmis and Wilkinson’s *spiral of self-reflective cycles*: planning, acting and observing, reflecting, and re-planning.

others; what they mean and what they value; and the discourses in which they understand and interpret their world (p. 25). They added, through participatory action research

people can come to understand their social and educational practices more richly by locating their practices, as concretely and precisely as possible, in the particular material, social and historical circumstances within which their practices were produced, developed and evolved—so that their real practices become accessible to reflection, discussion and reconstruction as products of past circumstances which are capable of being modified in and for present and future circumstances. (p. 25)

Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) concluded their outline of participatory action research by elaborating on four research traditions of practice that reflected the dichotomizing debates around the individual and the social, and the objective and subjective: practice as individual behavior, practice as group behavior, practice as individual action, and practice as social. They offered, however, a fifth research tradition, a “reflexive-dialectical” (p. 31) research tradition, which this current study aligns with. The reflexive component of this research tradition provides the person with the ability to view the relation between the person and the object, the subjectivity and the objectivity, differently, allowing for a process of reflection and self-reflection where the person understands herself or himself as “making action and making history” (p. 31). The dialectical component argues for thinking in dialectical terms “characterized as a move from ‘either or’ thinking to ‘both and’ (or from ‘not only...’ to ‘but also...’, or from ‘while on the one hand...’, to ‘also, on the other hand...’) thinking” (p. 28).

The outline of participatory action research provided by Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) maintains a creditable level of compatibility with the theoretical framework of this study and my evolving philosophy of education. In the following discussion I aim to illustrate this compatibility by providing details of (a) research site, (b) participant (i.e., co-research<sup>43</sup>)

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<sup>43</sup> A key component of participatory action research is that the participants are active participants throughout the research study, transforming them from passive research participants into active co-researchers or co-participants. (The term *co-participant* acknowledges that the researcher is also, and always, just a mere participant in the research

selection, (c) data collection, and (d) data analysis. Before I provide the details of these methodological procedures, however, I explicate my researcher subjectivity, a most crucial component of all research.

### Researcher Subjectivity

The discussions about subjectivity within the domain of research have been varied throughout the “Seven Moments” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) of qualitative research. The discussions have ranged from a virtual denial of researcher subjectivity in the “Traditional” period (around 1900s to 1940s) to a focus on researcher subjectivity during the “Blurred Genres” period (around 1970s to 1980s) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Bogdan and Bilker (1998) claimed that researcher subjectivity was present in all research, suggesting that the researcher should “become more reflective and conscious of how who you are may shape and enrich what you do” (p. 34). They stated, “Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable” (p. 34). Lather (1986a) suggested that for qualitative research to be considered valid a reflexive subjectivity component must be built into the research design, suggesting for “some documentation of how the researcher’s assumptions have been affected by the logic of the data” (p. 78). I agree with both of these positions concerning subjectivity. In other words, my subjectivity shaped and enriched this research study, and including it in the design enhanced validity. The following discussion, drawing from the scholarship of Glesne (1999) and Peshkin (1988), presents the subjectivity management plan used during this study.

Glesne (1999) connected researcher subjectivity with rapport and intersubjectivity. The coupling of rapport with subjectivity is what made her approach most appealing. Glesne believed

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process.) In other words, the methodological procedures employed in this study encouraged reciprocity, making concerted efforts to establish the participants as co-producers of the study—not just objects of the study. As I note this very important distinction, I use the term participant throughout the remainder of the discussion rather than the term *co-researcher* or *co-participant* for ease of reading purposes only.

that the researcher's "capacity and limitation for establishing rapport are affected positively and negatively by your subjectivity" (p. 111). She defined rapport as "the character of effective field relationship" and as a "distance-reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism" of the researcher, which is a "necessary but not sufficient condition to obtaining good data" (p. 95–96).

Redeveloping the necessary but not sufficient condition of rapport was of significant importance to this study. And I write *redeveloping*, because as a past mathematics teacher of the participants I did have an established rapport with them. It was that past rapport, however, that I had to deconstruct in order to reconstruct anew. In effect, I worked to remove the teacher-student binary (even though as a teacher I worked at reducing this binary, it existed, nevertheless) with its power structure and replace it with a different rapport of researcher and participant. In the process, I was fully aware that a binary of power existed in this relationship as well; however, based on my subjectivity, I established (?) that power relations are mobile and could be modified throughout the relationship. That is, power relations "are not fixed once and for all" (Foucault, 1984/1997, p. 292); in fact, power is productive when "framed in terms of rules of law, rational techniques of government and *ethos*, practices of the self and of freedom" (p. 299). In other words, developing a rapport of shared ethical power relations provided a space of trust and mutual commitment between and among the participants and me toward the study. The commitment to the study expressed by the participants is discussed in chapter 5.

Glesne (1999) believed that developing rapport enables the participants to be more willing to talk about personal and sensitive issues. She differentiated friendship from rapport, claiming that friendship meant, among other things, a "mutual liking and affection," whereas in rapport one's "need to be liked is overshadowed by the necessity of being accepted and trusted" (p. 96). She cautioned against the blurring of the line between rapport and friendship, which I

headed by maintaining a focus on the study throughout participant correspondences. Glesne argued that it was not so much the blurring of the line that was problematic but being unaware how the blurring affects one's subjectivity. Building from the suggestions of Pugach, Glesne contended that researchers "interact with openness, honesty, and respect; not with the masks that rapport can provide or with the walls of professional distancing" (p. 105), but to remain reflexive, authentic, and fully conscious of our emotions.

Glesne (1999) noted, "Part of being attuned to your subjectivity lenses is being attuned to your emotions" (p. 105). Indeed, when I became emotionally charged during the research process was when my subjectivity was being engaged. Glesne claimed that awareness of subjectivity contributed not only to trustworthy research, but also to greater understanding of oneself and one's psychological investment in the research (p. 95). She suggested that rather than suppressing researcher's feelings (i.e., emotions), one should use "them to inquire into your perspectives and interpretations and to shape new questions through re-examining your assumptions"(p. 105). She noted that the researcher should allow her or his emotions of anger, irritability, gleefulness, excitement, or sadness to be mechanisms indicating learning and to explore what was to be learned throughout the research process. Glesne claimed that subjectivity was autobiographical and to trace one's subjectivity by keeping notes or a diary of when it was being engaged, suggesting that tracing subjectivity was a method of monitoring. She argued, "Reading, reflecting, and talking about subjectivity are valuable, but they are not a substitute for monitoring it in the process of research" (p. 110). I monitored my subjective by keeping notes throughout the research study, as Glesne suggested, making notes in the margins of the data sheets whenever my emotions were charged.

Glesne (1999) explicitly stated, however, that monitoring was not synonymous with controlling, “When you monitor your subjectivity, you increase your awareness of the ways it might distort, but you also increase your awareness of its virtuous capacity” (p. 109). Glesne implied that awareness of the virtuous capacity of subjectivity coupled with an engaging rapport with research participants would facilitate the development of an intersubjectivity. She defined intersubjectivity as the blurring of the subjectivities of researcher and participants into a joint subjectivity that assists in shaping the research study. This joint intersubjective that developed as a consequence of the study is discussed in chapter 5. In total, awareness and understanding of researcher rapport, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity enabled me, the researcher, “to get as fully as possible in touch with the embodied self who performs the acts of research” (p. 111).

Peshkin (1988) provided a systematic method of monitoring subjectivity that facilitated awareness and understanding—getting fully in touch with the embodied self. He, like Glesne (1999), believed that subjectivity operated throughout the research process and was engaged when one’s emotions were activated. Peshkin contended that subjectivity was not a “badge of honor” to be “paraded around on special occasions for all to see,” but was “like a garment that cannot be removed” (p. 17). He became aware of his subjectivity as he conducted research on different high school communities: rural, urban, and private Christian. Peshkin uncovered six subjective “Is” that he monitored by taking notes on 5" x 8" cards whenever he felt his “feelings were aroused”: (a) the ethnic-maintenance **I**, (b) the community-maintenance **I**, (c) the *e-pluribus-unum* **I**, (d) the justice-seeking **I**, (e) the pedagogical-meliorist **I**, and (f) the nonresearch human **I**. (p. 18). Using Peshkin’s list, I give details of his **I**s and map my subjectivity, defining what I currently understand about my subjective **I**s.<sup>44</sup> Throughout the data analysis process, I

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<sup>44</sup> This understanding was non-static; it was constantly changing as I engaged in the research study.

noted my subjective **I**s, as stated earlier, in the margins of the data sheets whenever my emotions were aroused.

Peshkin's (1988) ethnic-maintenance **I** was his Jewish **I**. He believed that as he engaged with individuals who maintained their ethnic identity that he possessed a unique understanding about how they operated within the dominant culture. Peshkin was concerned, however, that this unique understanding distanced him from individuals who had assimilated to or were part of the dominant culture. Peshkin's Jewish **I** is my gay **I**. My concern, however, was not regarding the difference between the African American male students that did or did not assimilate to the dominant culture; given that, all of the participants of this study, I suppose, did assimilate to some extent while maintaining strong Black identities (i.e., accommodation without assimilation theory).<sup>45</sup> My concern was my overzealous desire to identify and explain the participants' "double-consciousness" (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 3), seeing as they might not have (a consciously developed?) one. Because of my understanding of U.S. hegemonic ideology and my observations of the participants as their teacher, I believe that they endured a dark "veil" (p. 2). Furthermore, I believe that I have a particular understanding of this veil, given that I wore a "white veil," specifically as a schoolteacher.<sup>46</sup> Recall, Ladson-Billings (2000) argued that double-consciousness "applies not only to African Americans but to any people who are constructed outside the dominant paradigm" (p. 260). This subjective **I**, therefore, is dangerously packed

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<sup>45</sup> When I argue that they assimilated to some extent, I am referring to the fact that they chose to be successful in structures that maintained a Eurocentric curriculum and operated under codes of conduct adopted by White, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, patriarchal America.

<sup>46</sup> Newberry County School System, adhering to the policy most often found within school systems across the nation, informally enacted a "Don't ask, Don't tell" policy regarding its gay and lesbian faculty, which I heeded—hence, the white veil (see Bonauto, 1994; Eisenmenger, 2002; Jennings, 1994; La Morte, 2002; Ryan, 2000; Varona, 1998; and Yared, 1999 for details of, and strategies to combat, the unjust, undemocratic, and unethical treatment of gay and lesbian public and private school teachers).

with emotions and assumptions (or not) about the participants for this study, and me. It was the most important **I** to monitor throughout the study.

Peshkin's (1988) community-maintenance **I** was prevalent in his research because of the nature of his study. He was concerned that his knowledge of communities created microcommunities that were not representative of the total community, providing misleading results to his study. This **I** did not clearly map onto my subjectivity for this current study, except to note that the Black school community operates, I believe, differently than the White school community. I also believe that my social positioning as a teacher within the Black community to be more positive than in the White community. Given that much of the literature reviewed for this study discussed the African American community within the schooling process (e.g., see Fordham, 1996; Martin, 2000; Ogbu, 1992), I needed to be aware that in my lack of seeking meaning from the community in this study (I collected data from the participants only), I might have misunderstood some important aspects of the data.

Peshkin's (1988) *e-pluribus-unum* **I** was acknowledgement of his optimistic idealist nature. His belief that the issues that divide us, such as class, gender, race, and religion could become nonissues. He was concerned that his optimism for unity might read unity into a situation where unity did not exist. I also have an optimistic idealist nature, believing that through education and engaging in Freirian defined dialogue<sup>47</sup> that heterogeneous groups can learn to embrace and celebrate the differences found within the group. Like Peshkin, I often

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<sup>47</sup> Freire (1969/2000) explicitly defined dialogue, insisting that it must be a "horizontal relationship between persons...[a] relation of 'empathy' between two 'poles' who are engaged in a joint search" (p. 45). Later, Freire (1970/2000) elaborated on the concept of dialogue as he provided the elements that must be present for dialogue to exist, without expanding on the details, they are: love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking. It is this Freirian definition of dialogue that I am optimistic about in bringing about change.

attempt to read unity into a situation where it might not exist. I was conscious of this idealist perspective throughout the research process.

Peshkin's (1988) justice-seeking **I** and pedagogical-meliorist **I** developed while he was engaged in his research. As Peshkin found himself embedded in different communities it became evident to him how unjust some communities were treated by the very structures that were to secure justice, including the poor and uninspiring pedagogy that was offered to the students in urban schools. Unlike Peshkin, however, I entered this research study knowing that social structures, including schools and pedagogy, are unjust and believing that a critical education<sup>48</sup> in public schools could assist in working toward social justice. Because of my critical theorist with poststructural leanings view of social structures, I monitored myself throughout the research process ensuring that I did not fallaciously apply a Marxist poststructural critique to the data.

Peshkin's nonresearch human **I** was the acknowledgment that as he engaged in human contact in the communities he was researching that his judgment might be "soften" or "distorted" (p. 20). He claimed that through developing human relationships the researcher was often caught between two poles: "a love affair, at one pole, and a let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may outlook, at the other" (p. 20). Peshkin believed, however, that the two poles provided "ample room for an affection that serves to remind one of obligations to his respondents, and for a dispassion that, as horseradish does in the nasal passages, clears his vision" (p. 20). I was less concerned about this **I**, given that the study reported only success stories. I did not uncover anything that might be perceived as negative or harmful regarding the participants. I was concerned, however, that I

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<sup>48</sup> Skovsmose (1994) defined the "most general and uniting idea" of a critical education:

If education, as both a practice and research, should be critical it must discuss basic conditions for obtaining knowledge, it must be aware of social problems, inequalities, suppression etc., and it must try to make education an active progressive social force. A critical education cannot be a simple prolongation of existing social relationships. It cannot be an apparatus for prevailing inequalities in society. To be critical, education must react to social contradictions. (pp. 37–38)

might be too over protective of the participants because of my past relationship as their teacher. This over protective concern could have led to unconsciously omitting data that might have impacted the study—I monitored this I.

Peshkin (1988) believed that the systematic monitoring of one's subjectivity was a "necessary exercise, a work out...a rehearsal for keeping the lines of...subjectivity open—and straight" (p. 20). He contended that systematic monitoring did not release a researcher from her or his subjectivity, but that monitoring it created an "illuminating, empowering, personal statement that attunes [the researcher] to where self and subject are intertwined" (p. 20). He argued that subjectivity was not to be exorcised, but managed "to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome" (p. 20) during the collecting, analyzing, and writing-up of data.

Glesne (1999) and Peshkin (1988) presented user-friendly approaches regarding subjectivity that provided me with a subjectivity management plan. As Glesne suggested, I used my understanding and awareness of my subjectivity in building accepting and trusting relationships (i.e., rapport) with the participants. A positive rapport with participants coupled with awareness of my subjectivity, I think, led to an intersubjectivity with the participants, which assisted in shaping and enriching the research study. And both Glesne and Peshkin advised monitoring one's subjectivity throughout the research process, which I heeded. Through embracing and effectively managing (not exorcising) my subjectivity, this research study, I believe, was an educative experience for both the participants and me, achieving the six key features of participatory action research noted earlier, while providing valuable information to the education community.

### Research Site

Keeling High School was an urban high school located in a suburban community, 10 miles from a large city in the South. The school was situated in a 95% African American community where the mean home value was \$220,000. Keeling High was the mathematics and science magnet school for Newberry County, a large (over 70,000 students) well-funded school system. The school facilities were modern and well maintained. Keeling High had 1,300 students with the following approximate demographic information:<sup>49</sup>

- 99% African American/Black;
- 50% female, 50% male;
- 25% of students enrolled in mathematics and science program;
- 44% of students eligible to receive free/reduced lunches;
- average combined Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) score of 900 (magnet average 1100);
- 5 administrators, 4 counselors, 1 part-time social worker, and 80 teachers;
- faculty and staff 55% White and 45% Black, all administrators and counselors were Black except for one White assistant principal and one White counselor.

While a teacher at Keeling High, my observable commitment to the well-being of the students made me a “favorite” among students, teachers, administrators, and parents. In return for this commitment, I was received into and embraced by the larger African American community of Keeling High. Being a member of this community provided entrée into the community in which the participants for this study existed, a crucial component of participatory action research.

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<sup>49</sup> Approximations were based on reported data averages of the academic years 1995/96–1999/00.

### Participant Selection

A “purposive sampling” (Silverman, 2000, p. 104) of 5 African American males between 20 and 25 years of age was conducted. The criteria for sampling included demonstrated achievement and persistence in high school mathematics, attended Keeling High School from the ninth to twelfth grade, and completed at least one mathematics course with me. The descriptor *demonstrated achievement and persistence in high school mathematics* was met if the participant achieved one or more of the following criteria their junior or senior year of high school:

1. completed an AP Calculus or Statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better,
2. completed a joint-enrollment calculus or statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better, or
3. scored in the 4th quartile (top 25%) of the mathematics portion of the SAT.

I invited 16 of my past students by electronic and U.S. postal letter in April 2003 (Appendix A). With this participant recruitment letter, I attempted to transform the participant recruitment effort into a co-researcher recruitment effort. The letter and its accompanying electronic attachment provided the latest details of the study, a sampling of the scholarship that was to guide the study, and information regarding the scholars (doctoral committee members) who were to assist with the study. The purpose of the letter was to inform the participants not only of their responsibility as a potential participant of the study, but also of the goals of the study and how their active participation in the study would contribute to and transform the study. In other words, their required investment of time and effort was made explicit in the letter. Six of the 16 students contacted responded to my inquiry, 5 agreed to participate, and 4 completed the study—Ethan, Keegan, Nathaniel, and Spencer. These four young men provided a cross section of defined families (e.g., two-parent or single-parent household) and socioeconomic statuses

(e.g., lower-middle or upper-middle class), and a tremendous diversity in how they approached their schooling experiences. Each participant at the time of the study was currently enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program at a university or college or a recent college graduate. I next discuss why I choose the 16 students that I contacted.

Through the 5 years that I taught at Keeling High School, I had approximately 60 male students who met the criteria noted; the 16 students that I contacted were selected for purely subjective reasons. As a teacher I attempted to “connect” with all of my students; however, I felt as though I had made a “special connection” with the 16 students I contacted. To illustrate what I mean by a special connection, I recount how one of the participants, Ethan, and I developed our teacher-student relationship.

During Ethan’s 11th grade year he took my AP Statistics course; it was not until that year that I developed a special teacher-student relationship with Ethan. (I had previously been Ethan’s homeroom teacher during his 10th grade year.) Through a misunderstanding between Ethan and me, I also developed a special teacher-parent relationship with his mother that same year. The misunderstood incident is worthy of recounting because it marks the beginning of my relationship with Ethan and his mother.

Three weeks into the 1st semester of AP Statistics Ethan asked me a question during class regarding a function of his newly acquired TI-83 calculator, which I had requested all the students to purchase. In response to his question, I asked, “How long have you had that calculator” and he replied, “About 3 weeks.” I then proceeded to pick-up the *TI-83 Graphing Calculator Guidebook* that I had on my desk and tossed the guidebook to him, telling him to find the answer to his question in the guidebook himself. I then told him, and the entire class, that after owning the calculator for 3 weeks that he and all of the students should be telling me what

the calculator could do, not the other way around. In other words, I was suggesting that Ethan, and the entire class, should have been exploring the various functions of the TI-83 on their own. I did not think anything of the incident until 2 weeks later.

Two weeks later the magnet program at Keeling High School had its annual Open House. The Open House was an opportunity for existing and new parents of the magnet program to visit with the teachers from the mathematics and science departments. That evening, as I was closing up my classroom, my department chair, Ms. Hall, came to see me regarding a conversation that she had had with Ethan's mother that evening. Ms. Hall informed me that Ethan had told his mother about the incident with the TI-83 guidebook and had told his mother that Mr. Stinson was one of those teachers that did not expect a Black male athlete to do well in mathematics. Because Ms. Hall knew that this perception was false, she recounted to me, in full detail, the conversation she had with Ethan's mother.

That evening when I returned home, I called Ethan's house straight away. When I telephoned, I initially got Ethan's father. I introduced myself, and he told me that I would need to speak with his wife because she handled all concerns with Ethan's schooling. I left my name and telephone number and asked him to tell her to telephone me as soon as she got home. It was about 1 hour later that evening when Ethan's mother returned my phone call. After a congenial and informative 2-hour telephone conversation she understood that my student expectations were just the opposite of what Ethan had perceived. Not only did she and I clear up the misunderstanding, but also she learned that she had another ally at Keeling High School. After the conversation with his mother, Ethan and I began to rebuild our teacher-student relationship. Consequently, after graduating from Keeling High, Ethan would visit my classroom whenever home from college. And even after I left Keeling High to begin fulltime doctoral studies, Ethan

and I maintained communication ties through electronic mail. When I electronically mailed Ethan and invited him to participate in this study, he replied, “Yes, I will help you because you helped me...e-mail me with any pertinent information, and God bless you” (personal communication, May, 19, 2003).

I could recount similar stories with the other 15 students I contacted. The purpose in recounting this specific incident with Ethan is to illustrate that even before the participants began the research study, there had been a prior, deep relationship of mutual trust and respect (i.e., rapport) built between each participant and me. It was these prior relationships, I suppose, that motivated their participation in the study; a participation that extended over 6 months, requiring roughly 30 to 40 hours each of their time.

#### Data Collection

Data collection included a combination of written artifacts and interviews. In particular, the participants completed a demographic and schooling survey instrument (Appendix B), wrote a brief autobiography (Appendix C), and wrote a brief mathematics autobiography (Appendix D). These artifacts, completed roughly through the months of July, August, and September 2003, provided basic demographic information, and the participants with the opportunity to express any information they thought to be pertinent to the study in written form.

In addition to these items, the participants completed four interviews. The first interview (Appendix E) was a face-to-face semi-structured traditional “question-and-answer interview” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 31). The interview, approximately 40 minutes in length, was conducted over a 2-hour lunch with each participant in July 2003. In this interview, I attempted to obtain descriptions of the lived worlds of the participants with respect to their interpretations of the meaning of their schooling and mathematics experiences (Kvale, 1996). This interview

and the previously mentioned artifacts are traditional means of data collection found in most qualitative research studies. It was within the second, third, and fourth interviews that the participants were asked to become co-researchers.

The second and third interviews (Appendix F and G, respectively), like the first, were semi-structured interviews; both interviews were approximately 1 hour in length, conducted over the telephone roughly through the months of November and December 2003. Prior to each of these interviews, however, the participants were asked to read and reflect on three to four manuscripts (seven manuscripts total) that discussed specific theoretical perspectives regarding African American children's schooling experiences. The seven manuscripts were:

Ogbu, J. U. (1978b). Black-White differences in school performance: A critique of current explanations, *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 43–65). New York: Academic Press.

Herrnstein, R. J. & Murray, C. A. (1994b). Preface, *The bell curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life* (pp. xxi–xxiii). New York: Free Press.

Majors, R., Tyler, R., Peden, B., & Hall, R. (1994). Cool pose: A symbolic mechanism for masculine role enactment and coping by Black males. In R. Majors & J. U. Gordon (Eds.), *The American Black male: His present status and his future* (pp. 245–259). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 613–629.

Ogbu, J. U. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Education Researcher*, 21(8), 5–14.

Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a factor in Black students' school success: Pragmatic strategy or Pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 54–84.

Fordham, S. & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting White.'" *The Urban Review*, 18(3), 176–206.

The specific instructions attached to the copies of the manuscripts that were mailed to the participants were as follows:

...The seven manuscripts enclosed are a collection of essays and book chapters that represent the prevailing theoretical perspectives available in the discourse about African American children's schooling experiences, and specifically the experiences of African American male students. Some of the most eminent African American scholars and researchers (with the exception of John Ogbu, who is Nigerian) wrote the manuscripts that initiated these theoretical perspectives. The purpose of these readings is for you to have the opportunity to read about how major discourses available in education are "re-presenting" African American children, and specifically African American male students. Note: Herrnstein and Murray are not African Americans; they are fearful European Americans—go figure.

Some of the theoretical perspectives may anger you and there will be some that you will agree with. What I am requesting you to do is to read the manuscripts and reflect and comment on those theoretical perspectives (if any) you experienced or felt the need to engage in during your pursuit to be successful in school (and school mathematics). All in all, what I am attempting to uncover through this study is how did you navigate and negotiate through the structure of public education so successfully. I believe (along with other scholars) that the strategies that you used, as a Black male, are unique given that you were working in a structure that was designed and has been maintained to privilege White males from middle-class backgrounds—often at the expense of other students. ... (Participant letter, August 27, 2004)

Through this letter, I again reminded the participants of my subjectivity and the purpose of the study, attempting to bring them further into the study as co-researchers. Reading the manuscripts provided the participants and me with a common vocabulary for our conversations. For instance, rather than me trying to interpret from the participants' interview responses as to whether they engaged in "cool pose" behaviors, the participants were able to explicitly speak about what they believed were cool pose behaviors and whether they had engaged in such behaviors. Moreover, the purpose of engaging the participants in the current literature was not for them to confirm or disconfirm the applicability or usefulness of the various theoretical perspectives outlined in the manuscripts, but to only express their (and friends') schooling and life experiences in light of the theoretical perspectives.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The participants' responses to the manuscripts, as noted in the participant recruitment letter (Appendix A), were initially to occur over the WebCT using a bulletin board and chat room format, a methodological procedure used and outlined in Gieger (2002). The participants as a whole, however, did not respond to this procedure. Therefore, I redesigned the data collection methods to those outlined in the study.

The fourth interview was a face-to-face interview using a narrative approach asking the participants to summarize their schooling and mathematics experiences, which required me to be a good listener and the interviewee (i.e., the participant) to be a storyteller rather than a respondent (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). In other words, there was no interview protocol. The research questions of this study, however, were used as a catalyst for the conversation (earlier drafts of chapters 1 and 3 of this study had been mailed to the participants for their review prior to the fourth interview). The interview was approximately 40 minutes in length, conducted with each participant over a 2-hour lunch in January 2004. The focus of the fourth interview was not only a continuation of the retrospective story telling of the participants' schooling and mathematics experiences, but also their reflections as research participants and on the research process. In effect, the fourth interview disclosed how the research process changed (or not) their thinking and reflections regarding their schooling experiences, and their future experiences.

The data collection procedures employed for this study align with the six key features of participatory action research identified earlier (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). In addition to these procedures, I made several other attempts to bring the participants into the study in hopes of transforming them from passive research participants into active co-researchers. For instance, I sent detailed letters via electronic mail approximately twice a month updating the participants as to the progress of the study and had numerous telephone conversations with the participants throughout the study as well. The participants also read the data analysis portion of the study, engaging them in "member checking" (Glesne, 1999, p. 32). In total, the data collection procedures covered a 6-month time period (July 2003–January 2004), requiring approximately 30 to 40 hours each of the participant's time and 60 hours collective contact time with me. The resulting data set included approximately:

- 20 single-spaced pages of autobiographical data;
- 200 single-spaced pages of transcribed interview data; and
- 20 single-space pages of researcher-participant electronic mail correspondence data.

### Data Analysis

Given that the bulk of the data collected was interview data; the data analysis methodology employed for this study was interview analysis. Kvale (1996) provided six steps to interview analysis that are understood to be ongoing throughout the interview process. The first step is when interviewees (i.e., participants) describe their lived worlds, providing details of what they believe, feel, think, and so forth about a topic, requiring little interpretation or explanation from either the interviewees or interviewer. The second step is when interviewees themselves discover new relationships in their experiences, making new connections within their lived worlds. The third step is when the interviewer replays the interviewees' responses during the interview, facilitating a method of self-correction and simultaneous analysis. The fourth step is when the transcribed interview is interpreted by the interviewer for structure, clarification, and analysis, developing meanings and understandings from the interview. The fifth step is when the interviewees are, in effect, reinterviewed, engaging them in a member check. And lastly, the (possible) sixth step is when action results from the interview, motivating action from interviewees as they gain new insights into their lived worlds or collectively from interviewees and interviewer as they work toward a larger social goal.

I incorporated all six steps outlined by Kvale (1996) in the data analysis of this study. The participants provided details of their lived worlds as they described their schooling and mathematics experiences. The participants made new connections to their lived worlds; on many occasions throughout the interviews they explicitly stated the new connections. Throughout the

interview process, I employed the method of replay, seeking confirmation or disconfirmation of what I believed I heard the interviewee say during the interview, effectively engaging in simultaneous data analysis. All four interviews were transcribed; transcribed data were structured according to a coding scheme of 25 codes (Appendix K), roughly correlating to the three research questions of this study.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, as noted earlier, the interviewees were asked to read and respond to the data reporting and analysis chapter of this study. And lastly, the interviewees implied that there were changes in their actions as they gained new insights into their lived worlds.

In his discussion of analyzing interview data, Kvale (1996) outlined five variations or methods for analyzing interview data: (a) categorization of meaning, interview data is coded into categories; (b) condensation of meaning, interview data is reduced into succinct formulations; (c) structuring of meaning through narratives, interview data is probed for temporal and social meanings; (d) interpretations of meaning, interview data is expanded to speculative reasoning; and (e) ad hoc method for generating meaning, an eclectic approach to interview data that incorporates one or more of the previously noted methods.

I employed the ad hoc method for this study, incorporating all of the four other methods outlined by Kvale (1996). First, during the analysis process, data were entered into a CAQDAS program and coded using a data scheme of 25 codes. Once data were coded, individual “data stories” were written for each participant, reducing data to succinct formulations and probing for

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<sup>51</sup> The computer-assisted analysis of qualitative data (CAQDAS) package Atlas.ti 4.2 (2002) was used sparingly during the structuring process to code and organize the data for the study. For a full discussion on advantages, limitations, and disadvantages of CAQDAS see Seale (2000). Furthermore, the 25 codes (Appendix K) used during the coding process were derived from maintaining a sharp focus on the three research questions that guided the study during the analysis process; a strategy suggested by Professor Mewborn (D. S. Mewborn, personal communication, spring semester 2003).

temporal and social meanings. The data stories were then merged, expanding data reporting as speculative reasoning was applied to this new collective data set.

Generally speaking, the methods of analysis, data collection, and participant selection outlined in this chapter are argued by many scholars to be sound methodological procedures (Glesne, 1999; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Kvale, 1996; Silver, 2000, 2001). Even so, as I employed these methodological procedures, tensions arose between these procedures and my ideology. To illustrate the tension, I provide Scheurich's (1995) definitions of a conventional or positivist perspective of interviewing juxtaposed against a postmodernist perspective. A conventional perspective suggests that

the researcher is purposeful and knows what she or he is doing. The researcher can devise questions whose meaning is bounded and stable. The questions can be stated in such a way that different interviewees understand the question in the same way. The researcher can deliver those questions so that the interviewee is not influenced by the delivery or by the particular researcher asking the questions. (p. 240)

Whereas a postmodernist perspective suggests that

the researcher has multiple intentions and desire, some of which are consciously known and some of which are not. The same is true of the interviewee. The language out of which the questions are constructed is not bounded or stable; it is persistently slippery, unstable, and ambiguous from person to person, from situation to situation, from time to time. (p. 240)

Given the theoretical framework for this study and my evolving philosophy of education, I reject the conventional perspective. Nevertheless, there were several components of how I collected, analyzed, and presented (chapter 5) the data that more closely reflect the first perspective—thus the tension.

This tension was further exacerbated as Scheurich (1995) provided a postmodernist critique of research interviewing that clearly reveals the difference between a (critical)

postmodern perspective of the research process and the methodology employed for this study. He wrote:

The complex play of conscious and unconscious thoughts, feeling, fears, power, desires, and needs of the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee cannot be captured and categorized. In an interview, there is no stable “reality” or “meaning” that can be represented. The indeterminate totality of the interview always exceeds and transgresses our attempts to capture and categorize. When we think we “interpret” what the meaning or meanings of an interview are, through various data reductions techniques, we are overlaying indeterminacy with the determinacies of our meaning-making, replacing ambiguities with findings or constructions. When we proceed as if we have “found” or “constructed” the best, or the key, or the most important interpretation, we are misportraying what has occurred. And techniques like prolonged interaction or joint construction (or even triangulation or collaboration) will not lead to a more correct interpretation because, again, an indeterminate ambiguity, “a wild profusion,” lies at the heart of the interview interaction. (p. 249)

Scheurich’s postmodernist critique of interviewing, which claims that the interview process is fundamentally indeterminate, problematizes most every methodological procedure that I employed for this study: participant interviewing, data categorization, data reduction, data interpretation, prolonged interaction, collaboration, data representation, and so forth.

Furthermore, as a novice critical postmodern researcher, several questions constantly resurfaced throughout the research process—troubling the process, producing the tension. For instance, given that there is an end of innocence, is everything dangerous (Van Maanen, 1995)? In view of the fact that there is a crisis in representation, how do I represent (Marcus & Fisher, 1986)? If there is no origin, what am I looking for (Derrida, 1978)? Seeing as voice is not authentic, what do I hear (Lather, 2000)? Given the irruption of data, does everything count as data (St. Pierre, 1997)? Seeing as experience is not experience, what are they talking about (Scott, 1992)? Given that life is not linear, how do I communicate a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987)? Is everything a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1988)? Given that meaning escapes, does anything have meaning (Derrida, 1974/1997)? In view of the fact that knowledge

is a discursive formation, do I ever “know” anything (Foucault, 1969/1972)? Does language have to be accessible (Lather, 1996)? What are the problems for speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991–1992)? Do you really have to be one to know one (Fay, 1996)? Given that validity is stuck, do I need to get it unstuck (Lather, 1986a)? What do I do, if they say, “That’s not what I said” (Borland, 1991)? How does a novice researcher actually work in the ruins (St. Pierre & Willow, 2000a)? and on and on and on.

As I live, think, and interact within a critical postmodern existence there appears to be a bottomless abyss of questions that trouble the research process—consequently, producing the tension. I fear that my inability (at the moment?) to make meaning (?) of this bottomless abyss drove me to selecting methodological procedures that were aligned with more conventional traditions of qualitative research. Yet, on the other hand, by engaging my researcher ethics throughout the research process, I suppose that I reconfigured, at least in part, these more conventional traditions, achieving a creditable level of compatibility with the theoretical framework of this study and my evolving philosophy of education.

#### Researcher Ethics

Although I have no definitive answers to the questions noted—nor should I, or anyone else for that matter—the research process was ethically enriched by the mere fact that these questions (and others) were constantly present in my thinking and actions throughout the study. And as I use and trouble<sup>52</sup> the term “ethically,” I acknowledge that exploring the infinite dimensions regarding the ethics of the research process is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, I provide a definition of ethics that offered a frame of reference for thinking ethically throughout the research process. *Ethics* is an understanding that we all desire happiness and we all seek to avoid suffering; therefore,

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<sup>52</sup> In this context, I use the term *trouble* to place *ethics* under erasure (Derrida, 1974/1997).

what is entailed...is not an admission of guilt but...a reorientation of our heart and mind away from self and toward others. To develop...an attitude of mind whereby, when we see an opportunity to benefit others, we will take it in preference to merely looking after our own narrow interests. But though, of course, we care about what is beyond our scope, we accept it as part of nature and concern ourselves with doing what we can. (Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIV, 1999, p. 162–163)

Such a definition of ethics does not require one to solve the “world’s problems”; it simply requires one to seek ways of assisting in others happiness and security concurrently with her or his own, decentering oneself to attempt to become the other. (Becoming the other is never possible; it is the honest attempt that is the ethical act.) Such a definition of ethics requires an ethics of care of the self (Foucault, 1984/1988) and, in turn, care of others.

This definition of ethics was forever present throughout the research process—from the initial draft of the research proposal written during the summer semester of 2001 to the final draft of the study completed during the summer semester of 2004. This definition of ethics, coupled with the troubling questions noted earlier, motivated additional questions, however. For instance, does a focus on mathematically successful African American male students bring into question the existing negative discourses surrounding African American male students or only serve to reinforce them? How will this research be interpreted and reproduced in the context of schools? in the context of teacher education? in the context of the mathematics community? in the context of the dominant White community? in the context of the African American community? and so on. These questions demonstrate an ethical concern regarding not only the “doing” of the research, but also an equally important ethical concern regarding how it will be applied or used.

In closing this chapter, in my pursuit to think the unthought (Foucault, 1969/1972) in the context of research, I often think: What would the world be like today if Oppenheimer’s research team had focused more on the ethics of their research project rather than on the scientific qualities of reliability, replicability, validity, and so forth? What if they had focused not only on

the doing of the research, but also on how it would be applied or used? And lastly, is the chief aim of education research to be “scientific” (National Research Council, 2002<sup>53</sup>) *or* ethical?

History has demonstrated, I argue, the dangers when the emphasis is on the scientific.

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<sup>53</sup> An electronic search (see National Academies Press, 2003) of the words *ethics* or *ethical* in the National Research Council’s (2002) book *Scientific Research in Education* returns a count of 28 usages throughout the 188-page document. In recognizing the lack of attention to research ethics, the Committee on Scientific Principles for Education Research (i.e., the authors of the document) provided the following statement: “Research ethics is a complex area that the committee did not have the time nor the expertise to consider fully” (p. 153). But they did find the “time” and the “expertise” to define *scientific*, didn’t they?

## CHAPTER 5

### DATA REPORTING AND ANALYSIS

Herein the longing of black men must have respect: the rich and bitter depth of their experience, the unknown treasures of their inner life, the strange renderings of nature they have seen, may give the world new points of view and make their loving, living, and doing precious to all human hearts. And to themselves in these the days that try their souls, the chance to soar in the dim blue air above the smoke is to their finer spirits boon and guerdon for what they lose on earth by being black. (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 76)

I begin this chapter by providing brief descriptions of the four young African American men who shared their schooling experiences for this study. These descriptions are followed by an analysis of the data, organized around subheadings<sup>54</sup> that roughly correspond to each of the research questions that guided the study:

1. How did participants define success? What sociocultural factors did they attribute to their school and academic success?
2. What discourses about African American males shaped participants' perception of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students? How did they accommodate, resist, or reconfigure those discourses?
3. How did participants define agency and how does it function in their lives? What relationship did participants perceive between their achievement in school mathematics and agency?

A summary is provided after the data reporting and analysis of collective subheadings that relate to a specific research question. The aim of the summaries is not to replay all of the intricate

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<sup>54</sup> The subheadings were derived from the data codes (Appendix K), which were, as noted earlier, derived from the research questions.

nuances of the data, but to present a recapitulation of the participants' conversations centered on each of the research questions.

### Participant Descriptions

The 4 participant descriptions that I provide are composed of collected data and my personal reflections on the young men as students and research participants. The reader should be mindful that these descriptions, like the total study, were written within a critical postmodern theoretical frame; therefore, they are not innocent. The data sources most often referenced while writing the descriptions were the participants' completed surveys, written autobiographies, and disclosed responses from the first interview (see Appendixes B, C, D, and E, respectively). For clarity, each participant description follows the same general outline: (a) sketch of physical attributes, (b) account of teacher-student relationship, (c) summary of academic and extracurricular records, (c) depiction of family background, (f) perception of self, and (g) account of present position and future plans. Throughout the descriptions, some comments are presented without supporting data. These comments are revisited with their accompanying data in the data analysis section of the chapter.

Furthermore, in the following discussion, although I present a singular description of each participant, I do so with reservations. Each of these young men, as the reporting of the data reveal, was a complex subject and any attempt to describe that complexity is always limited. Accordingly, the intent of the descriptions I put forth is only to provide the reader with a sketch of each of the participants, not to propose that they capture the "true" Ethan, Keegan, Nathaniel, or Spencer. To suggest that a true Ethan, Keegan, Nathaniel, or Spencer existed implies that there was some static essence present in each participant to be captured, which I believe contradicts the data. Rather, I argue that the data, as it is unfolded, illustrate that these young

men were dynamic subjects who shifted, altered, modified, or simply subverted their constituted raced selves throughout their pursuit of success.

### *Description of Ethan*

Ethan was a cross between the men one finds on the covers of *Sports Illustrated* and *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. He was a 23-year-old, solid 250-pound, six-foot and three-inch tall, dark-skinned African American, with a mischievous smile, round facial features, and a clean-shaven face and head. I first became acquainted with Ethan during his sophomore year of high school, my 2nd year at Keeling High. I was his homeroom teacher that year and in his subsequent junior and senior years. Ethan enrolled in my Advanced Placement (AP) Statistics class his junior year and during his senior year, upon my encouragement (along with the head guidance counselor's and his mother's), he enrolled in a joint-enrollment pre-calculus course at the local university.

Ethan was a leader in the classroom as well as in extracurricular activities throughout his middle and high school education. In middle school, Ethan was the only African American male student to graduate with a 4.0 grade point average (GPA) in the year that he graduated. As he reflected on his middle school education, Ethan wrote:

By the eighth grade, I had won over most of whom I fellowshiped with or whom I encountered. I loved [] Middle School; I could do no wrong. ...I was placed in accelerated classes in sixth or seventh grade; however, I was lazy and rarely challenged in middle school. I used my charm to get me through much of what I was doing.  
(Autobiography)

Ethan continued to use his charm, and intellect, throughout his subsequent 4 years at Keeling High. He was an active member in all the academic organizations, such as the talented and gifted (TAG) program, the mathematics and science magnet program, Junior Beta club, and National Honor Society. Ethan graduated in the top 5% of his class with a 3.7 GPA and scored in the 4th quartile on the mathematics portion of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). In addition to his

outstanding academic record, Ethan played varsity basketball, football, and soccer, lettering in all three sports and earning the distinction of a Wendy's Heisman State finalist. Ethan was a member of Boy Scouts of America and various other clubs and athletic teams throughout his years in middle and high school. During Ethan's senior year, his classmates voted him Best All-around Senior and the school's student body voted him Mr. Keeling High. He was also awarded the Faculty's Cup and Principal's Award, the two highest honors awarded to a graduating senior at Keeling High.

Up to graduating from high school, Ethan lived with his father, mother, and his brother, Evan, who was three-years older, in a comfortable middle-class suburb (his brother began attending college out of state during Ethan's 10th grade year). Evan had attended Keeling High as well and earned an equally impressive academic and athletic record. In remarking about his older brother and his 1st year in high school, Ethan wrote:

Upon entering high school, I had to realize that I no longer would be "big man on campus." I had to humble myself and start over. But that wasn't easy, and my brother being Mr. Keeling High didn't help either. I was Evan's little brother for a year and it took a lot of convincing to get out of his shadow. I thank God for him though. He took care of me and established a reputation for our family that will never be tarnished.  
(Autobiography)

Ethan's father was a small-package carrier and his mother was a biologist, working as a research assistant. His mother took an active and the dominant role in the education of both Ethan and his brother. When asked to write a brief statement regarding his relationship with his family during his high school years, Ethan wrote, "busy, never quiet, [but] little communication" (Participant Survey).

Ethan continued his outstanding academic and extracurricular record during his undergraduate education. He consistently made dean's list, graduating with honors, earning a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in mathematics from a selective historically black

college and university (HBCU). He was the only male student that year to graduate with a major in mathematics. He was a member of Fellowship of Christian Athletes and honored with membership in the Golden Key National Honor Society and Beta Kappa Chi Scientific Honor Society. Ethan attended college on a football scholarship (just one of several academic and athletic scholarships he was offered), making all-academic team in Division I-AA his senior year. Ethan noted, however, the difficulty in balancing academics and athletics at the collegiate level:

In college, school or academics was extracurricular and football was number 1. People don't realize that college athletics is the biggest rip-off in the USA. They call it a nonprofit organization, but the athletics makes millions of dollars for a particular school. I never lost focus though. As some of my classmates changed majors, I stayed the same. I knew that math would pay the bills and I love it like no other. (Autobiography)

While effectively balancing the demands of academics and athletics, Ethan also found time to volunteer for organizations such as Project Hands-On, St. Francis Soup Kitchen, and Habitat for Humanity.

Ethan identified himself through academics and athletics, believing that he stood out from the rest of the pack with this combination:

Well, academically was the foundation, but if you ask me, the athletic and the academic was like the cherry on top, because it topped it off. To say academically I achieved, they said, "Man, that is a minority male achieving at a high level of mathematics," and then the athletic aspect of it, just blew them out of the box. (Interview 4)<sup>55</sup>

Ethan considered himself popular in school because he understood the politics of schooling: "I had the knowledge of what they call politics, the ability to be a friend to some and associate with others" (Interview 1).

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<sup>55</sup> As I present the participants' transcribed interview data, I often omit conversational pauses such as "you know," "like," "ah," and so forth for reading easy. Furthermore, throughout the data reporting *ellipsis points* represent omitted data, not pauses in the participants' speech.

Ethan demonstrated a strong ethnic identity as an African American male, understanding that he could only view the world from this positionality. When asked if there was a relationship between his mathematics experiences and being an African American male, he replied, “Being an African American male really didn't have an affect, considering I can't really tell the difference from me to another” (Mathematics Autobiography). As Ethan defined aspects of being an African American male, he argued that being in a society where one is a minority is “almost like being in the hole already” (Interview 1). Although Ethan was clearly aware of the structural inequities present in society, he did not see these inequities as detrimental to his success. In fact, he practically shrugged them off:

So what can I say, it was tougher because a lot of the options and opportunities, facilities and things that Caucasians have, we don't have, and so you know, that is kind of tough, but what can I say...there is pressure, but as an African American male you have got to do what you need to do. (Interview 1)

At the time of the study, Ethan was in his 1st year of teaching high school mathematics in a midsize urban school district in the southern United States. He believed that his experiences as an African American male, although different, helped him connect with his minority students, who were the majority at his school. As this teaching experience solidified his interest in mathematics education, and the profession of education in general, Ethan anticipated beginning graduate studies in mathematics education in the near future. He planned to research the connection between high school athletics and school and academic success, and minority students' motivation to learn mathematics.

#### *Description of Keegan*

Keegan was a coupling of the impassioned spontaneous Black Baptist preacher found on early Sunday morning television programming and the reticent reflective Black politician found later on Sunday morning's *Meet the Press* with Tim RSSERT. He was a 23-year-old, 170-pound, 5-foot

and 10-inch tall, medium-skinned African American with short curly hair, intense observant eyes, and a smile that was equaled only by another southern politician, Jimmy Carter. Keegan was as comfortable in a Brooks Brothers bankers-striped suit, white French-cuffed shirt, and understated gold cufflinks as most others are in jeans and a t-shirt (even in high school). I became acquainted with Keegan during his junior year in high school, my 2nd year at Keeling High. I was aggressively recruiting students for the AP Statistics course, specifically targeting students who might not be interested in an AP mathematics course. Keegan was such a student.

Keegan took AP Statistics his senior year, earning a B average both semesters. I was able to convince Keegan to enroll in the course by demonstrating the prominence of statistical analysis in politics, given that he was more interested in history and political science than in mathematics. Keegan's enthusiasm for history and political science was exemplified through his selection to the state's Governor's Honors Program (GHP) in history during his junior year. (GHP is the state's most competitive and highest academic honor awarded to a very select group of students in respective disciplines. It is an intense 8-week summer academic program in which students explore their interest in respective disciplines in nontraditional methods.) His enthusiasm was also exemplified via his résumé at the end of his junior year in high school; it would make any graduate of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government envious. Keegan had twice summered interned for significant members of the U.S. Congress, including a former Congressional Leader of the Democratic Black Caucus; attended the 1992 and the 1996 Democratic National Conventions (his father was a convention delegate for the state); and had attended the University of Michigan's Debate Institute.

The political aspects of Keegan's character enabled him to be a friend to and respected by a wide variety of students at Keeling High, as well as earn favorable marks from his teachers and

the administration. Although Keegan noted that he was more involved in extracurricular activities at church rather than school, he was an active member of the National Honor Society, Beta club, and Y-club, and was a lead member on the debate team. Keegan graduated in the top 20% of his class with a 3.5 GPA. And due to his advanced oratory skills, Keegan competed for and was awarded the honor of delivering the commencement speech for his graduating class; a speech that received a roaring standing ovation from the over 3,000 people in attendance.

Throughout his primary, middle, and secondary education Keegan lived with his dad, an influential spiritual and political leader of the community; his mother, a mathematics teacher at Keeling High; his two older brothers who were academically as impressive as Keegan and had attended Keeling High as well; and his younger sister. In many ways, Keegan's home life was exemplified through the fictional television family of the Huxtables (Keegan's father and mother held graduate degrees—his father having earned a doctorate—and his two older brothers were in graduate school). Keegan described his family as “very close...encouraging, and supportive” (Survey). Throughout his education, Keegan was reminded often of (and understood) the privilege of coming from an upper-middle class family and the expectation of success, specifically from his father:

If I failed it was my fault and my parents would remind me of that; they were not too shy to remind me of that. My dad would...say, “Keegan, if you fail it is your fault because your mother and I have provided everything for you; have made it easy for you.” I didn't want to disappoint my parents. I didn't want to disappoint my family, my uncles, my aunts. ...My biggest fear was everyone in my family had graduated from college...I am not one of those first-generation students going to college. I was the opposite; everyone had graduated. I didn't want to be the one who didn't graduate. ...When I received my degree at [] College, I just said, “I am not the one, I am not the one to break the trend. I graduated.” ...I had no reason to fail, because my brothers...my mother...my father [were] always willing to help in just anything I needed, in every area. I was lucky to live in a household in every area, in any subject. I had a mathematician at home; I had one who could proofread papers with my father. ...I was always fortunate to have someone in the house. I didn't have to go to the tutoring center. ...I was there [after school for] 3 hours anyway, so I would spend an hour after class getting help, because I was so afraid

of failure. I was even afraid to get a C because that was like getting an F in my house. (Interview 4)

This expectation of success followed Keegan into his undergraduate education. Keegan graduated *cum laude* from a prestigious HBCU with a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology with a minor in political science. During his undergraduate education Keegan earned membership to the school's nationally ranked debate team, interned for the state's senate majority leader, and mentored at a local elementary school.

Keegan did not distinguish himself much from other African American males. He simply identified himself as an African American man “who could succeed, who could meet and overcome obstacles” (Interview 1); he looked at himself as one who could meet a challenge head on, able to beat against any odds that came his way. Keegan argued that doing well and graduating from high school was not a choice but just a precedent-set expectation, set by his father, mother, and two older brothers. Similarly, attending college was a precedent-set expectation as well. Keegan recalled his father saying, “The day you graduate [from high school] you have two choices: you can either go to college or you can go into the United States Army” (Interview 1). Keegan stated that these limited choices provided needed motivation during his high school education, specifically on those days when he felt his self-motivation to study for a test or to do homework waning.

Although Keegan was aware and acknowledged the damaging effects of racism and discrimination, his perspective of himself, and African Americans in general, were as people who were “free to be great achievers” (Interview 2). He noted his experiences with his family and through his church coupled with his readings of African American scholars and spiritual and political leaders is where he learned to celebrate his Blackness:

[I learned to celebrate my Blackness] from my parents, and I credit the church a lot, because in church is where I learned, even more so than in school, about my culture, and learned to celebrate it. For instance, [at church] I looked at Black as being free to be great achievers, great preachers, and being great teachers, all that in one setting. Every Sunday I got the experience of greatness, seeing individuals who were successful in whatever they did, who were professors at colleges. Also, just in the sermons, hearing about Martin Luther King Jr., hearing about Fannie Lou Hamer, and other great African Americans who were instrumental in America and abroad, hearing about Nat Turner. ...I carry what I learned in the church into school...having heroes that was another thing...that was very important in my life. Right now I am looking at four posters in my room, one of Martin Luther King Jr. and one of W.E.B. Du Bois, I even got one of Booker T. Washington. I believe that they are great heroes to follow, to model your life on. Whenever I get discouraged and upset, feel like I can't make it here in graduate school, I read some King, read some Benjamin Elijah Mayes, read Howard Thurman, read their writings and read that they went through the same thing [racism and discrimination]. Not only did they go through the same thing, it was a lot worse...they couldn't even ride the bus home...because of segregation. ...I believe I have adopted the Afrocentric culture ideology, and I believe that that is not a determining factor that leads to whether you will be able to block racism and discrimination. ...I think that it just worked for me. (Interview 2)

At the time of the study Keegan had begun his 1st year as a graduate student at a theological seminary in the nation's capital. Upon completing seminary he was not sure if he would seek leadership in a church or begin a doctorate degree in divinity or philosophy. The questions he was most contemplating on at the moment were:

How can we fulfill the beloved community of Martin Luther King Jr. that he talked about? How can we stop just talking about creating a beloved community and actually begin living in a community where we can accept all people, no matter race, color, sexual orientation, or gender? How can we live in a society like that? (Interview 4)

Keegan also noted that as a graduate student his view of education had evolved from one of just wanting to get out of the school—as was his case in high school—to his current “passion for education”:

I want to learn. I know that when I am writing a paper I am not just writing it for a professor, I am writing it for myself to grow and to climb higher in my success. So I know my education is an evolving process that is great. ...Education, it's a wonderful thing. (Interview 1)

*Description of Nathaniel*<sup>56</sup>

Nathaniel was a fiercely independent young man. Although he worked well as a team member, Nathaniel seemed to be at his best when provided the opportunity to be singularly introspective. Nathaniel was a 22-year-old, 190-pound, six-foot one-inch tall, dark-skinned African American with an athletic build, close-cropped hair, and a reflective gaze. Nathaniel could just as easily be pictured in an outfielder's baseball uniform as in a scientist's white lab coat. I became acquainted with Nathaniel his senior year in high school, my 3rd year at Keeling High. Nathaniel was in my AP Statistics class. Nathaniel was a memorable student not only because he performed well in the class (and on the AP examination, scoring a 5 out of 5), but also because he was consistently inquiring about problems from the text that I had not assigned.

This attribute of going beyond what was assigned, or expected, clearly defined Nathaniel and was directly related to his success, both academically and socially. Nathaniel was constantly setting goals for himself, claiming that he had “been self-motivated the whole time” (Interview 4). When Nathaniel did not meet his self-defined expectations he questioned his goal setting: “Maybe I should have set my goals a little bit lower, maybe I should have set them a little higher, I don't know” (Pilot Interview 1). Nathaniel provided a sport analogy to illustrate his self-motivation and goal-setting characteristics:

I guess it is when you start having your own goals for yourself. You might say...taking it back to athletics, “You know, I scored ten points this game, I want to score 15 the next game.” So you try to figure out what you need in order to score 15. ... I mean ...what do I need to do to make myself better; that is...what I got from athletics. ...It makes you really competitive...just me wanting to get better, which has been my self-motivation. (Interview 4)

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<sup>56</sup> Nathaniel's data set is different from the other participants, in that, in addition to participating in this current study he also participated in an earlier pilot study in which he was interviewed on three occasions. The protocols for the first and second pilot interviews (Appendix H and I, respectively) provided much of the information derived from the Participant Autobiography and Participant Mathematics Autobiography (Appendix C and D), and the third pilot interview (Appendix J) roughly followed the current study's first interview protocol (Appendix E). Therefore, Nathaniel did not complete the autobiographical portion of data collection nor did he participant in the first interview protocol of this study.

Nathaniel noted that he was not as involved in extracurricular activities during high school as he would have liked due to lacking transportation and working a part-time job; however, he maintained a creditable level of extracurricular activity, specifically through sports, which developed his popularity among his peers. In addition to lettering in varsity baseball and cross-country, Nathaniel earned membership in the mathematics and science magnet program and was a member of the Future Business Leaders of America and Junior Beta club. Nathaniel graduated in the top 5% of his class with a 3.9 GPA, taking not only AP Statistics, but AP Computer Science and Chemistry as well. Nathaniel was recognized as an academic-honors student on numerous occasions throughout his primary, middle, and secondary education; was a member of the TAG program since fourth grade; and had been a member of 4-H club, Boy Scouts of America, and school choir during his middle school education.

During his primary, middle, and secondary education, Nathaniel lived with his father, a pharmacist; his mother, a data-entry clerk and accountant; and his three younger brothers and one younger sister. Nathaniel's parents were both Nigerian immigrants. During his childhood Nathaniel stated that he was a "latch-key kid" (Pilot Interview 2), given that his parents were full-time workers and full-time students. His father attended pharmacy school and his mother attended a local university, working toward a second undergraduate degree. Nathaniel noted that the advanced education that his parents received transitioned his family from a lower-middle-class socioeconomic status to a comfortable middle-class socioeconomic status as he progressed through his middle and secondary education. Nathaniel also noted that even though his parents were very busy the expectation of school success was very present in his home, with the financial and social "payoff" of education being physically present:

From my parents, I got more of a sense that learning was important...because my dad and mom came from Nigeria... in their late twenties. For them, they came over here with a

focus...they knew exactly what they wanted to do. ...I got a sense that learning was something important, it was something that ...put food on our plate, and eventually led us to moving up in social standing. ...When my dad graduated from pharmacy school he no longer had to work that job at Churches, where he was the manager. He had a steady job, we could move to a house, get a car, and do things of that sort. So, I mean, I guess you sort of see education just sort of equally as success, and moving up. (Interview 4)

The effects of seeing the tangible benefits of an education and his self-motivation “to make myself better” (Interview 4) followed Nathaniel into his undergraduate education. He attended a top-ranked public research-one university on an academic scholarship, graduating with honors with a Bachelor of Science degree in biochemistry and microbiology. Nathaniel consistently made dean’s list, earning a graduating GPA of 3.5. As an undergraduate student, Nathaniel earned membership into Alpha Epsilon Delta, the premedical honor society; worked part-time to finance a portion of his education; participated in the cinematic arts; and tutored at a local family center.

Nathaniel identified himself through high school as “geeky, nerdish, but also sort of a jock” (Pilot Interview 1). He identified the geeky side as liking comic books, films, and video games as well as doing well academically, and the jock side as playing sports. And, although Nathaniel undeniably identified himself as an African American, he understood that his experiences as an African American were somehow unique given that he was a first generation African American. He noted that he was somehow in the middle of Ogbu’s (1978a, 1992) voluntary and involuntary minorities: “I guess it is sort of in the middle...for me...because I was born here and I was raised in an African American community...[but] my parents are Nigerian” (Interview 3). Nathaniel contended that when he told people, Black or White, that his parents were Nigerian there were “things that came along with that, too” (Interview 3). Nathaniel claimed that those “things” were negative stereotypes regarding African immigrants, specifically

held by African Americans. Nevertheless, Nathaniel learned to “take care” of himself, arguing that in the southern United States all Blacks are part of the collective:

I mean, you get the jokes and you get the teasing, but you ultimately take care of yourself. You let it go, or you speak on it, because here we are all Black. I mean, you could be from Jamaica and you will still be regarded as being Black; so you are sort of that collective. ...[The negative stereotypes are] something you just learn to navigate, or you learn to deal with it. (Interview 3)

At the time of the study Nathaniel was preparing for admission to medical school. Most recently, Nathaniel was proceeding through the interview process at some of the top-ranked medical schools in the country.<sup>57</sup> And, although much of Nathaniel’s 4 1/2 years as an undergraduate student (Nathaniel double majored) had been spent in a laboratory, he planned to concentrate on medical practice rather than medical research, noting that he would rather work with people than with test tubes and petri dishes.

#### *Description of Spencer*

Spencer’s projected stance was a stance of belongingness. He was a 24-year-old, 165-pound, six-foot and one-inch tall, medium-skinned African American with the physical build of a long-distance runner. He had chiseled facial features with a clean-shaven face and close-cropped hair. Spencer had a sense of quiet reflective elegance about himself that was not only embodied in his physical movements, but also in his voice-tone and use of language. Being reflective and elegant in both his written and spoken communications enabled Spencer to construct strings-of-consciousness in a lyrical, almost poetic manner. (He would make for a great litigating attorney if he chooses to do so; the jury would become mesmerized with his voice-tone and speech pattern.) I first became aquatinted with Spencer his senior year of high school, my 2nd year at Keeling High. Spencer was in my AP Statistics course, which provided him with opportunities to

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<sup>57</sup> Through a later follow-up phone call, I learned that Nathaniel had been accepted to four of the six medical schools he had applied to.

demonstrate both his advanced mathematics skills and his advanced communication skills. In addition to these skills, Spencer conveyed respect toward his peers and teachers alike in all of his interpersonal communications and actions.

Spencer's quiet reflective elegance can be traced back to one of his earliest recollections of schooling. In his kindergarten classroom, a fellow classmate, Albert, after causing quite a disturbance in the classroom had to make a public apology to his classmates. Spencer recounted the resulting impact:

The picture is still vivid in my mind, some 19 years after it took place. Albert, front and center, revealed to the class that he had been lying about losing whatever it was he was so distraught about losing. And, as he sobbed incessantly in front of the entire class, I was immediately taught a life-long lesson that will forever remain impressed upon my mind. I never wanted to be humiliated on such a large stage, and I would do anything to prevent what had happened to Albert from happening to me. (Autobiography)

Spencer asserted that this event forged his "desire to please" and "ignited my still-existing intense fear of failure" (Autobiography). Spencer noted, "While my motivation to succeed is sometimes lacking, my fear of failing and of embarrassing my family and myself is what has taken me so far" (Autobiography).

Spencer's attitude toward schooling and academics was significantly impacted in second grade. After he "posted an insanely high score" on an I.Q. test, Spencer was placed in the TAG program, which is where he "finally began to love learning" (Autobiography). In fact, Spencer remarked that he owed "90% of my educational development" (Autobiography) to his two TAG teachers in middle school, Ms. Murray and Ms. Watkins, both White females.

Spencer stated that even though his academic motivation in high school dropped significantly, he fully understood that to achieve the things he desired in life, it would be incumbent upon him to continue to make top grades. Spencer maintained his top grades throughout high school, finding "ways to be 'smart' and 'cool' at the same time"

(Autobiography). In high school, Spencer continued his membership in TAG as well as earned membership in the mathematics and science magnet program at Keeling High. Spencer took AP Biology, Chemistry, Statistics, U.S. History, and English, and earned membership into the Junior Beta and Beta clubs and National Honor Society, as well as the Spanish Honor Society. Spencer was an active member of the Academic Bowl, Mathematics Team, and Southeastern Consortium for Minorities in Engineering (SECME), among others clubs and organizations. He graduated in the top 5% of his class with a 3.8 GPA and scored in the 4th quartile on the mathematics portion of the SAT, being awarded “too numerous to remember” (Survey) academic awards throughout his K–12 education.

Throughout high school, Spencer lived with his mother and his younger sister, 10 years his junior. Spencer’s father was absent during his childhood and young adulthood. Later in an interview, when Spencer commented on the child rearing practices of African American men, he remarked:

My initial thought, and this may be something horribly wrong for me to say, but my initial thought was what practices, because my experiences have been that the African American females generally do all of the child rearing, and even if there is a two-parent home the males are rarely involved. (Interview 3)

Spencer self-classified his family income level as lower-middle class during his high school years. His family, however, was upwardly mobile given that his mother privileged education, completing her undergraduate education and attending graduate school as a single mom. Spencer also was surrounded throughout his childhood with family members, from his mother’s side, who had achieved school and financial success. In his first interview, Spencer specifically noted an aunt who was a doctor and the indirect positive impact that she had on his success. In writing a brief statement regarding his relationship with his family during his high school years, Spencer

wrote: “Very good. I was treated with respect and allowed to be independent. I felt as if my family had a great deal of trust in me and in the decisions that I would make” (Survey).

Spencer’s undergraduate education was less (academically) spectacular than his K–12 education, in that, he “played the first 2 years of school, and spent the last 2 years catching up” (Survey). Nevertheless, Spencer graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in economics from a top-ten ranked engineering research-one university. During college, Spencer wrote for his school’s newspaper and volunteered for various mentoring programs sponsored through SECME. Although Spencer “played” his initial 2 years in undergraduate school, he graduated with a 3.0 GPA and scored well into the 4th quartile on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), earning him admission to law school at a prestigious private university.

Spencer viewed himself through high school “as one of the smart kids, but at the same time, one of the smart kids who was cool” (Interview 1). He believed that his identification as one of the smart kids was because he had been in TAG since elementary school, and in high school he was in the mathematics and science magnet program and in several AP and honors courses. Spencer believed that his identification as one of the cool kids was because he was not just always studying: “I saw myself on the fringe of the smart academic type and the outgoing social type” (Interview 1). He stated that the reason that he had time for a social life was because he “figured out the formula to success” early in his schooling:

I knew what I had to do in order to get the grades that I wanted to get. I knew what amount of studying I had to do. ...I knew that if I put in class time and payed attention in class and took notes in class, then I wouldn’t have to do as much outside of class. So I kind of felt like I had that balance of being in the AP and honors classes, but at the same time, having time outside of class to hang out with my friends, and to go out, and go to parties and do things like that. (Interview 1)

As Spencer acknowledged the “great pressure” on African American male students to take a less positive academic path in middle and high school and just “hang out with... friends”

(Interview 1), he consistently returned to his “fear of failure” as the motivation for making positive choices:

My fear of failure, and my fear of letting down my family, more so than my drive to be successful, and that might sound kind of weird, [motivated the choices that I made]. It was an unstated thing in my family, I was always looked at as, “This is the one that is going to make it. He is the one who is going to get the degree, make the money, and have a good house and all of that.” So I think that it is not really a burden; I kind of see it as a badge of honor, because I have the responsibility on me and I accept it. I have never wanted to let anybody down. I was so afraid of failing that even to this day, that has driven me to not fall into some of those gaps that some of my peers may have fallen in, and that fear is stronger than anything I could even imagine. (Interview 1)

At the time of the study, Spencer was fulfilling this family responsibility as he was completing his 3rd year of law school. After completing law school, Spencer was not sure what type of law he planned to practice but he was confident that he would have many options.

#### Data Organization

As the four previous descriptions revealed (see Table 1 for a summary of participants’ description), each of the participants for this study was a complex and unique subject, the only characteristics that were consistent among the four were that they were self-identified young African American men who had achieved and were continuing to achieve school and academic (and societal) success. The next section of this chapter presents the data collected on each participant organized around subheadings that roughly correspond to the three research questions for this study. The participants’ data are not presented as bordered-off case studies, but as a border-less collage. My aim in presenting the data in this manner is to illustrate the similarities and stark differences found in the schooling and mathematics experiences of these four young African American men. Throughout the discussion, data from each participant might not be presented under every subheading. As striking similarities appeared in the data between 2, 3, or even all 4 participants regarding a specific topic, I presented only one or two examples from the

data that, I suppose, best exemplified how the participants conceptualized the topic collectively. In making such a data presentation decision, I do not intend to suggest that the participants spoke from a single monolithic “voice” on a specific topic—they were never monolithic—but to suggest that for the current purposes of this study that the data example(s) presented are sufficient in responding to the research questions. A summary is provided after the data reporting and analysis of collective subheadings that relate to a specific research question, offering a concise response to each respective question.

*Table 1.* Summary of participants’ description

Participant	Family background; socioeconomic status	High school extracurricular activities	Undergraduate major; type of school	Current or future profession
Ethan	Father, mother, one older brother; middle class	Basketball, football, soccer, and academic clubs and organizations	Mathematics; HBCU	Teacher
Keegan	Father, mother, two older brothers, one younger sister; middle class, transitioned to upper-middle class	Academic clubs and organizations	Sociology; HBCU	Preacher
Nathaniel	Father, mother, three younger brothers, and one younger sister; lower-middle class, transitioned to middle class	Baseball, cross-country, and academic clubs and organizations	Biochemistry and microbiology; research-one university	Doctor
Spencer	Mother and younger sister; lower-middle class, transitioned to middle class	Academic clubs and organizations	Economics; research-one technology university	Lawyer

## Conversations on Success

### *Success Defined & Sociocultural Factors Attributed to Success*

The following discussion reveals the participants' perspectives of success and the sociocultural factors that they attributed to their school and academic success. Reporting of the data reveals that the participants defined success in broad social terms and in narrow human needs and desires terms, attributing the external forces of God to the internal forces of self-motivation to their success. The insight into the participants disclosed in the following discussion provides the frame for much of their remaining data.

*Success defined.* Ethan defined success in very broad social terms. Although he recognized that some people defined success in terms of monetary wealth, Ethan defined success as the means to effect change in a positive fashion:

People think to be successful they have to have all the money in the world, but that is sad, money is not going to stay with you always. ...Most people don't realize, that several successful people don't have any money, several of them. But as far as success, coming from my aspect, I think I am successful because I have been put in a position to help others. I think that is what success really means. It is the ability to change and affect the lives of others...change somebody's life in a positive manner, then, I think you are successful. (Interview 1)

Ethan believed that knowledge was the key to success, noting, "If you are full of knowledge, you are able to pass it on and help somebody else" (Interview 1). Ethan also noted that some people believe that learning stops after college, but he believed that learning should be continuous throughout life. He believed that knowledge was power and that power leads to success:

Well, I realized in life that you could never know everything...there is always somebody out there that knows more, and not only that, knowledge is power. A lot of people don't value education, but knowledge is powerful. The more you know, the more successful you will be in life, as far as, not just societal success, but success period. (Interview 1)

Keegan defined success as being able to meet direct human needs and desires and, similar to Ethan, in a broader social context as well:

I define social success as doing something that you love, doing what makes you happy. In my personal life success is having a supportive family that loves you, having a strong faith base, being comfortable, not rich, not wealthy, but being comfortable, being able to provide for yourself, to eat three times a day, and have a decent business. That is my personal meaning of social success, and just having friends and having someone that you can love and you can share your life with. (Interview 1)

Keegan believed that on this basic level of success that he was successful. He expanded on this definition, however, remarking:

I want to go higher. I want to go to the next level, the next dimension in success, as far as touching people's lives, impacting people's lives. One person who I look to as a model is Martin Luther King Jr., and I look at the philosophy of Jesus Christ...and Gandhi. [If someone] came in contact with these individuals they never left the same, whether they were ignorant in racial hatred, or sick as far as leprosy or any disease, they never left the same, that is what I want in my life. I want to be a testimony. I want people to say, "When I met Keegan Graham, I came in one way, but I walked out another way." So that is the success I want to reach. ...I may not ever reach that success in my lifetime, but that is the success I want to reach. (Interview 1)

Nathaniel, on the other hand, maintained a less broad definition of success, defining success as "having what you want, seeing what you want, working toward [your goals] and even excelling way past...so you may never fall back to where you were before" (Pilot Interview 1). Nathaniel's goals were financial achievement and higher levels of learning. Similarly, Spencer defined success in a two-fold manner: achieving basic happiness and contentment, and having the means to financially care for family and loved ones. In defining happiness, Spencer, remarked, "Happiness means the ability to live a comfortable life and not having to worry about health, safety, my family; being able to take care of the people who I love" (Interview 1).

Implicit or explicit in all variations of success identified by the participants was the undisputed need for education, whether it was to pass knowledge on as in the case of Ethan or to ensure that one could financially care for one's family and loved ones as in Spencer's case. Moreover, the difference in how they defined success—either in broad social terms or in narrow human needs and desires terms—reflected, I suppose, their financially lived experiences. In that,

both Ethan and Keegan had been immersed in the comforts of the middle to upper-middle class, whereas both Nathaniel and Spencer had experienced less than comfortable middle-class economic conditions, transitioning to the middle class through their schooling years.

*Sociocultural factors attributed to success.* As Ethan identified several factors that led to his success, one factor that prevailed throughout his data was his relationship with God: “I just give GOD all the glory, praise, and thanks. I’m here because many fell by the wayside and never had the opportunity, but I was blessed with both opportunity and success” (Autobiography). Second to God, Ethan credited his mother for providing the motivation and the “tough love” to teach him and his brother how to be extraordinary, not just ordinary. In the process of teaching both Ethan and his brother to be extraordinary, Ethan stated that not only was she very explicit about what was needed to be successful but also was a living example of success:

Well, one of the big things was that my mother was highly educated herself, and second of all, I think one of the things she did, she enabled us to do, was she knew what mainstream wanted. She instilled in us the fact that this is what it is going to take to be successful, so this is what you need to do. We were able to listen to her, because she was successful, we had proof, you know, “the proof is in the pudding.” She was real life proof to us. ...I thank God that my mother was able to raise us in a way which she showed us not only how to be successful academically, but she also taught us how to be successful socially and culturally. (Interview 3)

As Ethan attributed much of his success to God and his mother, he also identified other aspects of his childhood and adolescence that prompted his success. When Ethan was younger he most enjoyed reading: “I read everyday: Boxcar Kids, Hardy Boys, everything. I was always good at math but reading was more entertaining” (Autobiography). He noted, however, that reading became less of a hobby and more of a chore as girls distracted him during middle school. And, although Ethan was placed in the accelerated course during his sixth grade year, he wrote that middle school rarely challenged him, stating that his charm got him through most of his schoolwork successfully.

When he began high school he was introduced to Mrs. Meadows, the head counselor at Keeling High, who he calls “one the more intricate parts of my success” (Autobiography). Mrs. Meadows placed Ethan in the mathematics and science magnet program, which Ethan wrote: “I hated zero period and my grades showed it. But it was what others wanted and so I did it” (Autobiography). (Zero period was the portion of the magnet program in which students attended an additional period for the school day, earning two Carnegie units for mathematics or science during the school year.) Ethan noted that as he progressed through high school he became more involved with extracurricular activities and less involved in academics, but since God had blessed him with a strong mind his grades did not suffer, keeping him in the top 5% of his graduating class (Autobiography).

Ethan not only credited God, his mother, and Mrs. Meadows with his success, but also several teachers. But in noting the teachers who were effective in positively influencing his success, Ethan stated they had a positive influence mainly “because they didn’t only just care about the education aspects of a student’s life, but they also cared about the life of the student” (Interview 1). Ethan mentioned this care ethic of teaching several times throughout his conversations:

Well, when a child feels like he, you know, all children need to feel wanted, and when a child feels wanted and comfortable, it compels them to want to learn, and want to listen to that teacher. It compels them to realize that, that teacher is not talking for [her or his] health, but that the teacher is talking to help the child. When a child feels [cared for], that teacher is not out for bad teaching, but for good teaching, and that is when the child will learn. (Interview 1)

The importance of caring teacher-student relationships appears as a factor of success in the conversations of the other 3 participants as well.

Keegan stated that his driving force to succeed was being surround by success throughout his education; given that he saw his father, mother, and two older brothers succeed he knew he

could do the same. He remarked that his parents (and the entire family) were always encouraging and pushing him to be his best, which led to a fear of disappointment: “I was so afraid of failure. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents. I didn’t want to disappoint my brothers. I was so afraid of failure” (Interview 4). Moreover, Keegan’s parents often recounted their education experiences as individuals who were among the first African Americans to integrate some of the more prestigious universities in the southeastern United States. This recounted history provided Keegan with additional motivation to succeed in education as well as in life in general:

So I felt that if they could [succeed], I could do better. If my parents could succeed in the face of segregation and racism, having to live in segregation the early part of their life, not having as many advantages as I have, that there was no reason for me to fail. If I failed it was my fault. (Interview 4)

Keegan also attributed his success to the extracurricular activities at church, noting, “I felt more comfortable participating in activities at church, rather than school because I never had the threat of being excluded” (Autobiography). Keegan believed that the people he encountered at church, like his family, were always encouraging and pushing him to be the best at whatever he did. Although I did not explicitly explore why Keegan felt more comfortable participating in activities at his church, I inferred from his later remarks that success (academic and social) was encouraged more often, from adults and peers alike, at church than it was at school. In other words, concepts such as cool pose, stereotype threat, cultural inversion, acting White, and raceless persona (discussed in chapter 2 and later in this chapter) appear to not have been present in Keegan’s experiences at church.

Similar to Ethan, as Keegan attributed his success to teachers, he remarked that the teachers who were most influential developed

a teacher-student relationship that went beyond just the classroom. ...[A relationship] where you could go into their office or classroom after class and not necessarily talk about academics, but you can still learn from them, learn about life, and learn about just

different aspects. ...I think that is very important to have a relationship with a teacher...engaging in other things, things as academic, but not necessarily just the subject, where you develop a trust. (Interview 2)

Keegan stated that the trusting relationship that he developed with teachers (and professors) was often a motivating force to succeed in a particular course. In addition to a teacher-student relationship that went beyond the classroom, Keegan noted the affect of teacher expectation on his motivation to succeed. The positive impact of teachers who set high expectations for students is illustrated as Keegan recounted his experience with his fifth-grade teacher:

Ms. Maxine Drew in fifth grade...I remember up until fifth grade I was kind of a student who was happy with a C. If I made a C, I was happy and that was the end of it: "Thank you, I am out of here. I can go on to the sixth grade." But Ms. Drew wouldn't let me settle for a C; she wouldn't even let me settle for a B. I remember...I didn't even care about making honor roll, but she made me motivated to make the honor roll every year. And even up through my high school years, until I graduated from high school and college, every time I did well on my report card I would stop by Ms. Drew's room. I remember my junior year in college, I almost felt silly stopping by my elementary school, to show Maxine Drew my grades, but I wanted to make her proud. Even when I didn't want to achieve, even if I wasn't doing it for my parents, I would think of Maxine Drew, and think of her, and say well, "I am doing it for her." ...One of the last times I saw her...I was telling her that I was about to graduate from [] College. She started crying when I told her what a transition she did in my life. So I even carry that in graduate school, when I don't feel like reading, I think of her, even more so than my parents. So she gave me that motivation to achieve. (Interview 3)

Similar to Ethan and Keegan, Nathaniel noted that his parents consistently encouraged and supported his education, stating, "from my parents I got more of a sense that learning was important, more so than it was fun, because...my dad...and my mom...came over here [from Nigeria] with a focus" (Interview 4). Nathaniel's parents' focus on learning equated to an enforcement of his (and his siblings) school success:

My parents, they always asked to see our report cards, and anytime we had problems with it...they would take the time to tell us that...you can always do better...that a C is not accepted in our house, or something like that. So I guess it starts when you are young and what your parents expect out of you...how often they enforce that...whether they enforce that or not. That gives you a sense of [whether] you should really care about your grades or [if]...you should be doing better. (Pilot Interview 1)

Unlike Ethan and Keegan, however, Nathaniel attributed much of his success to his independent goal setting and desire to better himself: “I kept pushing myself that way...I had some kind of goal, even though it wasn’t clearly defined” (Pilot Interview 3). Along with goal setting, Nathaniel argued for a structured environment so that “your mind doesn’t just go wandering” (Pilot Interview 3). He noted that although his parents were not home after school that they arranged for him to attend after-school programs, providing a space for continued academic activity rather than playing Nintendo, watching television, or “running around on the street, getting...caught up with people...who do all sorts of other things” (Pilot Interview 2).

In recounting the teachers that had most influenced his success, Nathaniel stated, echoing comments made from Ethan and Keegan, that the teachers who were most effective were those who “seemed really interested in our well-being” (Interview 4). Nathaniel provided a narrative (on three occasions) of a mathematics teacher from middle school who was especially influential:

I had a teacher in eighth grade, an African American male, Mr. Richardson...who went to Stanford and instead of going into medicine he decided he really wanted to be a mathematics teacher. So he seemed really interested in our well-being and seeing us [succeed]. He...wouldn’t accept us being mediocre, which I think is something really important. He...always wanted [us] to do our best and...to see us strive to succeed. ...When he was at school, he was there for us, that was always the sense we got from him. That is the sense I got from the teachers who really, really seemed interested in being there; it is like, they were there for you and they let you know that, too. (Interview 4)

Spencer, similar to the other participants, attributed much of his success to his family, specifically his mother, stating that she “was a much better student than I could ever have hoped to be” (Interview 1). As he credited other family members who encouraged his success, he claimed that the expectation of his success was always a present motivating factor. This expectation of success from his family coupled with the fear of failure or letting down those

family members (Keegan made similar remarks) was a constant theme throughout Spencer's data. He stated:

I have always felt like I had to be successful in education, and that maybe success really wasn't much of a choice. I mean ultimately of course, it is up to me to study for the test, turn in the homework, write the papers, and that sort of thing. But I have always, and again, this is not something that I shy away from, this is something that I welcome, had the feeling, specifically from my family, that they looked at me as the success story for my generation in the family. So this goes back to me wanting to please and things like that. Although the ultimate choice has been up to me, I have always felt that there has been some sort of unspoken driving force in the background saying, "You have to make it." (Interview 4)

Spencer also attributed his success to being an avid reader in his earliest years, stating that he "always read books and newspapers and things of that nature" (Interview 1). And when Spencer would pose a question to his mother he was always instructed to figure out the answer on his own: "I never got easy answers from my mom about anything. She would always tell me to go find the answer on my own" (Interview 1). Spencer also believed that the very clear dichotomy between how people lived, which he had the opportunity to see, motivated his success. This dichotomy was witnessed through visits with his aunt who was a doctor and visits with his grandmother who was a childcare provider at a United Way children's home:

I would see kids that were the result of parents who were in jail, or on drugs, or whatever. So I always had different viewpoints to look at, to compare and say, "Okay, this is what I want. This is what I don't want; and How do I go about getting what I do want?" Education seemed to be the surest path. Nothing is a guarantee, but the common dominator usually is some level of education; that [understanding] has always been with me for as long as I can remember.

Spencer, like Keegan and Nathaniel, attributed much of his academic success to the expectations set by some of his teachers, specifically his TAG teachers from sixth grade:

I think that a lot of my academic success to this day is because of the push that I got from my two TAG teachers in middle school. I think that by far, those two teachers had the most influence on me because I was coming out of a period where I was sort of bored in a way with school, because we weren't really being [challenged]. There was always two or three kids in my elementary school classes who were a lot further along than the other

kids and we would do our work and we would get our assignments done and we would be done for a week or whatever waiting for the rest of the class to catch up. So my middle school experience was the first time that I was consistently pushed and challenged on a daily basis. I think it was good because it brought me out of that boredom of elementary school, and set me up well for high school and college. (Interview 1)

There were a variety of external and internal sociocultural factors<sup>58</sup> noted by the participants as contributing to their school and academic success. Ethan identified the external force of God as the key factor of his success, whereas Nathaniel identified the internal force of self-motivation. And Keegan and Spencer both identified the external-internal force of fear—fear of disappointing their families—as a key factor in their success. Although differences were plentiful in the participants' experiences, three themes surfaced as being influential in the school and academic success of all 4 participants. These themes, which have been previously reported as influential in the academic success of historically marginalized students (e.g., see Hébert & Reis, 1999; Martin, 2000; O'Connor, 1997), were: (a) observing or knowing family or community members who had benefited from a formal education by achieving financial and societal success; (b) encouraging and forceful family and community members who made the expectations of school and academic success explicit; and (c) caring and committed teachers and school personnel who established high academic expectations for students and developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics.

### *Schooling Experiences*

The following discussion recounts specific schooling experiences of the participants as they discussed their encounters with White teachers and their perspectives about school curricula. The purpose of the discussion is to position the participants within the discourse of Black boys and White teachers and the discourse of Black boys and school curricula.

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<sup>58</sup> The factors of success identified by the participants are, I argue, all sociocultural, given that the factors identified have their origins in historical and sociocultural discourses, including the external force of God and the internal force of self-motivation.

*Encounters with White teachers.* Ethan argued that his experiences with White teachers were not as positive as some of his experiences with African American teachers, not because of what they did, but more so because of what they did not do:

I think a lot of my White teachers...were a little bit more passive when trying to convince African American students that they did fit in, because they didn't want the African American students to think that...[as White teachers] they felt that the African American students didn't think that they fit in with mainstream. So they were kind of passive as far as that. But now my African American teachers, they did aggressively try to employ the mentality that as an African American we did fit in, they aggressively tried to, not necessarily brainwash, but try to help us realize, put into our minds that we do fit in, we can be mainstream, or we can do the same things that [mainstream students] do, or we can be educated, and achieve. ... I think a lot of my White teachers...avoided the race issue; they kind of sugarcoated the fact that there was a racial difference between them and the students. (Interview 2)

When Ethan was asked to comment on how his cool pose behaviors (discussed in a later subheading) impacted his education, and specifically his relationship with his White teachers, he claimed:

Most of [the White teachers] at the public schools did not see [cool pose] behaviors as aggressive, or demoralizing, or demeaning. But when I went to [] Christian High School,<sup>59</sup> when I was in ninth grade, several of the teachers there saw some of my demeanor as cocky, as aggressive, as far as language, or as stereotypical behaviors of African American males. Several of them saw it, but throughout high school, no. I think that most of the White teachers who taught at Keeling High understood African American males and culturally what they went through, or what was culturally, in the African American male sense, acceptable. (Interview 2)

Ethan argued that because most of his mathematics teachers through high school and college had been White (with the addition of Russian, Arabic, or African in college) he was motivated to become an African American mathematician. Ethan believed that as an African American educator, he had “knowledge of the educational differences, the different social aspects, and [that the African American students would] feel comfortable talking to other African Americans, explaining their mentalities” (Interview 2).

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<sup>59</sup> Ethan attended a Christian high school on an athletic scholarship his freshman year; however, he “left because of social differences” (Autobiography) after completing just one quarter and began attending Keeling High.

Although Keegan had some positive experiences with White teachers, specifically noting his White mathematics teachers and his White AP History teacher (he spoke very highly of these teachers), overall he believed that his White teachers were less caring than his Black teachers. He wrote:

Throughout elementary, middle, and high school I had about an equal portion of White teachers as Black teachers. I noticed that many of my White teachers would teach the lessons that were to be taught for that day and leave. It seemed as if they really did not wish to be at the “Black” school, but was willing to give it a try. Black teachers, on the other hand, seemed to have a vested interest in my education and wanted to ensure that I not only knew the lessons, but also knew about how to survive as a Black man in America. (Autobiography)

Keegan expanded on this perception in a later interview:

In my experiences with White teachers [and professors]...I believe that White teachers tend to be less caring...you learned a lot, but that is all you did...very few White teachers did I get something extra. For instance, if I was taking a course on...political philosophy, I would learn about Locke, I would learn about Rousseau, I would learn about Hobbs, I would learn about Martin, but that is all I got. When a Black teacher taught me, at least in my own experiences, I gained a lot more than just learning about Rousseau, Hobbs, and Martin. I gained so many life experiences, gained so many things outside of, just the academics. I learned a lot, and it seemed like a lot of White teachers say, “You got it, great! If not, you get a C. I will pass you so I don’t have to deal with you anymore...so your mama won’t come up here and complain and cuss me out.” Black teachers, [on the other hand] say, “I am going to drive you. I am going to make you want to [learn], because we can’t afford more of you to fail. You are one of our best, we can’t afford for you to fail. So we are going to set aside Rousseau. Rousseau is always going to be there, but I am going to give you some life experiences, some little secret, as a Black man that you need to have, as a Black woman that you need to have.” So not to discredit any of the White teachers that I have ever had, but I just think that Whites don’t give...those tidbits. (Interview 2)

Nathaniel spoke about several positive experiences that he had with White teachers throughout his schooling, noting that the major difference between his Black and White teachers was the cultural misunderstandings that sometimes occurred with his White teachers: “The White teachers...sometimes have cultural misunderstandings, sometimes...that...a Black teacher wouldn’t have. Sometimes, [White] teachers just misunderstand you when you are telling them

something; maybe in the way you act. ...I mean you do get that culture clash, sometimes” (Interview 2). Nathaniel also noted, however, that even though he had never experienced a reduced academic expectation from a White teacher he had friends who experienced such encounters:

Sometimes some teachers have lower expectations for some of the Black kids...than they do for others. I mean that is just me looking from the outside. ...I haven't experienced that myself, but I have heard other students say that about their teachers. (Interview 2)

Later in his conversation, Nathaniel specifically stated that he believed the reason he had never had negative encounters with White teachers regarding academic expectations was because he had been placed in the honors program from an early age.

Spencer, similar to the Keegan and Nathaniel, had mostly positive experiences with White teachers, noting that his two TAG teachers from middle school, who he held responsible for 90% of his education development, were White females, Ms. Murray and Ms. Watkins. He wrote:

I guess they saw some sort of potential in me specifically, because in a classroom full of bright, talented young students, I felt that I was always expected to be the best, and they both pushed me to my limits. I am truly grateful for having had them in my life. (Autobiography)

When specifically asked about his relationship with White teachers, Spencer recalled that most of his honors and AP teachers were White, with the exception of his AP and honors English teachers who were both Black. When asked to compare the experiences between Black and White teachers, he stated that his Black and White teachers appeared to be equally tough and demanding on him to succeed. Incidentally, Spencer did recall a negative experience he had with a White female teacher in fifth grade:

I can only really think of one bad experience that I have had with a teacher. ...I was very talkative in elementary school, and I got in trouble a lot for being talkative, and I had a fifth-grade teacher who said I was like a wild Indian one day, and that upset me. ...The

main reason it was negative was because I didn't really think that I deserved that kind of a response. I was talking, but I wasn't being rambunctious, I wasn't disrupting the class, or anything like that. I can remember her literally stopping class and yelling and really getting on me. I thought that her response wasn't in line with what I was doing. It was kind of disproportionate; it was a disproportionate response to what I was doing. If she would have said, "Be quiet and clam down," I would have probably taken to it better. But I guess it was just one of those things, you would just have to be there and see it. ... I guess, since I am recounting these facts, it must have been worse than I can think, as far as my behavior, but to this day I just don't think that my behavior warranted that kind of response. (Interview 1)

Spencer noted that throughout his K–12 education most of his teachers had been White, and similarly so through undergraduate and graduate school. Spencer's troubling of always having a White teacher or college professor is revealed as he wrote about an experience during his junior and senior years at college:

My college experiences with professors were less pronounced until my junior and senior years. There, in my studies of economics, I found something I thought to be as strange as flying pigs, but as refreshing as a cool island breeze, two African American male professors in the same department. Needless to say, I took every class that the both of them offered, even if I was not particularly interested in the subject matter. For some reason, I felt that I needed to have the experience of being in their classes, since I viewed the situation as somewhat historic and unlikely to be repeated in my educational experiences. (Autobiography)

Spencer's remarks regarding African American professors (teachers) provides evidence of the importance of students "seeing themselves" as producers, dispensers, holders, and so forth of knowledge. In other words, it is important for students to have teacher-student experiences with teachers who look like them (Irvine, 1991). Later in Spencer's data, he discussed the importance of belongingness; I infer from his noted comments regarding his African American professors that his need to prove his belongingness was lessened in these classes due simply to having teachers who looked like him.

The encounters with White teachers described by the participants were most often positive experiences. It is important to note, however, that all of the participants had been placed

in the “honors track” early in their education. Adhering to national trends, teachers, Black or White, found within honors programs are often the most credentialed and experienced in a specific school; therefore, it appears that the participants’ experiences with teachers, Black or White, were most often with teachers who were recognized as the “better” teachers in the school. Even with Ethan and Keegan noting that they perceived White teachers to be less caring, the “cultural misunderstandings” experienced by Nathaniel, and the “disproportionate response” experienced by Spencer, in total, the conversations of the participants bring into question the often projected negative discourse of White teachers and Black boys (Irvine, 1991; Kunjufu, 1995; Majors & Billson, 1992). Nevertheless, either implicitly or explicitly, all 4 participants noted the significant benefits and crucial need of having African American teachers.

*Perspectives of curriculum.* Ethan remarked that until he began reading the literature for this study that he had never really thought about concepts such as a core curriculum or multicultural curriculum. Based on the responses from the other participants regarding perceptions about the curriculum, this statement could have been said by any one of the participants. Ethan noted, however, that after reading the literature, coupled with his experiences as a teacher, he understood how forcing a core curriculum or the lack of a multicultural curriculum could impact student learning. Specifically relating these curriculum approaches to his schooling experiences, Ethan stated:

As far as me experiencing those, I never really saw it while I was in school, as having to learn a core curriculum. I was always, how can I say, willing to learn, well what I needed to do to achieve, and if core curriculum was what they needed me to do, I was willing to do it. So it was almost like we were brainwashed that this is what you need to learn to be successful, so this is what you are going to learn, and so that is what we wanted to learn. [And as far as] multicultural education, I really wasn’t surrounded by too many cultures other than my own, so I really didn’t experience that much of multicultural education. (Interview 2)

Ethan believed that the differences of minorities should be incorporated into the curriculum; however, he did not perceive these differences to be deficient differences, just differences. He argued:

It is not necessarily that minorities cannot [learn the core curriculum], it is just the fact that there must be aspects taken into consideration when it comes to minorities as far as their environment, as far as their past, as far as maybe even the level of education of their parents. [Consider] things that are around them that might affect their learning experience or the way that they learn, as far as maybe their priorities, or those who are around them that compel them to have certain priorities. ...I think we all could learn the same thing, but I think we all learn in different ways. I think that is the aspect that we all have to take into consideration. It scares me that they want us all to learn in the same way, the same thing; but we don't all have the same background or environments. (Interview 4)

As Keegan critiqued the school curriculum, he argued that most often students just do not understand how the curriculum relates to their present lived experiences, or their future ones. He believed that it was the responsibility of parents and teachers to illustrate to the students how the curriculum will be useful in the future. Keegan asserted that relating the curriculum to the child's future experiences requires a committed interest in what the child is learning, not only by the child's teachers but also by the child's parents. Keegan recounted a conversation between he and his dad to illustrate his argument:

I remember I would come home often and say, "Why do I have to learn this mess, I don't care"; my dad would almost drill me and tell me [that he dealt with it] everyday. "[For example,] this is how you use it: when I bought the house you are living in I had to learn about interest." ...He would show me the house notes, the mortgage payment coupon and how the base price and the interest compiled. ...I think that parents' involvement is important...in everything that you learn in school; it is dire important, that teachers and parents, those who are involved in the child's life, show how it is relevant to that life, show how it is applicable to that life later on. So I think that is why so many minority groups have learning and performing difficulties because they don't know how this is applicable in their life. They say, "I am never going to use this." (Interview 2)

In Keegan's conversation regarding a multicultural curriculum, he believed that the curriculum was inclusive, at least in his experiences. He stated that most of his teachers had experience

teaching in an African American environment, and therefore they would adapt the curriculum by creating examples directed toward young African Americans' experiences.

In total, Ethan's statement, "I was always...willing to learn...what I needed to do to achieve, and if the core curriculum was what they needed me to do, I was willing to do it" (Interview 2) typifies the participants' responses to questions regarding the curriculum. Even after reading a critique of the core curriculum and multicultural curriculum approaches to education (Ogbu, 1992), these four young men appeared to be more focused on what they needed to learn to be successful as opposed to whether the curriculum was oppressive or inclusive of their experiences. Furthermore, Ethan's remarks about incorporating differences into the curriculum and Keegan's remarks regarding teachers' and parents' responsibility in making the curriculum relevant and culturally inclusive were either implicitly or explicitly found in the conversations of each participant.

#### Summary of Success

*How did participants define success? What sociocultural factors did they attribute to their school and academic success?*

The different subjectivities of the participants were readily observed as they defined success. Success was defined as helping others by effecting positive change; as impacting people's lives by being a just testament; as achieving what one desires by excelling past one's goals; or simply, as living a happy life by caring for those who one loved. The difference in how the participants defined success—either in broad social terms or in narrow human needs and desires terms—reflected their lived experiences. Nevertheless, no matter how the participants conceptualized success, implicit or explicit in all variations of success was the undisputed need for education, whether it was to pass knowledge on or to ensure that one could financially care

for loved ones. The valuing of or need for education, specifically formal education, was a common theme found throughout the participants' data as they discussed success.

There were many external and internal sociocultural factors identified by the participants that contributed to their valuing of education, which ultimately resulted in their school and academic (and mathematics) success. The factors identified were extreme, ranging from the external force of God to the internal force of self-motivation, with the force of fear somewhere in between. There were three clear themes, however, that resonated in the conversations of all 4 participants: (a) observing or knowing family or community members who had benefited from a formal education by achieving financial and societal success; (b) encouraging and forceful family and community members who made the expectations of school and academic (and mathematics) success explicit; and (c) caring and committed teachers and school personnel who established high academic expectations for students and developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics.

Observing or knowing family or community members who had benefited from a formal education was instrumental to the participants' valuing of education. The life experiences with these individuals from their inner-circle of family and community members provided the participants with proof that there was a "pay off" to education and determination that they too could succeed. Knowing and seeing other African Americans that had succeeded provided the participants with tangible evidence of the value of working toward school and academic success.

Not only did these individuals provide the participants with tangible evidence of the value of a sound education, but also they made the expectations of school and academic success explicit. These explicit expectations of school and academic success loudly reverberated through each participant's story. The participants were constantly surrounded by family and community

members who were not “too shy to remind” them about the expectations of school and academic success, and success in general.

Expectations of success were not only established by family and community members, but by teachers and school personnel as well. The participants discussed the significant impact of caring and committed teachers and school personnel who established high academic expectations for students and developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics. Teachers (and school personnel) who established high academic expectations for students were credited with giving “me that motivation to achieve” and “90% of my educational development.” And teachers (and school personnel) who developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics were credited with compelling “them to want to learn” and “engaging [them] in other things... where you develop a trust.” Within the context of schools, there was no other single factor identified throughout the participants’ data that matched the impact on success as the positive impact of caring and committed teachers who established high academic expectations and developed student relationships that went beyond the school and academics.

Furthermore, within the context of schools the encounters with White teachers described by the participants were most often positive, bringing into question the often projected negative discourse of White teachers and Black boys. It is also important to note that there was an absence of conversations regarding specific school curricula or after-school programs, with one exception, as factors contributing to the participants’ school and academic success. In making the foregoing statement, I provide two caveats, however. First, it is important to reiterate Ethan’s statement regarding being “brainwashed” into learning what the mainstream wants you to learn. This statement, which was somewhat echoed by the other 3 participants, motivates some

important questions for educators: Wouldn't learning be easier without students having to be brainwashed? What happens when students are conscious of the brainwashing? What would a school curriculum look like that did not brainwash students into learning? Second, recall that all 4 participants maintained active extracurricular lives that took place after school; therefore, the lack of conversations regarding after-school programs is not surprising. And in Nathaniel's situation, when there was a need in his earlier schooling experience for an after-school program, the program served an important distinct purpose, assisting him in maintaining a focus on his academics.

### Conversations on Discourses

#### *Perspectives of and Relationships with Mathematics*

The following discussion presents the various perspectives of mathematics held by the participants. The data presented not only illustrate how the participants viewed mathematics but also their relationship with mathematics. In effect, the discussion aims to shed light on the participants' "mathematics identity" (Martin, 2000, p. viii), defined as the participant's beliefs about his mathematics abilities, his beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, his beliefs about the opportunities and constraints that exist to participate in mathematics, and his motivations to obtain mathematics knowledge.

Ethan claimed that mathematics from the very beginning was very natural to him—"like eating or talking. ... Sounds silly, but numbers would talk to me; sing to me; call to me" (Mathematics Autobiography). Ethan recalled how as a young boy he would play games with license plates, manipulating the numbers until a pattern, or product or sum would appear. He argued that as a Black male, mathematics would define him, since through his middle, high school, and college education he was recognized as somehow "unique."

Ethan said that he was drawn to mathematics because it compelled him to go into deeper thought. He noted, however, that mathematics was not challenging in high school except for the AP Statistics examination, with the same holding true in college except during his senior year when he took Real Analysis, which “kicked my butt” (Autobiography). Ethan believed that his success in mathematics during high school worked to his advantage only because he was in a mathematics and science magnet school, stating that if it had been at any other high school there would be students who did mathematics and those who did not. He argued that the important aspect of mathematics to learn was how mathematics would benefit one in the long run, “not just in that class, but forever” (Interview 1).

Ethan noted two rewarding mathematics experiences during high school: passing the AP Statistics examination (he scored a 3 out of 5), and attending a joint-enrollment mathematics course at a local university. He noted that his most disappointing high school mathematics experience was his experience with Pacesetter Pre-calculus, an experimental curriculum from the College Board that presented the topics of pre-calculus through “real-world” applications. For Ethan, this approach to teaching mathematics changed the very foundation of mathematics. He was concerned that he was only learning how to apply the procedures of mathematics and not learning the conceptual aspects of why the procedures worked. He summed up this experience, claiming that Pacesetter

is taking out the theory and laws, that is the foundation, the analysis of mathematics. They are replacing it with the application of mathematics, and when the kids go to the next level, they don't have the basics to see it, and go to another level. (Interview 1)

Moreover, Ethan viewed the discipline of mathematics as culturally free, arguing that mathematics is a universal subject “no matter how it was done in other cultures” (Interview 3).

Ethan's naturalness with mathematics is juxtaposed against Keegan's struggles with mathematics. Keegan was the only participant in this study who proudly claimed that he "hated mathematics and science" (Interview 1). He stated that he had his biggest problems academically with these subjects. Even though Keegan's academic performance in mathematics and science was always above average, he preferred the social sciences, identifying himself as a "history buff" (Interview 1). Nevertheless, given that both his father and mother valued mathematics (Keegan's mother was a mathematics teacher at Keeling High and his father's undergraduate major was in mathematics) and he was attending a mathematics and science magnet high school, Keegan "always looked at mathematics as something that was very important and necessary for success" (Mathematics Autobiography). Keegan claimed that it was through his father and mother imparting their skills in mathematics to him that he learned the "ways of maneuvering through mathematics" (Interview 1). Keegan's mother, understanding where her son's passions lay, was able to expand the utility of mathematics, providing him with the justification for engaging in mathematics:

I would say, "Mom, why do I have to study mathematics? How could you major in mathematics? How could you do this mess? Why do you like math so much?" and she told me, "Life is a problem that you will eventually have an answer to; mathematics is a great analogy for life. It can teach you that when you have a problem there is a way of solving it. There may be two or three ways to solve it, there may be a best way to solve it, but there is always a way of solving it." And that is how I look at life. I know past experiences have taught me that when I am presented a problem and it may seem impossible, just sit there, contemplate it, look back, think about all what I learned back in elementary school...in high school...in college, and then solve the problem, that is how life is. Life is a huge mathematical equation and all the time figuring out what X is. (Interview 1)

Keegan's father echoed this message, providing for an important "different tone" regarding the utility of mathematics:

Hearing it [the message of the importance of mathematics] from my dad gave it a different tone. ...He would say that mathematics was very important in just running a

household and being a Black male, that it is very important to have strong mathematics skills. It is just as important as having strong reading skills; that mathematics was a crucial part of life. (Interview 2)

Keegan expressed that he would be apprehensive about solving an advanced mathematics problem given that he had not taken a formal mathematics course in over 3 years, but he said that he still used mathematics in his everyday life in very practical ways. Keegan also extended the utility of mathematics to broader uses and to his future profession:

I enjoy mathematics because it allows me to practice solving problems. I believe that the more successful people are great problem solvers and able to conquer challenges effectively. Mathematics offers me that opportunity. In my future career I must be able to solve problems effectively. [Moreover,] as a clergyman and leader of a congregation, I have to know how to do a budget, how to get a loan, and how to ensure that the congregation is healthy financially. (Mathematics Autobiography)

Keegan appeared to contradict himself when he stated, “I hated mathematics” and “I enjoy mathematics.” I suppose, however, that the different attitudes expressed by Keegan were located in the context in which the mathematics was applied: he hated “school” mathematics—applying mathematics procedures to routine textbook problems—but enjoyed everyday mathematics—applying mathematics process skills to nonroutine real-world problems. Keegan’s later comments clearly illustrated an understanding that mathematics was integrated in all disciplines, specifically even in his chosen field of study as a social scientist:

Every book, whether you are studying biology, studying physics, everything is going to have some basis of mathematics. I think that it is the only subject, or only academic field that is integrated into everything. You don’t see much biology in political science, you don’t see much physics, but you see mathematics in the social sciences. (Interview 4)

Keegan’s most rewarding experience in mathematics was earning a B+ in his college calculus course, a course that he nearly withdrew from because he felt overwhelmed. Keegan noted that his experience with this specific mathematics course taught him not to drop courses in the future, even if he thought that he was going to fail the course: “There are ways that I can

conquer courses; the experience gave me a tremendous challenge” (Interview 1). Keegan recalled his most discouraging mathematics experience was his AP Statistics examination score (he scored a 1 out of 5), claiming that he really did not have the best mindset for taking the exam, especially after what had happen during a speech he gave in February:<sup>60</sup> “I was, just like, I don’t want to take it, I don’t care. I was so sick of high school; I didn’t care. I just wanted to get it over with” (Interview 1).

Although Nathaniel was very skilled in mathematics, he did not perceive his mathematics ability as natural, as Ethan claimed, but rather as something he got better at because he worked at it. He noted that his earliest memories of mathematics were working mathematics games in a *Child Craft* book his parents bought for him. Nathaniel provided a narrative starting with this *Child Craft* book and concluding with his performance in mathematics as an undergraduate double-science major:

My first mathematics experience...is my parents bought me a *Child Craft* book...I started learning about numbers and playing around with numbers in there. In elementary school I was never really great at math; it was something I had to work at...I was like a B-C student in math. I got better at it because I kept working at it through middle school...[when] I got to high school...I didn’t do as well in high school math as I probably could of, but then again I didn’t work as hard in high school, until the last two years...[when] I took some AP courses. It was like I had to work harder because the classes were harder. So...other than that I was always like a B-C student in math. I...work at it...I got better at it and started making A’s here at University of []. (Pilot Interview 1)

Nathaniel contended that some people were just naturally skilled at mathematics, suggesting that some people are just better at keeping everything logically organized. Nathaniel transferred the logical aspect of mathematics to writing: “You would be able to think out your thoughts and stuff

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<sup>60</sup> Keegan stated that his most disappointing experience in high school occurred during a speech he delivered at the Black History assembly his senior year at Keeling High. He recounted:

I remember I was giving a speech, and the students were so rude, they were talking and fighting, and it was just commotion all through it. ...I was so feed up; we were graduating in May. I just said, “To Hell with it.” I was through with Keeling High from then on. (Interview 1)

in a wise fashion, the same way you have to answer a math question” (Pilot Interview 2). And Nathaniel extended mathematics’ relevance to his experiences as a double-science major, arguing, “you are not going to escape it” (Interview 4).

Nathaniel also extended mathematics into a broader social relevancy. He claimed that mathematics knowledge, like all knowledge, made it less likely that one could be “swayed or swindled” (Pilot Interview 1) because

math is the backbone of a lot of things...like throwing numbers around...when we talk about politics all the time. We sit there and talk about the numbers...and whatnot...and just knowing math helps me to know a little more about what somebody else is saying. Even though they are a heck of a lot more experienced and knowledgeable in that area...[mathematics] sort of serves as a protection...it keeps me from being swayed. (Pilot Interview 1)

Nathaniel noted that his most rewarding mathematics experience was earning a 5 out of 5 on the AP Statistics examination. He believed that his success on the examination was because he “practiced a lot...and just worked harder,” stating that he “tried to emphasize thinking more than memorization” (Pilot Interview 3).

Spencer, similar to Ethan, contended that as far back as he could remember he was always good at mathematics, noting that because of his early ability in mathematics people just steered him in the direction of mathematics and science. Spencer believed that the logical nature of mathematics is what drew him to it, stating that the logical, rules-based nature of mathematics enables anyone to learn it through practice and study. Spencer viewed mathematics as culturally free: “It is the same whether you are Black, White, Asian, young or old; it is just something that you can get better at with practice, and with study” (Interview 1). He distinguished mathematics from other things that might be naturally inscribed in some people; for example, the “natural” capacity for some people to be faster runners than others, even with equal training. Although Spencer acknowledged that people’s capacity to learn might be different, he stated, “Everyone

can learn, and mathematics especially lends itself to learning because of its very nature” (Interview 1).

Spencer attributed his identification and much of his success with mathematics to being in higher-level mathematics courses with a high-achieving peer group throughout most of his schooling:

The fact that I was in [higher-level mathematics courses] and around the same people all the time, kind of tends to shape how you identify yourself; you see yourself as being a member of a group of students that are achieving and are after a certain goal. (Interview 1)

He believed that his mathematics experiences had little to do with him being a Black male, and more to do with his motivation level in mathematics classes. Spencer enjoyed mathematics in elementary school because he was always good at it: “Early math was fun, because it was all new, and each day presented a new challenge to be overcome” (Mathematics Autobiography). His classmates, however, did not match Spencer’s pace of mathematics learning, and he increasingly became bored with the mathematics lessons his elementary teachers provided.

In middle school, Spencer’s boredom was replaced with a renewed enthusiasm for mathematics, due largely to his TAG teacher, Ms. Murray, his “mathematical inspiration” (Mathematics Autobiography). Ms. Murray allowed Spencer to advance not only in “regular” math, but also in “more exotic forms of math like number theory and the like” (Mathematics Autobiography). He noted that middle school mathematics “was never boring, although sometimes a chore, it was always fresh and new, and I honestly looked forward to each day in class” (Mathematics Autobiography).

Spencer’s motivation to learn mathematics rapidly diminished in high school as his desire to have fun became a focus. He specifically recalled his experience in AP Calculus, which

clearly illustrates how his desire for fun (or pressures to be “cool”?) overruled his desire to learn mathematics:

My most poignant math memory will always be AP Calculus in my junior year. Myself, along with three other friends never paid attention, never did any work for class, always showed up late, and failed every test miserably. We were more concerned with laughing and goofing off than doing well in class, and the four of us, all bright, intelligent young men, were kicked out of class. We were offered a deal: leave class and get “Ds” or stay in class and surely fail (by this point in the year, it was mathematically impossible for us to get grades higher than “Ds” anyway, and this would happen only if we made perfect scores on everything else). (Mathematics Autobiography)

In college, Spencer’s mathematics mindset was, “I need how many calculus classes to be an engineer????” (Mathematics Autobiography). Spencer acknowledged that this mindset was the single biggest factor in determining his major. Although Spencer’s major, in the end, required several mathematics courses, he noted, “The thought of taking five calculus classes left me sickened and terrified (especially after getting the boot from AP Calculus in high school)” (Mathematics Autobiography). Nevertheless, Spencer summarized his collegiate mathematics experiences, writing:

Now, I wish I had gone through all the pain of mathematics at [] Tech. I have found that skill at math is hard to attain, and easy to lose. Unfortunately, I fear that my best math days are forever behind me. As a future lawyer and businessman, I doubt that I would have ever used the math knowledge that an engineering degree would have forced me to attain, but in hindsight, I really wish I had sucked it up instead of taking the easy way out. (Mathematics Autobiography)

Clearly, each participant unequivocally had acquired a robust mathematics identity. These identities were developed through being naturally or logically drawn to mathematics as in the case of Ethan and Spencer, respectively, or working toward getting better at mathematics as in the case of Nathaniel, or even reconfiguring the utility of mathematics as in the case of Keegan. Each of the participants also viewed mathematics as relevant to his daily life and past, present, and future successes.

*Perspectives of Society*

In the following discussion, I describe the participants' perspectives of U.S. society in general.

Disclosed are the participants' remarks regarding the structures present in U.S. society, structures such as class, politics, power, race, stereotypes and so forth; and the participants' perspectives of African American males and females, specifically regarding academic expectations.

*Structure.* As Ethan argued that he understood the politics of schooling: "I had the knowledge of what they call politics, the ability to be a friend to some and associate with others" (Interview 1); likewise, he understood the politics of society:

Well, in life almost everything we do is politics, as far as some people you have to get to know them because they are in power. You never want to be left out of the loop, and that is how choices are made, even though, everybody has somebody to answer to. So you just have to get to know the right people and get to know the people that can put you in the right position. (Interview 1)

And, for Ethan, getting to know the "right" people meant learning the "right" middle-class values of the White majority to survive. He argued that as an African American

you must instill into your child, or to yourself, the values of the middle class, upper-class White values, because that is the only way you are going to survive, like social skills. [Those in power] employ the values of the White middle class, because they are the majority, and to be real with you, they run most of the show. Meaning, most bosses, CEOs, corporate officers, most people who [are in a position to] hire you will be White, of the White middle class or upper class. (Interview 2)

In other words, Ethan was clearly aware of the existence of the hegemony of White America.

And, in turn, awareness of the hegemonic forces of White America, I suppose, precluded him from falling prey to the negative consequences of hegemony.

Keegan was acutely aware of the "haves" and "have-nots" in society, and of the fact that he was a "have" in terms of financial means. He recalled his experiences mentoring at an inner-city elementary school, noting that many of the children wore the same clothes everyday or did not have pencils and paper: "They didn't have a lot, just simple stuff" (Interview 1). Keegan also

expressed concern about how African American children were revering celebrities and sports figures rather than individuals that made a difference in society.

Keegan clearly understood that being successful in a White dominated world was playing a game. This game playing is exemplified in Keegan's recount of his Governor's Honors Program (GHP) interview:

Sometimes, I believe to be successful you have to play the game. I don't want to call it a game, but you have to know what you are doing. ...I remember one particular question that they asked me at the GHP [qualifying interviews]. I would never forget it, because I started to answer it one way, but I am so glad I didn't. They asked me who did I most look to as a role model, and I thought about it and I was thinking of some other people, and who I started to say, I didn't say, it was more like, I think John Lewis or somebody, but then I said, "Well, I am not going to say him. I am going to say Martin Luther King Jr., because more people universally can accept King." ... Yeah, they always know King, and I said, "I don't know who is interviewing me. I don't know if they are Republican or Democrat," so I said, "Let me say King; let me answer in a way...[they would understand]." I wasn't lying; he is still a role model, but they asked me who most influenced my life, so I said something that they could understand. (Interview 4)

He also noted that society often essentialized African Americans, especially within the academy.

Keegan reached this understanding through his own experiences and those of his older brother who was working toward a Ph.D. in theology:

I know...that there are some educators and administrators who still believe that Blacks are inferior academically. That the Black male's role in academics is to only get the Black perspective and no other perspective, that we should write our dissertation on nothing but African American issues. I think that you are expected to just give the point of view of the African American and sit down; we have nothing else to offer. ...Educators seem to be shocked [when you] tell them that you are interested in evangelism in an Irish society; that you are interested in a field that is usually White dominated, they look at you almost as odd. Now I have professors ask me and other people, "Are you sure that you want to take this on because you may not widely be accepted as an authority because of the color of your skin." So instead of saying, "Nobody is going to listen to you," or "You can't do it," they say, "Well, you may not be as accepted...people may not hire you as a professor if you are an expert in this, why don't you consider being an expert in African American issues. You would be more relevant, more widely accepted in that." ...My brother went to Chicago last year, and he was telling me that he was...specifically interested...in Lutheran women, the reformation of women; he was saying that one of his professors told him that he should maybe focus

on something else because he would never be well known...widely recognized having gone into that field, because of his color, his gender, and his background. (Interview 2)

Keegan did not shy away from cultural difference. In fact, he viewed the differences between Black and White cultures as something to celebrate, not fear:

I think there is a culture difference that Blacks don't understand in Whites and Whites don't understand in Blacks; there is nothing wrong with that. A lot of people still think that that is horrible, but it should be celebrated. ... There are some things we don't understand, but that is okay, we can still come together and agree on some things. (Interview 2)

Keegan added, if society was threatened because he was a Black man, "how sad for them to have to walk in fear" (Interview 2).

Nathaniel claimed that after he took an Urban Sociology course in college he understood the reproduction of the class structure in the United States. He believed that the dismantling of affirmative action would limit opportunities for African Americans, making it "a little bit harder for African Americans to do what their parents did...say a generation ago" (Interview 2).

Nathaniel believed, based on his experiences in different socioeconomic classes, that most differences in attitudes held by students regarding education stemmed from their class and not their race:

Well, when we were lower-middle class...the middle school I went to there were a lot of lower- and middle-class kids, and kids from the projects, too. ...In that environment there [were] a lot of kids doing the wrong things and some kids doing a little bit more positive things. ...Whether you have goals for education is a big part of whether...you see some light at the end of the tunnel. ...If you don't see the purpose of the education...then being there is just going to be a big waste of your time...you don't care or respect the teacher because you don't see education doing anything for you. (Pilot Interview 3)

Nathaniel stated that his current experiences at a majority White university made him feel at times as though he was speaking for all African Americans. Although this feeling of "representing" African Americans limited Nathaniel's behaviors, he learned "to deal with it," noting that being around majority White students

sort of limits your behavior. ...I mean you may not act out the same way you would with your Black friends because...[a White student's] interaction with you may be the only interaction they have with another African American in college. ...I mean, I can interact with just a couple of Black people on campus, but being that I am a minority, I am going to have to interact with a White person. ...I am not being forced to, but even if I wanted to be closed minded and didn't want to interact with Whites, because of the makeup of the student body and teachers, I am going to have to deal with it. It is not the same if you are a White student at a university, you wouldn't have to necessarily have to deal with someone who is African American, or Asian, or any other racial group. So it affects the way you may deal with people, because you don't want [Whites] to walk away and say, "I met one Black person and he treated me really badly, so all Black people must treat me like that." So if you are in class, you may try a little bit harder. (Pilot Interview 2)

Spencer had a clear understanding of how society operated with regard to race and stereotypes. He, however, troubled these constructed divisions and categories in society:

I am being a realist, noticing that those characterizations [White and Black stereotypes] are definitely a part of our culture and they are definitely a part of society; you can't, realistically speaking, you can't really get away from them because they are out there and they are very prevalent in our society. That is just the pure realist in me. But on the other hand, I also know and understand that generalizations in practice don't really work, and especially when it is so broad as to characterize a whole race of people. (Interview 3)

Spencer believed that the question of why some students experience difficulty in learning could only be answered through an interplay of multiple factors, ranging from students not understanding the system of American capitalism to students focusing on the immediate rather than the future. He said:

I don't really think that there is any one specific factor that you can pinpoint and say, "This is where the problem lies." I think it is an interplay of factors; some suspending factors maybe. Maybe there is not an adequate understanding of the system, in terms of knowing that you need to accomplish a certain level of education in order to make it in the American capitalistic society, and that those people that accomplish more educationally will generally tend to do better financially and otherwise. ...[And] maybe students just don't take responsibility for their academic progress, or academic success, maybe there is not enough focus on academic performance at home. Maybe [it goes] back to the systemic problem, maybe students don't really know what to expect, or if they do know what to expect, then maybe, I don't know, I hate to say, maybe they don't care. But it seems to me that a lot of thought is focused on maximizing the present as opposed to preparing for the future, and doing what you need to do educationally, and otherwise, to make sure that down the road you will be successful. (Interview 3)

Either implicitly or explicitly, each participant acknowledged a “structure” to U.S. society. This structure included differentials in experiences, opportunities, and expectations with regards to one’s race and class, and as revealed in the discussion that follows with regards to one’s gender.

*African American males.* Ethan was very attuned to the negative discourses that surrounded African American males and the affects of these discourses. He claimed that

African American males have a larger boundary to get through, because just the fact that in today’s society African American males have so much against them. When you think about racial profiling, when you think about racial discrimination, when you think about so many things that African Americans deal with; and not only that, we also have to deal with the battle within the race, Black-on-Black crime. It is mostly African American males, gangs, drugs, single-parent homes, no father figures; males looking for other males to look up to. And as fewer males get educated, there will be fewer males to look up to. So it is slowly, you know, the [African American] male is slowly declining. Look at the jails; most jails are filled with African American males. (Interview 2)

Ethan claimed that the continued negative perception of the African American male, and minorities in general, was due in large part to the media:

Society has decided that we want White behaviors and Black behaviors, and it all goes back to one of our biggest “cash cows,” television. Television and entertainment affects the lives of most of our children nowadays, only because a lot of children aren’t getting educated at home, and they are going other places to learn the lessons of life. One of the things they have seen is that most minorities on T.V., as far as entertainers, are now jewelry downed, or baggy clothes, and this and that. But they are not able to see the highly educated minorities, the ones who didn’t necessarily do it by talent, actually did it through hard work and education, how they are tailored and how they achieved success, the way they respond. (Interview 3)

Similarly, Keegan claimed that the image most often presented to (and of) African American men was a negative image—an image of being a “player, you know, having a lot of women, to be a lady’s man” (Interview 3). He saw this image as in conflict with the image most often presented to women—an image of being the virgin. Even though Keegan acknowledged that the image of a “player” held true for men of any color, he believed that it was “uplifted even

more in African American society because you see it so much on the television, on [music] videos” (Interview 3). He also believed that the desire to be “socially accepted” affected African American men more so than African American women:

I think...society tends to make it seem like women are the ones who are emotionally unstable and that they are the ones with the most problems, but I think deep down men want to be more accepted than women. I think that if a woman is not accepted, that they can deal with it; they can achieve in spite of. But being socially accepted for a man is very important, at least it was for me, because if I was looked upon as not being part of the “in crowd,” that meant no girlfriend, nobody liking you, being made fun of, the beautiful young lady in the cafeteria laughing at you. I just thought that was the worst thing in the world, not to be socially accepted. (Interview 3)

Keegan claimed that no matter how successful a Black man was, he was often perceived to be a threat, somehow thuggish. Keegan said that he had fallen prey to this perception as he mentored second-graders at a summer camp:

I am even guilty of it...when they [Black boys] are not performing as well, if they are acting bad and not really doing well in school, and just kind of playing around instead of studying, you say, “Oh Lord, this is going to be a thug. ... I can’t help them, I can’t do anything about it.” (Interview 2)

Keegan drew a direct link to this perception of Black boys as “thugs” to the images portrayed on television, claiming that

so often Black males are portrayed [as thuggish]. If you watch television, if you look at the news, you don’t tend to see Black men in that positive role, of being successful, of being successful entrepreneurs, being great leaders in academics. You tend to see Tupac who is revered and uplifted...you tend to see individuals who are thugs, they are revered, which is sad. ...You ask a lot of times a young man, a young African American man, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” That is one of my favorite questions to ask, but I don’t ask it as much anymore because I get so disappointed. Instead of hearing, “I want to be a great professor, I want to be an astronaut, I want to be a doctor,” you tend to hear, “I want to be a basketball star,” or “I want to be a rapper,” or “I want to be the next....” It is sad. (Interview 2)

Nathaniel contended that the stereotype of the African American male was one of being less motivated toward or having less interest in school and academics. And like Ethan and Keegan, Nathaniel attributed much of the existence of this stereotype to the images of African

American males found on television: “You see males getting locked up...on TV, running from the cops or something like that” (Pilot Interview 3). Nathaniel claimed that the consequence of this stereotype was that African American male students are often not held accountable in school:

Well, I mean some [African American male students are]...allowed to slide-by and slack. I mean, I got slack; I was slack in high school. So it is not hard [to slack]...especially if you are male, because teachers are not going to be after you as much as they would be a female. ... I mean, at our school, it was all right to be smart, but you got more attention if you were just average, if you slacked off and told jokes in the back of the classroom. (Pilot Interview 2)

Spencer, like the other participants, was well aware of the different academic and social paths an African American male student could take, having felt pressured to take a less positive academic path during his middle and high school education. And like the others, he attributed much of the existence of the negative images of African American males to television:

In the Black community...there is this great pressure to, and especially being a male, it seems as if Black males, or Hispanic males, especially, are kind of looked down upon by their peers for advancing their education. Especially...when you are in middle school and high school. It seems that there is this pressure to live up to certain images that might be on T.V., portrayed in music, or whatever. ...I think a reason that I was so conscious about not being too serious on my schoolwork and being kind of cool, I guess, in a way, is because there are those pressures that we receive from each other. I think that, and especially going to a pretty much all Black high school, all Black middle school, those pressures were just even stronger. (Interview 1)

*African American females.* Ethan perceived the academic experiences of African American female students differently than those of African American male students. He noted that there was a deeper pool of educated African American women, stating, “Let’s be real, there are more educated women here than men, and for me to be an educated Black man, I mean that makes me a rarity” (Interview 1). Ethan claimed that this deeper pool of educated African American women, or women in general, created a fiercer competition among women, and sometimes an unethical competition. Ethan did not believe that African American women got

preferential treatment in society; rather he attributed the visibility of their success to the sheer number of African American women in college—noting a 17 to 1 female-to-male ratio at the university he had attended. He noted, however, that academic success, and success in general, for African American female students is expected more than it is for African American male students:

It is almost like for African American males, when they come out of the womb they are already stereotyped. It is stereotypical for a Black female to be smarter than a Black male; that is just a stereotype that we are given. And males have so much to deal with within the community and when they go outside the community. ...It is...just kind of known that African American women are sometimes smarter than African American men and that they apply themselves more than African American males, because they kind of have less pressure than African American males. African American males have so much to deal with. (Interview 2)

Ethan attributed much of the existence of this stereotypical difference between males and females to the child rearing practices within the African American community:

It is sad, it hurts to really think about it; we do treat our females and males differently. As a female it is almost expected that you [are going to be] successful as an African American. But with males it is almost understandable if you struggle, or if you are not successful, as far as you have lower expectations. It is understandable if you don't necessarily achieve success in school. (Interview 3)

Keegan, on the other hand, believed that life was more difficult for African American women because they had to worry about certain predicaments such as physical abuse, pregnancy, rape, and so forth. He also believed that African American women had fewer historical roles models to emulate. In society, generally, however, Keegan noted that favoritism was shown to African American women because they were perceived as less threatening. He specifically noted how he observed this favoritism during his earlier years in education, but claimed that the favoritism seemed to work in reverse as he went higher in education:

As I climbed higher, I saw it kind of switch. I saw...toward the end of high school and in college, that men would tend to be more favored, the athletes, the few smart, really smart men who were really about something, tended to receive more accolades than the many

women, because it was very rare for a male to be one of the smart ones. So as I climbed higher academically there was more pride to be a Black male and doing great things academically, achieving well academically. (Interview 2)

Keegan agreed with Fordham (1988) that African American women are less affected by the damaging consequences of acting White or raceless persona, stating, “they can deal with it, they can achieve in spite of [not being socially accepted]” (Interview 3). Keegan noted that he knew young Black men who “started off smart...achieving, but as soon as they felt like they weren’t going to be in the ‘in crowd,’ that their cultural status would be depleted, things changed” (Interview 3).

Nathaniel noted that there was a differential in expectation between African American males and females: “I think it goes back to expectations...we expect more out of the Black females anyway than we do out of the Black males” (Pilot Interview 2). He implied that this differential in expectation was the reason why there were more African American female students on college campuses than African American male students.

And Spencer, similar to Keegan, believed that the anti-achievement and raceless persona identified by Fordham (1988) affected Black female students differently than Black male students, noting the prevailing sentiment that males are supposed to be tough. He claimed that it was easier for Black female students to be successful without being “looked down upon” (Interview 3). Spencer, like Ethan, believed that the African American community in general contributed to this differential, noting the difference in the childrearing of male and female children:

I would say that there is a slight difference in the way that children are generally raised. ...I would think that with the males there is more, there is probably less focus on being a good student than doing well academically, not to say that it is not there, but I think that it is there more so for the females, for a number of reasons. If I had to think of some of the reasons, I would say that a lot of times, and this is very unfortunate, but a lot of African American families are single-parent households and it is often the mother who is raising

the children, and so mothers raising young girls tend to have a unique perspective on what it takes for African American women to succeed and they know that African American women have to be even more on top of their games than African American males. . . . Even with all the things that African American males have to go through, I think that our community tends to adopt a belief that a man can land on his feet. A man can do physical labor and can go dig a ditch, if push comes to shove, and if he has to feed himself, then he can go and do something to feed himself. Whereas I think we tend to look at the African American woman and say, “You know, there are fewer of those opportunities available to you, so you really need to be focused on school . . . and do it the correct way.” (Interview 3)

There was great diversity in how the participants talked about African American males and females. Each participant, however, clearly acknowledged a differential in schooling experiences. The inferred causes for this differential were from negative stereotypes of African American males (most often presented through television) and lower academic expectations for African American male students, lowered by teachers, and most important, argued by the participants, lowered by the African American community in general. The participants also claimed that African American female students succeed in school and academics with greater ease than African American male students because of less pressure to be “kind of cool.”

#### *Discourse of Deficiency*

The following discussion provides the participants’ responses to questions asked regarding various theoretical perspectives located in the discourse of deficiency. Specifically, the participants responded to the theoretical perspectives critiqued in Ogbu’s (1978b) book chapter entitled “Black-White differences in school performance: A critique of current explanations.” In that chapter, Ogbu critiqued the cultural deprivation theory, the culture conflict theory, the institutional deficiency theory, the educational equality theory, and the heredity theory (see chapter 2 for an explanation of these theoretical perspectives and Appendix F for the interview protocol).

As Ethan responded to questions regarding the discourse of deficiency, he clearly saw the theories of cultural deprivation and culture conflict as relating to the socioeconomic status of the student and not to the race or ethnicity of the student. It is important to note, however, that he validated, and troubled, these theories through his experience as a teacher, not as a student.

When asked if he had seen or experienced these theoretical perspectives, he remarked:

I think, while I was at Keeling High I didn't, because Keeling was made up of a vast socioeconomic status, as far as we had middle class, we had upper class, and then we had lower class. The fact that we had such diversity... a lot of the mainstream cultural aspects were still there, and were instilled in the students. But now that I am teaching at a school where it is mostly lower class [African Americans and Latino/as], I can see where cultural deprivation, and somewhat culture conflict, how they derived these theories. ... See, at school they are taught some of the White middle-class ways, White middle-class social skills, so when they go home, they are taught some of the, what they call "lower class," Black or African American social skills, as far as calling Blacks "niggers." See, in school they are taught not to do that, when they are at home they are taught that it is a free word. It is almost like reading a book, reading period, and expanding your education. At school they are taught that that is a positive thing, when they go home they are taught that it is a negative thing. ... So I do see that in some ways, now more than I did back when I was in school. ... Now are they [the theories] wrong or are they right, that is still the question. But as far as do I see where they were derived from, yes; and have I seen it in some students, yes. (Interview 2)

Ethan believed that the fallout from these theories was very detrimental to the learning of African American students because they suggest that African American students, and specifically African American male students, cannot be successful in "regular" programs. A consequence of school personnel operating by these theories is that African American male students are often placed in remedial programs.

Ethan did not see any significant inequities in the educational facilities between Keeling High, a majority African American high school, and most majority White high schools. When specifically asked to compare Keeling High with a majority White high school in the same county, he remarked: "I think there is really no difference. I really don't think there was a

difference in the fact that [the majority White high school] may have had, maybe better facilities; except for that, I have no idea” (Interview 2).

Ethan completely dismissed the heredity theory based on his own observations, noting that he had seen parents who had not graduated from high school or college “produce kids who are brilliant, and have outstanding minds and a yearning to learn” (Interview 2). He said: “I don’t think that genetically or biologically a parent affects a child’s learning capabilities. I think maybe psychologically or mentally a parent can, but...not genetically or biologically” (Interview 2).

Keegan echoed the cultural deprivation theory, suggesting that there were students who attended schools who were culturally deprived in terms of an academically rich home environment. But he also claimed that because of his direct family experiences that this theory was vastly overplayed. He noted that even though his paternal grandparents only had limited formal schooling (neither went past the sixth grade) they still created a home environment for his father to succeed academically. Recall that Keegan’s father had earned a doctorate degree.

Keegan completely dismissed the culture conflict theory, stating, “I believe that that is not a factor in assessing African Americans at all, because I didn’t grow up in the mainstream culture, and I would like to consider myself successful” (Interview 2). Keegan added that he thought a major factor in his belief was due to the city that he grew up in, a city where he was in the majority in many situations: school settings, church settings, cultural settings, and so forth. Keegan noted, however, that even in situations where he had not been in the majority, and was the clear minority, such as at the Governor’s Honors Program and in seminary, his cultural differences had not been in conflict with the mainstream. In fact, he claimed that his cultural difference had just the opposite consequence:

I believe that I was just as successful, in some aspects more successful because I offered to the table a different worldview, a different perspective. People were very interested in

learning about the African American experience, learning about the African American culture, and here at [ ] Theological Seminary, I am clearly a minority. I am not in the mainstream culture. I am an African American male Baptist, at a White United Methodist school. So I think I find myself being successful because they want to hear a different view. They are very interested about the African American Baptist churches, about my place as a Black male in the African American church, being raised in an African American church. (Interview 2)

As Keegan embraced the interest that other people demonstrated in “learning about the African American experience,” recall that he also critiqued, in the same interview, how the African American experience was often essentialized.

Keegan also noted that even though he was not in “culture conflict” due to his race, that schools, especially public schools, tend to be geared more toward middle-class and upper-class children. From his own experience, he understood that some children from lower wealth families were not able to participate in some school activities:

I have seen...kids who were not able to meet those criteria of socioeconomics and they kind of fell by the wayside; they couldn't participate in after-school activities, which required money. They...kind of were the ones who were left on the sideline, not really able to play, and it is sad. Now that I think about it, I feel guilty about it because I was able to go on the field trips, and able to participate in a lot of things that helped me learn a whole lot. (Interview 2)

Keegan extended the class division of education to his undergraduate and graduate education, noting that he had no financial concerns while attending expensive private colleges. It is important to note that in the discussion of institutional deficiency, Keegan, throughout his conversation, spoke only about institutional deficiencies surrounding class and not race.

Keegan did not perceive the existing educational inequities as detrimental to school success, claiming that although equal educational opportunity was very important he thought that personal drive to succeed was just as important a factor in school success. Keegan argued that Whites have greater educational opportunities but many lack the personal drive to take advantage

of those opportunities. In contrast, many Blacks do not have those educational opportunities but succeed in spite of the inequities. He recounted a specific example that supported his argument:

One of my best friends went to one of the worst public schools in [city in southern United States], but she had a personal drive about herself. She ended up going to Princeton, graduated from Princeton with honors, and now she is in graduate school at Stanford. It [was her] personal drive, even though her educational opportunities weren't that great, she went to a horrible [] city school, which we often kind of joked about, but she had a personal drive. She said, "In spite of me going to a certain school, I am not going to end up like most people do." (Interview 2)

Keegan fervently dismissed the heredity theory. He contended that after the Civil Rights era African Americans might have had an inferiority complex that prohibited them from performing equally as well as Whites, but not in 2003. Keegan stated:

Personally, I have never felt inferior, that I am not as smart as them because of the color of my skin. I always felt like I was just as smart, if not smarter, because of my race. It has always been a source of pride, not a source of being inferior. I have never felt the least bit inferior. Or those who I have been around; I have never heard anyone say, "Well you know, they are White, so I feel that I am inferior." (Interview 2)

In discussing how the heredity theoretical perspective had been rejuvenated with the publishing of Herrnstein and Murray's 1994 book *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, Keegan offered the following comments:

I think that it is still sad that we are dealing with those... thoughts still being rejuvenated, that African Americans are inferior genetically, which I think is just stupid. I think of it as BS; it is total BS that we still have those out there who are trying to prove this, or strongly believe this. It shows that we have advanced so far, but yet we haven't advanced far enough. (Interview 2)

Nathaniel believed, as Ogbu (1978b) had suggested, that the programs to combat cultural deprivation, such as remedial programs, most often only reinforced negative stereotypes.

Likewise, Nathaniel agreed with Ogbu regarding the culture conflict theory. Based on his earlier experiences of attending a culturally diverse middle school and living in a culturally diverse

neighborhood, Nathaniel believed that cultural diversity did not necessarily lead to culture conflict or school failure, the same conclusions reached by Ogbu.

Nathaniel claimed that educational inequities make a difference in “what you are able to do” (Pilot Interview 2). He noted, however, that it was not until he began college and had the opportunity to compare schooling experiences with other students that he realized that schools were unequal:

Equitable...I mean, you notice that when you come up to the university and you hear about other students' experiences in high school, you realize that maybe your high school didn't have as much money, or you didn't have all the experiences that these other students had. So in some ways it is not as equitable because some schools are richer, some schools are poorer, and you will notice what you are able to do, especially when you come up here [to the university] and you hear other people's experiences. (Pilot Interview 2)

Nathaniel extended the structural inequities found in schools to the inequitable attention focused on some students by teachers:

You are always going to have teacher's favorites and teacher's pets...[who] influence how...much time this teacher actually spends on them as opposed to another person who doesn't say as much to the teacher and gets less time and attention focused on them. So...you still have some bias in the school system and bias among teachers in dealing with other students. I mean they will treat the nicer students or the students who don't complain as much in the class definitely [different] from students who are a little bit more of a discipline problem. (Pilot Interview 2)

Nathaniel, similar to Ethan and Keegan, dismissed the heredity theory. He attributed the existence of this theory to the fact that people often “buy into” questionable stereotypes when they first encounter individuals different from themselves, such as the stereotype that all Asians are good in mathematics.

As Spencer discussed the various deficiency theories, he pointed out that the theories needed to be taken in the aggregate. In other words, he believed that the differences between Black and White achievement were complex, noting that no one single theory could explain the

differences and why they persist. Specifically, he noted that the cultural deprivation, culture conflict, and institutional deficiency theories were the least helpful in explaining the differences. Although Spencer acknowledged that in the 70s, which is when Ogbu (1978b) reviewed these theories, that they might have been more helpful, he believed that the current schools and school systems could help a student “overcome” most differences in language or culture. He claimed that

now with the state of our schools, we are definitely improving in the types of educational access that is available to people. And, even though some of the things that people come to school with might be cultural, I do believe that [being in] a strong school environment<sup>61</sup> and a strong institutional environment, that some of those things could be overcome, like different linguistic skills, or whatever. (Interview 2)

Spencer viewed most linguistic or cultural difference that Ogbu’s (1978a, 1992) involuntary minorities, such as African Americans, might bring to school as primary cultural differences, rather than secondary cultural differences. This perspective is evident by his statement: “Those [cultural] differences that certain Black children might have when they come to school...can be worked out” (Interview 2).

Spencer also perceived that schools provide equitable opportunities, stating that students just had to be willing to take advantage of those opportunities if they wanted to succeed.

Spencer’s experiences in a strong school environment and institutional environment provided the foundation for his argument that deficiencies between Black and White students’ institutions or opportunities in those institutions had been diminishing, at least since the 70s. He believed that there are

all kinds of good structures available for students based on what type of help they need, and what type of challenges they need in school. So I think the institutional deficiency

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<sup>61</sup> Spencer did not clarify what he meant by “a strong school environment” (Interview 2). From his conversations regarding his schooling experiences, however, I inferred that Spencer meant a safe, equitable, and well-funded school. Newberry County Schools, the school system Spencer attended throughout his primary, middle, and secondary education, was an affluent county school system, providing safe and well-funded schools.

theory is starting to be less of a factor now. ... I think that it might go to the education equality theory as well, just again talking about the number of programs and the things that are available to students now. I think a big part of it is that students have to be willing to learn and have to be willing to, in this situation, be changed by the school environment. (Interview 2)

Spencer connected the importance of taking advantage of opportunities to his experiences in law school, stating that he did not take advantage of the office hours that his law professors made available. Spencer claimed that it was the utilization of resources that was the “big factor” (Interview 2) and not so much that the institution was deficient or the opportunities unequal.

Spencer cautiously dismissed the heredity theory, stating that he did not “know enough about those kinds of things to make a good assessment,” but his initial reaction was that this theory was not very helpful. He claimed:

Knowledge is something that is very easily...not easily attainable, but it is something that people can attain. I think that there are going to be differences in terms of abilities, and maybe that does have something to do with genetics and biology, or something like that. But I don't think that a general gap between Black educational achievement and White educational achievement can be attributed to genetic differences in races. ...It is too broad of a theory. I mean, it sounds too clean and too simple to be true...people can learn and I just really don't think that this theory is too helpful when you boil it down. (Interview 2)

Recall that Spencer did not encounter anyone perceiving him as being less intelligent because of race. Spencer scored an “insanely high score” (Autobiography) on an I.Q. test in the second grade, setting him off “from the general population as being in the gifted program” (Interview 2).

In an earlier chapter, I defined the discourse of deficiency as a focus on the perceived deficient cultural, schooling, and life experiences, in general, of Black children. The participants responded to questions regarding various theoretical perspectives located in this discourse. As they spoke about the cultural deprivation and culture conflict theories, they most often argued that the socioeconomic status of the student rather than the student's race contributed to the deprivation or conflict. Moreover, the participants questioned—but did not reject—the relevance

of the institutional deficiency and the educational equality theories. And each of the participants refuted the heredity theory, often providing personal anecdotes that contradicted the theory.

### *Discourse of Rejection*

The following discussion provides the participants' responses to questions regarding various theoretical perspectives located in the discourse of rejection. Specifically, the participants discussed Majors and Billson's (1992) cool pose theory (participants actually read Majors, Tyler, Peden, & Hall, 1994, a summary of cool pose theory); Steel's (1997) stereotype threat theory; Ogbu's (1992) cultural-ecological theory; Fordham's (1988) raceless persona theory; and Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) burden of acting White theory (see chapter 2 for an explanation of these theoretical perspectives and Appendices F and G for the interview protocols).

*Cool pose theory.* Majors and Billson's (1992) suggested that *cool pose* is a ritualized form of masculinity often incompatible with school academics that allows Black boys to cope and survive in an environment of oppression and racism.

Ethan stated that in the past he had participated in cool pose behaviors. In fact, he claimed that to engage in cool pose behaviors was inevitable for an African American male. Ethan believed that one of the reasons he engaged in football was because it was perceived as "cool." He viewed these behaviors as self-regulating and self-perpetuating coping mechanisms, because there are "so many things against" African American males:

I did participate in "cool pose" in high school, probably because I was young minded, uneducated, and just willing to fit in. But as I got more educated, or more dependent on my own self, my own mind, I did not participate as much. To this day, I think that no matter how much African American males don't want to participate in a cool pose, or don't want to use it as a coping mechanism, we do. I agree with Majors, it goes back to just our ancestry and who we really are, you know the fact that African American males...so much want to stand out, because we have so many things against us. We want to show that we are so much ahead of others. Think about our cars, think about our fashion, think about our demeanors, think about our mentality; we so much want to show so much masculinity in everything that we do. ...I did that as a coping mechanism, for

some of the things I wasn't taught [by my father] because my father worked a lot. So I learned a lot of things...from just watching others, and watching their perspectives. So a lot of the things that I wasn't taught I used a cool pose as a coping mechanism to cope with some of the things I wasn't taught. (Interview 2)

Ethan carried the concept of cool pose over to his collegiate years, noting that although he attended a HBCU he “didn't necessarily see...stereotypical African American cultural aspects, as far as the rap, and the hat being worn backwards, etc., because I think it was a higher education level” (Interview 2). Ethan claimed that even though he knew several highly educated African Americans with gold teeth, that at the college level, mainstream ideas and social skills were strongly encouraged. While making his claim, Ethan returned to his understanding of the power of mainstream: “Like we always say, ‘College is to get you a good job. And to get you a good job, you have got to act like the mainstream’” (Interview 2).

Keegan's engagement in cool pose behaviors was limited. He identified cool pose as maintaining a stance of masculinity by appearing to have “gotten it” during the lesson when in fact he had not, and by demonstrating no emotion even when a situation called for expressing emotion (e.g., when he was told that his grandmother had passed away while he was at school during his 4th grade year). Moreover, Keegan subverted some of the cool pose behaviors of African American male students by choosing to dress in an unexpected manner, effectively subverting the subversion:

I did dress [differently]. I remember when I was in high school, freshmen would think I was a teacher...I adopted that [dressing like a Brooks Brother advertisement] because it made me feel more successful. It made me feel more confident in myself; I guess clothes can make you feel more confident, and particularly, even today when I wear a suit...I feel better about myself. I feel more confident. So a lot of times when I am taking tests and I am dressed up I think I tend to do better; I think that teachers see that confidence. They see that this person is more acceptable in society, I guess we have a common bond...the teacher can relate more to me, especially, probably White male teachers. I am not looked upon as a culture that they don't understand, as far as hip-hop and dreads; I don't think they understand that culture. (Interview 2)

Nathaniel noted that he understood how cool pose operated, especially by middle school.

He argued, however, that cool pose

isn't necessarily a bad thing...if it doesn't, just trample over what you are doing academically. ...But sometimes in your efforts to be cool, it sort of does, it can get in the way of what you are trying to do academically. (Interview 2)

He claimed, similar to Ethan, that as he progressed through his education that cool pose was less of a factor, but in middle school and high school it was certainly a factor, specifically in how he subverted his academic performance:

As far as the cool pose and school...to be cool you don't want to be labeled as a nerd, or as being too smart, [you want to] hang out and fit in with the rest of the students. So I mean at some point and time you may...develop a nonchalant attitude about things like, you don't need to study, or "I made an A and I didn't even do anything," or "I don't like school at all," but you go back home and you study your ass off. (Interview 2)

Spencer defined cool pose behaviors as "a completely distinct system of verbal communication...different words...use of slang...nonverbal gestures...way that you walk and carry yourself in the hall...different from the way that you...do so in the classroom" (Interview 2). He defined traditional school behaviors as using Standard English, being respectful (Spencer noted, however, that cool pose was not disrespectful, just different), and accommodating, just putting people, specifically teachers, at ease. Spencer stated that he did participate in cool pose behaviors that impacted his schooling experiences but only his social experiences, claiming that he always separated the social aspects of school from the educational aspects:

Once I came into the classroom, I would sort of shed those cool pose behaviors and adopt a more traditional educational behavior. I mean, once class started I had a job to do and all of the other extraneous stuff I might have done in the hallways, those things weren't necessarily brought into the classroom, because they were two different environments. So I was able to separate the social environment in school; I could engage in the cool pose behaviors and the educational aspects of school. (Interview 2)

Spencer attributed this shedding of cool pose behaviors back to his desire to please, aiming "to put people at ease and to be accommodating" (Interview 2). He explicitly stated that

his behaviors with his White teachers were different than with his Black teachers, noting that he consciously or unconsciously tried to limit his cool pose behaviors even more so with his White teachers. Recall, however, that Spencer did not shed his cool pose behaviors in his AP Calculus class, resulting in being dismissed from the class.

Cool pose or some hybrid of cool pose operated on each of the participants. All 4 participants claimed, however, that they most often effectively managed their cool pose behaviors, limiting the negative impact cool pose might have on their academic success.

*Stereotype threat theory.* Steele's (1997) stereotype threat theory claimed that African American students participated in *disidentification* with schooling due to the threat of confirming the negative stereotype regarding the intellectual capabilities of African Americans.

Ethan's response to stereotype threat operated just the opposite of how Steel had theorized, however. Even though Ethan was aware of the discourse of anti-achievement and school disidentification that surrounded African American male students, and specifically African American male athletes, he used the discourse as a motivating factor:

I think I did experience [stereotype threat], as far as when it came to, not necessarily standardize testing, but academic achievement. I think I used it more as propulsion [against] something that held me down. I used it more as motivation. ...I know that I am successful and that I identify with mathematics and education. And I know that [mainstream] thinks that I don't identify myself with this. So I used it as, I will show them that I can use education and mathematics to identify myself. ...I recall [aspects about] community service, they kind of expect you not to do that, so I did those activities...they think you are just a dumb athlete, no! I used stereotype threat as motivation to achieve more as a scholar-athlete, that is how I used stereotype threat. ...[However,] I do think that a lot of African Americans do become compulsive...they do become kind of brainwashed with the fact that, okay, they think I can't identify myself [with mathematics or education], so I won't. I think nowadays a lot of kids say, "I won't; I will be a stereotypical African American...Black as I can." (Interview 2)

Ethan did believe, however, as Steel suggested, that stereotype threat was a factor when he engaged with the mainstream in social situations:

When I encounter maybe a White middle-class American, and I can see that they, sometimes...they think you can't relate. ...[Therefore,] I do find myself trying to discredit that theory, or that threat by showing them that I am an educated African American and that I can relate to them, socially, economically, mentally, and psychologically. ...I do find myself trying to eliminate the threat, [make them] feel at ease, when all the while I am almost kind of making myself feel at ease, because in trying to eliminate that threat with them, I am kind of proving to myself, I do have those skills, I can be middle class. (Interview 2)

Similarly, Keegan was aware of the negative stereotypes surrounding African American male students and academics, specifically around mathematics, but rather than being a detrimental factor, stereotypes were a motivating factor for him as well:

Stereotypes...have motivated me, when I read [about stereotype threat theory] it makes me laugh, because it [claims that] stereotypes bring us down...stereotypes uplift me. When someone says, "I am not as smart as another culture," or "I am not as bright, and I can't do it," I laugh that in their face because...they are not talking about me. It motivates me. ...A lot of people think that African Americans can't do mathematics and science, that that is not our forte, that we should just give that up to Asians, that Blacks especially can't do that, but that is my motivating factor. The more you tell me that, the more I am motivated. (Interview 2)

Nathaniel stated that he was aware of how stereotypes acted on him when in broader social situations. He specifically noted how it impacted him as he entered a retail store:

Well...talking about an experience of being a Black male...going into a store with your book bag, you sort of want to ease people's fears, like, "I am not going to take anything." So you may just put your bag down; you may say, "Can I put my bag over here." (Interview 2)

Nathaniel also noted that the stereotype of African American male students being disidentified with academics impacted him as a double-science major on a majority White campus. He believed, rather than people thinking that he was somehow intellectually inferior, that stereotype had just the opposite effect. He claimed that students and faculty on campus most often thought, "If he is Black and he is at the University of [] he must be really, really smart" (Interview 2).

Spencer believed that Steele's (1997) argument regarding domain-identified students attempting to overcompensate in certain situations to disprove a negative stereotype was valid.

Spencer recounted his experiences of taking standardized test to illustrate his belief:

I know, whenever I go and take a standardized test that for some reason or another it [the stereotype that African Americans do not score well on standardized tests] is always on my mind. It has been on my mind for as long as I can remember. ...I guess maybe going back to the SAT and the PSAT, going back to those tests, and the L4 to the LSAT. I definitely think that those stereotypes had an effect on me, in that I was definitely aware of those stereotypes and I wanted to disprove them. (Interview 2)

Spencer noted that although he was not one to brag about his test scores, he wanted other students to know that he belonged, especially at the engineering university he attended:

I wanted to let people know, even though I am not the type to go out and talk about my scores. I wanted to have that sort of internal satisfaction of knowing that I belong in a place like [] Tech, where everyone was very accomplished in mathematics and everyone's SAT score in mathematics was very, very high. ...Those kinds of successes would go to reinforce my feelings of self-worth in a way. So those things were definitely always in the background. (Interview 2)

When asked whether his awareness of the stereotypes had a positive or negative impact on him while taking test, Spencer believed that the benefits or cost of stereotype threat could be argued on both side:

Given that I was aware of those stereotypes, I felt the need to be more careful on my test, to double check my work, and to make sure I wasn't making stupid mistakes. ...But on the other hand, there is also the argument that because I am constantly thinking about those stereotypes, I can't really focus on the issue at hand, and I worry about collateral issues when I should be focused on the test. So in short, I don't really know, because I can see plausible arguments on both sides and I don't know if sometimes it will affect me in a negative way, or sometimes it will affect me in a positive way. (Interview 2)

Spencer often returned to the concept of belongingness within the discussion of stereotype threat. He specifically relayed his strategy used to demonstrate his belongingness during undergraduate and law school:

I went to [] Tech, which is a predominantly White school, and when there are so few African Americans in an education environment it seems that, at least on my part, I will

always try to make the professors or the instructors recognize early on that I deserve to be there and that I know what is going on just as well as everyone else. ...I make sure that if the professor asks a question in class, I make sure that I raise my hand to answer the questions early, because I don't want them to have that stereotype of me. So I guess what I am trying to say is that I think that because of the stereotype theory, that I try to cut those things off very early and I try to prove my worth, show that I belong. I try to do things like that, so that those stereotypes will maybe not be as prevalent in my particular experiences. (Interview 2)

As noted earlier, the participants were acutely aware of the many negative stereotypes of African American males. In particular, they were aware that a stereotype existed that portrayed African American students, and male students specifically, as being incapable of succeeding academically. Nevertheless, each participant subverted this negative stereotype either by turning the stereotype on its head—using it as motivation to succeed academically—or by cutting the stereotype off at its knees—developing strategies that demonstrated that they belonged.

*Cultural-ecological theory.* Ogbu's (1992) concepts *cultural inversion* and *acting White* are theorized methods of how African American students resist the hegemony of public schools; they are the key components of his cultural-ecological theory.

Ethan claimed that cultural inversion was not a factor in his schooling experience as far as academic success. He acknowledged, however, that

there were certain behaviors that minorities would apply cultural inversion to, as far as maybe from the way the person might dress, some of the ways a person might talk, but not necessarily for me. [The students at Keeling High] didn't necessarily apply cultural inversion when it came toward academic success, because at Keeling High we were pretty much competitive. So it wasn't necessarily competitive against mainstream; we were competitive against each other. So we weren't necessarily, "Okay, he is successful," or "He is doing his work, so he is acting White." ...It was, "Oh, he is successful because he wants to do something with himself" or "He is successful, so he is actually trying to be something or be successful." We didn't necessarily use cultural inversion as far as academics [but] behavior wise. (Interview 3)

Ethan troubled the concept of acting White directly, stating:

I never saw success as acting White. I never really applied cultural inversion; I was ignorant to the way of cultural inversion. ...I saw success as something that was expected

of myself, and I actually never saw it as something that African Americans, or any culture, any minority, wouldn't expect. (Interview 3)

Keegan was aware of how certain attributes or characteristics of African American youth could be considered as cultural inversion, such as alternative ways of behaving, dressing, speaking, or differences in music preference, and so forth. He, however, did not view these "latest fads" as defining himself as a young African American man:

I never felt cultural inversion was very real in my life. I knew that I had to adapt into the world. [I was] always reminded by my parents, and even by teachers, that what we are learning is just not going to fit you living in a Black society, that what we are learning in this classroom, what we are learning everyday, and what my parents were teaching me at home, was to help me to live in an integrated society, to live in a society where there were Blacks and Whites. My parents were very careful to teach me, and even in school, I had some wonderful teachers who would teach me that you are going to have to live in a society where you are going to have White bosses, maybe as well as a Black boss, you are also going to have people under you, or colleagues who are Black and White. You are also going to have women; you are also not only going to have Black and White, but we live in America where you are going to have Asians, you are going to have Latinos, you are going to have all kinds of different cultures. (Interview 3)

This understanding of an integrated society followed Keegan in seminary; he expressed concern about reaching all people with his message: "I am going to have to portray this [his message] in such a way that I can relate to those other cultures, Whites, Latinos, just different cultures, different ethnic groups, different races, different sexual genders, different sexual orientations. So I am going to have to portray this message to all people" (Interview 3).

Although Keegan had a secure identity as a young African American man, he relayed that in his early schooling experiences aspects of acting White were problematic. Keegan credited his father and mother for making explicit to him that the concept of acting successful was not acting White during a critical stage in his life; a stage when he "could have gone and really tried to become what is looked upon as being Black" (Interview 3):

My parents helped me in that middle ground. They would always remind me that I had to be Black, but that I also had to live in a society that accepted me. I couldn't work for

AT&T, or work for IBM, or Delta Airlines with gold teeth in my mouth. So at those times when I presented my parents [with the latest fads] ...I said, "I am the only one with a regular haircut, everyone has these flat-tops and earrings," and my dad said, "No, you can't have it, because yes, you are an African American, you are Black, but you also have to live in a society that is dominated...by Whites. So you have to assimilate, but you don't lose your Blackness in the process." (Interview 3)

Keegan reiterated this belief about maintaining one's Blackness while assimilating to the methods of success in the dominant culture in a later interview. Although Keegan used the term *assimilate* in his discussion, obviously he defined *assimilate* in broader terms, in that he specifically noted that one does not "lose" his Blackness in the process. I believe that to replace Keegan's term *assimilate* with *negotiate* more closely matches what he was attempting to express in the previous passage and the one that follows:

In order to live in society and to be successful in society you don't have to get rid of your Blackness, but you can be successful by doing this, doing *a*, doing *b*, doing *c*. Teachers would instill that [message] and I would listen. I would say, "You know, that is so true." I think that they taught me...how to assimilate into this culture, but you don't have to lose your culture. A lot of people think that you have to give up one to gain the other, [but] you don't. (Interview 4)

I could be Black and successful. And just because I am wearing a suit or I don't have an earring in my ear, or I don't have a tattoo, does not mean that I am trying to appear White. I am still Black, but I am giving off the look of being successful. (Interview 4)

I argue, Keegan, in the preceding conversations, spoke as a voluntary minority, rather than an involuntary minority (Ogbu, 1978a, 1992).

Nathaniel believed that the concepts of acting White and cultural inversion were more directed toward "having a White accent...if you talk a certain way, if you speak correct English" (Interview 3), rather than how well one performed academically. He claimed that the term *nerd* could be applied to all races—"to the Black community, to the White community, to Asians, whatever" (Interview 3). In other words, Nathaniel, like Ethan and Keegan, did not equate academic success with acting White. Nathaniel spoke less about Ogbu's (1992) cultural-

ecological theory than the other 3 participants. His lack of conversation around this theory might be due to the fact that Nathaniel saw himself “sort of in the middle” (Interview 3) of Ogbu’s voluntary and involuntary minorities.

Spencer believed because of the compulsory nature of schooling that cultural inversion and acting White were factors in his K-12 education. Spencer noted, however, that as he continued his education in undergraduate and graduate school he observed less rejection of mainstream school behaviors:

I think everybody, once you get to a certain level of education, everybody is striving for the same thing and you don’t really look at educational success at that level as acting White. Although, in secondary education, I think [cultural inversion and acting White] is probably more pronounced. However, I don’t know that I would call it acting White. ... Cultural inversion, on the other hand, I think could definitely be seen in terms of just not wanting to conform to accepted school behaviors...you know, people who are class clowns, disruptive in class, students not doing their work, not doing homework, and things of that nature. So I definitely think that some people kind of internalize [cultural inversion] and turn it on its head, like Ogbu said, and wear it as a badge of pride because it is some opposition to mainstream forces or something of that nature. So I think that at the primary and secondary levels, where you have more of a diverse...group of people, because everybody has to go to school, I think that [cultural inversion] is more pronounced there, but as you climb up in education, I don’t think that it is there. (Interview 3)

Spencer defined mainstream school behaviors at a “generally speaking...very basic level”: respect for fellow classmates and teachers, not being disruptive in class, not talking or joking during class at inappropriate times, coming to school everyday, being on time for class, and so forth (Interview 3).

None of the participants equated school and academic success or success in general as anything but being successful; it was not equated with White, Black, Asian, Latino/a, and so forth. In other words, success was understood by all 4 participants to be colorless. And, cultural inversion, when invoked by the participants, similar to cool pose, was effectively managed as to not have a detrimental effect on their school and academic success.

*Raceless persona theory.* Fordham's (1988,) raceless persona theory claimed that African American students who achieve school and academic success are often conflicted, feeling the need to reject their racial and cultural identity in the process of achieving success. In effect, Fordham claimed that academically successful African American students distanced themselves from the Black collective, developing a raceless persona.

Although Ethan acknowledged the possibilities of raceless persona theory, he did not believe that his academic success led to distancing himself from the Black collective. He attributed his lack of this experience to being "ignorant" (Interview 2) toward the fact that success was perceived as having a color attached to it:

[Mainstream] tends to kind of force us with, if you want to be successful, you need to participate in a raceless persona. You need to not be able to know that what you are learning is what the mainstream wants. And that was one of the ways, like I said, that I was able to be successful, was because of ignorance. My ignorance allowed me to not necessarily take on a raceless persona, but to keep my ethnicity, to not necessarily feel educational success was a color. (Interview 3)

Ethan added that he had never thought about schools as leaning "toward making us a raceless culture...I just thought of it as a process of education, just another normal process" (Interview 3).

Ethan attributed the development of the anti-achievement ethic, which Fordham (1988) referenced, to the lack of success that some African Americans have with the "mainstream way":

I do think that several African Americans do tend to resort to an anti-achievement ethic, only because we are not successful, because we feel that we are not successful as far as learning the mainstream way. So if we are not successful in that way, we feel that something is wrong with it. So we tend to reject it. ...And the sad thing about it is that we try to recruit each other. We try to say, "Hey man you shouldn't be doing that! Hey man, you don't want to learn that lesson, you are never going to need that!" We try to bring each other down, as far as adopting an anti-achievement ethic. (Interview 3)

Keegan claimed that after reading Fordham's (1988) raceless persona theory he believed that his earlier schooling experiences could have been classified as racelessness: "I felt raceless, felt like success was sometimes being outside the race I guess, not being Black enough"

(Interview 3). This raceless persona was brought about because Keegan did not enjoy the activities and things that most of the “popular” kids in school enjoyed, such as hip-hop music, sports, and so forth. Keegan stated, however, that during middle school when he was placed in the honors program his sense of racelessness began to fade as he became surrounded with other African American students who had similar interests:

I remember...it kind of went on...deep down inside. I kind of felt like...what is wrong with me. ...I remember feeling as if I was different, not really Black, and not really White. I didn't like everything my Black peers enjoyed, for instance music; I have a total different taste. ...Then I took a sense of pride of it more in middle school...that I wasn't like everyone else. ...In elementary school you are kind of in the same class with everyone else, but then once you go into middle school, they...separate you, you have the honors program, the honor classes, you take honors English, honors science, honors math. ...I guess when I was separated I began to take a sense of pride, that transition sort of took place. I remember...distinctively from sixth grade going to the seventh grade...I was in honors courses; there were other people who were interested in going to [ ] Museum. (Interview 3)

Similar, to his conversation around Ogbu's (1992) cultural-ecological theory, Nathaniel's conversation around Fordham's (1988) raceless persona theory was limited. Nathaniel continued, however, to regard “the speaking correctly thing”(Interview 3)—not academic success—as a possible means of separating oneself from the Black collective. He noted that playing sports was a way in which he learned to navigate between the “smart” students and the “cool” students, effectively securing his position in the Black collective:

Well, I guess it is something you sort of learn to navigate. I have been playing sports for a long time...I grew up around some of these guys. I guess you sort of get a better respect for them anyway, even though they see you as being smart, they also see you as being cool, too. I guess it is the whole idea of just being accepted. They sort of accept you a little more because you know, they don't feel like you are acting shady toward them, you are not putting them down by speaking, oh well, it is just the way I talk. But you can still be cool; you can still play on the same team. (Interview 3)

Spencer questioned Fordham's (1988) concept of raceless persona on several levels.

First, Spencer claimed that he had never felt the tension between success and the Black

collective, noting that maybe it had something to do with attending an all Black high school. It is important to note that Spencer's conversation regarding raceless persona directly contradicts what he had said in the first interview regarding academic success and coolness:

I think a reason that I was so conscious about not being too serious on my schoolwork and being kind of cool, I guess, in a way, is because there are those pressures that we receive from each other. I think that, and especially going to a pretty much all Black high school, all Black middle school, those pressures were just even stronger. (Interview 1)

Second, Spencer did not believe that there was a preference for Black behaviors or White behaviors in schools. Spencer did, however, mention Ogbu's (1992) concept of cultural inversion, noting that it was logical that these inverted behaviors, if stretched and identified as Black behaviors, would not be favored given that they had been constructed to be in opposition to the larger mainstream system.

Third, Spencer questioned the general concept of Black behaviors or White behaviors, arguing that generalizations, although present in the larger society, held little value for him:

I can't really give a good answer to what the characterization of White and Black behaviors mean to me. I can just give generalizations. I recognize the generalizations out there, but to me, specifically, I think that people are so different that generalizations don't really do much for me. (Interview 3)

Spencer's concluding comments regarding Fordham's (1988) raceless persona theory communicated that he not only doubted her theory, but also provided for an opposing belief system:

I seem to think the opposite kind of way, in that, not that I am necessarily having to carry the banner for my race, but it feels good to me to know that I am accomplishing things, and I am accomplishing things as an African American male. I don't feel the need to separate the two, nor do I want to separate the two, because it makes me feel good. (Interview 3)

Spencer provided an example of why he negated the raceless persona theory:

So many [African Americans], even at the law school, the staff in the law school, the custodial staff, to all types of support staff, they all provide so much encouragement, to

not only me, but I see it happening to the other African American students. There just seems to be a lot of pride that they all take in seeing us do well. So I definitely don't think that it is necessary to adopt a raceless persona to be successful; I view it in the complete opposite light. (Interview 3)

Spencer's contradiction, noted earlier, might be explained by arguing that in the first interview when he stated, "I was so conscious about not being too serious on my schoolwork and being kind of cool," he was reflecting on his relationship with his adolescent peers, whereas in the later interview when he stated, "I definitely don't think that it is necessary to adopt a raceless persona to be successful," he was reflecting on his relationship with the larger African American community.

Similar to the participants' conversations regarding Ogbu's (1992) cultural-ecological theory, their conversations regarding Fordham's (1988) raceless persona theory questioned the idea that academic success and success in general was perceived as not being part of the Black collective, or in other words, as being White. The participants readily questioned the concept that the Black collective was void of success because, as noted earlier, the participants had parents, family and community members, and teachers who explicitly made the concept of success colorless.

*Burden of acting White theory.* Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) burden of acting White theory is a coupling and extension of *fictive kinship* (i.e., Black collective) and *acting White*. This theory attempts to explain how academically successful African American students manage the burden of acting White; it also recognizes an additional burden present for successful male students—the burden of being taunted as "gay."

Ethan acknowledged that an internal conflict between choosing social success or academic success did exist for some African American students. Ethan stated, however, that this

conflict did not exist in his schooling experiences because of his participation in athletics and the type of high school he attended:

I was able to balance between academics and athletics and I was strong in my ethnicity. I was able to establish myself, but there are some who aren't able to establish themselves. ... They are often compelled to choose, do they want to be successful socially or do they want to be successful academically. It is one of the hardest choices that a person... could make in their adolescence, because there is nothing that another person can do for them after they make the choice. Either they go down the right road or the wrong road. They go for a long-term success in life academically or short-term success in high school. So as far as mathematics is concerned, because I was surrounded by so many African Americans who actually wanted to achieve, the burden of acting White was not necessarily there, because none of us saw success as Black or White, we saw it as being successful period. (Interview 3)

Ethan claimed that the additional burden of being taunted as “gay,” again, was not present in his experiences. He further claimed that the phrase “That’s so gay” was intended to be a derogatory comment, similar to acting White, not intended to actually question the sexuality of the one at whom the phrase was aimed toward.

Keegan perceived the burden of acting White as being aware of White dominance. He returned to his Governor’s Honors Program qualifying interviews and graduate school entrance interviews to provide an example:

Yeah, I think there is a burden of acting White, and it is upsetting when you, I wouldn’t even call it acting White, but that is what it is looked upon. For instance, college entrance interviews...and interviews for GHP. ... Secretly, I probably wouldn’t have admitted it then, but if I was going to an all White setting, I knew that more than likely I was going to have a White interviewer. ... So when they ask me what my interests were, I was not going to say rap music. I would not have been true to myself and told them what I really liked. I probably would have told them, instead of liking someone who they may not have even heard of, I would have said Luther Vandross instead. (Interview 3)

Keegan was aware of the derogatory nature of the comment “That’s so gay.” However, similar to Ethan, Keegan did not believe the comment to be actually questioning the sexuality of the person that the comment was being directed toward:

I guess I took it as a joke, but it was a very derogatory term...it was meant to put you down, that term was thrown around to put you down, to say that you were gay because of just certain acts. It just wasn't academics, but it was almost thrown around, as the same term of being lame. (Interview 3)

Nathaniel returned to the concept of “speaking correctly” as being a means of separating oneself from the “cool” students, as his burden of acting White. But unlike his earlier conversations, in the present conversation Nathaniel expanded the burden to being smart as well. He, however, still did not equate smart with White, just un-cool at times:

Yeah, I think it just goes back to the whole question of acceptance, just what a lot of people think is cool; people see being smart as not really cool. [Peers are]... a little bit less likely to accept you, because they sort of have their own perceptions of what you are, of who you are because you are making certain types of grades. They may try to belittle you, but you can still be smart and still be accepted. ...They may not want to talk to you; you are lame, get away from me. But I guess to be accepted in any group, you have to show them otherwise, that hey, “I am smart, but...I am still cool.” (Interview 3)

Spencer, while discussing the burden of acting White theory, reiterated that he did not perceive a burden due to his school success. He understood, however, that other students might have had those experiences. He attributed his lack of a burden to the racial composition of the K–12 schools he attended (again, this contradicts his statements made during his first interview). He also noted that during his high school years rather than the burden of acting White that he and his peers wanted to emulate the few Asian students in the school, suggesting that they were succumbing to the stereotype that all Asian students made As in mathematics:

Specifically with mathematics, it is kind of funny because there is always a general stereotype, or it [might be] just a stereotype limited to the schools that I went to, because of the racial composition of the schools. But in both middle school and high school there were a few Asian students, and there was always the perception that, especially in mathematics, if you wanted to do well, then you wanted to act like the Asian students. The stereotype was that all the Asian students made As in mathematics and science. So when I was thinking about the [concepts of] acting Black and acting White, I know this is kind of outside of the scope of the question, but I think that in reality as far as my experiences...we wanted to be like the Asian kids who made all As in mathematics. (Interview 3)

Spencer believed that because he was successful in mathematics, a discipline where males are stereotypically expected to do well, that he did not experience the burden of being taunted as gay. He claimed, however, that if an African American male student was “composing poetry, or writing songs, or doing things like that” (Interview 3) the student then might have been challenged in regard to his sexuality.

Given that the participants did not perceive academic success as White, for the most part, they did not experience the burden of acting White, with the noted exception of Keegan. Although all 4 participants noted that the potential burden existed, the burden was not so much understood as a burden of acting White, but a burden of acting un-cool. Specifically, Ethan and Nathaniel suggested their involvement in sports was a strategy employed in maintaining a balance between the “smart kids” (not White) and “cool kids”; involvement in sports was a coping strategy identified by Fordham and Ogbu (1986). The participants also claimed that the burden of being taunted as gay, similar to being taunted as acting White, was just a derogatory comment, not necessarily questioning one’s masculinity or sexuality.

In an earlier chapter, I defined the discourse of rejection as the systematic rejection of school and academics by African American children or as the systematic rejection of cultural-specific Black behaviors by African American children. These four young African American men subverted this discourse, in both cases, by embracing school and academics while establishing strong racial identities as African American men.

Additionally, as the participants discussed the discourse of rejection, a fourth theme surfaced that resonated in all 4 participants’ conversations as being influential in their school, academic, and mathematics success: associating with high-achieving peer-group members who had similar goals and interest. This theme, like the themes noted earlier, has also been previously

reported as influential in the academic success of historically marginalized students (e.g., see Hébert & Reis, 1999; Martin, 2000; O'Connor, 1997).

### Summary of Discourses

*What discourses about African American males shaped participants' perception of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students? How did they accommodate, resist, or reconfigure those discourses?*

Each of the participants had acquired a robust mathematics identity as defined by Martin (2000). The participants' beliefs about their mathematics abilities, however, were as varied as the participants themselves. For instance, they defined their mathematics abilities as something very natural, "like eating or talking"; or as learning "ways of maneuvering through mathematics"; or as "something I had to work at...I got better at it because I kept working at it"; or as "just something that you can get better at with practice, and with study." The participants all held strong beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, perceiving "mathematics as something that was very important and necessary for success." And, either implicitly or explicitly, each participant remarked that mathematics was "the backbone of a lot of things," claiming that knowledge in mathematics helped one to "know a little more about what somebody else is saying." The participants believed that their opportunities and constraints to learn mathematics were unbounded, given that mathematics was culturally free, "the same whether you are Black, White, Asian, young or old"; something that "everyone can learn...because of its very nature."<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, because each of the participants perceived mathematics as "very

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<sup>62</sup> Either directly or indirectly all 4 participants identified mathematics as culturally free. How the participants developed such a perspective was not explored. I inferred from their conversations, however, that, although each participant expanded the utility of mathematics beyond mere school mathematics, the 4 participants also viewed school mathematics as an important component of the school curriculum. Therefore, like most of the Eurocentric curriculum that was presented to the participants, they were willing to learn what they needed to learn to achieve school and academic success (Ethan, Interview 2).

important and necessary for success,” they were motivated to “work harder because the classes were harder,” leading them to achieve advanced mathematics knowledge. How the participants acquired such uncharacteristic mathematics identities for African American male students, I suppose, is to be found, in part, in how they understood the sociocultural structures and discourses of U.S. society and how they accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured the specific discourses that surround African American males.

The participants were keenly aware of the sociocultural structures and discourses present in U.S. society and how they operated, and that most operated inequitably. For example, it was noted, “in life almost everything is politics...some people you have to get to know...because they are in power”; “you must instill into your child, or to yourself, the values of the middle class, upper-class White values, because that is the only way you are going to survive”; “to be successful you have to play the game”; “give the point of view of the African American and sit down; we have nothing else to offer”; “cultural difference...should be celebrated...how sad for them to walk in fear”; “a little bit harder for African Americans to do what their parents did...say a generation ago”; “they didn’t have a lot, just simple stuff”; and “generalizations in practice don’t really work, and especially when it is so broad as to characterize a whole race of people.”

Collectively, although the participants did not use the vocabulary of poststructural theory, critical race theory, or critical theory they certainly were speaking the language as they provided their perspectives on the structure of U.S. society, and throughout their conversations in general. In effect, without using the words they defined deconstruction, discursive formations, hegemony, empowerment, essentialism, power relations, and so forth. At times the language used by the participants was the language of humanism and at other times it was the language of poststructuralism. It was in this space, however, trapped between humanism and

poststructuralism, that the participants existed as they accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured the discourses that surround African American males in their pursuit of school and academic (and mathematics) success. The following paragraphs provide a recapitulation of the participants' conversations regarding the discourses around African American males, African American females, the discourse of deficiency, and the discourse of rejection.

*African American males.* The strength of the present discourses surrounding African American males was observed in the striking similarities in the participants' conversations as they spoke about African American males in general. The image that was painted, in part, by all 4 participants was the jewelry downed, baggy clothes, player thug who projected a nonchalant attitude toward school and academics. The participants noted that the reproduction and perpetuation of this questionable image of the African American male was due to one of the nations "biggest 'cash cows,' television." The image of the "thug" was so strong that even young Black men fall prey to the discourse when mentoring "troubling" young Black boys. And even though all 4 participants actively subverted this discourse, each also explicitly stated that the discourse had a negative impact on his academic success. Furthermore, in the United States it is virtually impossible for one to escape hearing about the "plight" of the African American male; it was evident that the participants had not escaped this discourse as they recounted, and refuted, this plight of the African American male throughout their conversations.

*African American females.* Not only were there striking similarities in the participants' conversations regarding African American males, but also regarding African American females. The similarity was most present when the participants spoke about the school and academic performance of African American female students. The similarity found in their conversations is exemplified in the following statement:

It is almost like for African American males, when they come out of the womb they are already stereotyped. It is stereotypical for a Black female to be smarter than a Black male; that is just a stereotype that we are given.

Although it was acknowledged that African American females have their own set of problems, it was also acknowledged that African American female students “apply themselves more [to school and academics] than African American males, because they kind of have less pressure than African American males.” The consequence of the stereotype that “a Black female...[is] smarter than a Black male” results in lower school and academic expectations for African American male students, lowered by teachers, and most important, argued by the participants, lowered by the African American community in general.

*Discourse of deficiency.* The participants accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured discourses located in the discourse of deficiency. Both the discourses of cultural deficiency and culture conflict were most often reconfigured as relating to the socioeconomic status of the student, not to the race or ethnicity of the student. Even when the cultural deprivation theory was acknowledged as being applicable, or was accommodated, a caveat was offered as not to overplay the theory. Or an argument was provided stating that the deprivation (or conflict) could be “overcome.” The institutional deficiency theory and educational equality theory were most often reconfigured as meaningful only in a different era. When accommodated, these theories were accompanied by an argument that one could succeed in spite of the deficiency or inequities through personal drive. And the heredity theory was clearly resisted as participants either provided anecdotes that refuted the theory or declarations of contempt for the theory.

As the participants most often resisted or reconfigured the discourses located in the discourse of deficiency, there are three specific aspects of their collective schooling experiences that must be highlighted. First, each of the participants attended public schools, K–12, located in

well-funded county school systems in a very “race-sensitive” city, and in most instances, African American students were the clear majority in their schooling experiences. Therefore, the physical facilities of the schools they attended, on the surface, were equitably funded and well maintained, and conflicts, problems, and so forth due to the race of the students were minimal.<sup>63</sup> Second, as noted earlier, each of the participants had been tracked into the honors program early in his education, providing him with access to enriched schooling experiences and academic programs, and access to the most credentialed and experienced teachers. And third, the family wealth present at Keeling High (Keeling High was embedded in an affluent African American community), and experienced by the participants in general, provided the participants with what could be argued as atypical schooling experiences for African American students.<sup>64</sup>

*Discourse of rejection.* The participants’ also accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured discourses located in the discourse of rejection. The discourse of cool pose was reconfigured by the participants as they developed strategies, such as shedding or subverting the subversion, that allowed engagement in cool pose behaviors in social settings while limiting the negative impact on their school and academic success. The discourse of stereotype threat was reconfigured by some participants and accommodated by others. Those who reconfigured the discourse argued

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<sup>63</sup> It is beyond the scope of this present study to compare or predict how the schooling experiences of these students might have been different if they had attended racially diverse schools and lived in racially diverse neighborhoods. My educated guess would be that their experiences would have been different; just how different, I do not know. It is, however, important to note that since the mid-1980s African American students have ever more attended schools in which they are the majority, as public schools across the nation have become increasingly resegregated (Frankenberg & Lee, 2002).

<sup>64</sup> The presence of family wealth at Keeling High—and experienced somewhat by all 4 participants—might explain why the participants’ conversations around the discourse of deficiency most often were reduced to discussions regarding the socioeconomic status of the student and not the race or ethnicity of the student. Furthermore, it is important to note that even as Nathaniel and Spencer experienced a lower wealth socioeconomic status during their schooling years, the expectations set forth for their school and academic success were always within a middle-class frame of reference. Nathaniel’s experience can easily be explained given that his parents were well-schooled voluntary minorities (his experience supports Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory, 1978a, 1992). Spencer’s experience, however, cannot so easily be explained and, in fact, is further complicated given that he was from a single-parent home (although, recall that his mother was well-schooled). The experiences of just these 2 participants reveal the complexity between race and class; a complexity not explored in this current study.

that it acted as “propulsion” or “motivation” to achieve. Whereas those who accommodated the discourse developed strategies that demonstrated that they “deserved to be there,” that they did “belong.” The participants most often resisted the discourse of cultural inversion, arguing that it “didn’t necessarily apply” or “never...was very real in...life.” And when the discourse was accommodated, like the discourse of cool pose, the cultural inversion behaviors were effectively managed by relegating them to the hallways and other out-of-classroom venues as to limit the negative impact on school and academic success. The discourse of acting White was resisted, as it was argued that the term *nerd* could be applied to all races—“to the Black community, to the White community, to Asians, whatever.” The discourse was, however, accommodated as the concept of acting White was often applied to other “White” things, such as “White” dress, “White” English, “White” music, and so forth, an accommodation also noted by Bergin and Cooks (2002). The discourse of raceless persona was most often resisted, with one noted exception, as the participants troubled a Black collective void of success given that the participants had parents, family and community members, and teachers who explicitly made the concept of success colorless. And given that the participants did not perceive academic success as White, for the most part, they resisted the discourse of the burden of acting White. Nevertheless, a burden of acting un-cool was present in their experiences, in effect, reconfiguring the discourse.

Overall, each participant recounted instances where he accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured specific discourses that surrounded African American males. At times the conversations among the 4 participants were strikingly similar, and at other times they were strikingly different. Nevertheless, even as the conversations were similar at times, they were never monolithic, not across participants, and I argue, not even within participants as illustrated

by each participant's apparent contradictions and inconsistencies found throughout his respective conversations. Contradictions and inconsistencies that reveal his fragmented self juxtaposed against the unified self of humanism.

### Conversations on Agency

#### *Perspectives of Agency & Agency and Mathematics*

The following discussion presents the participants' conversations regarding the concept of agency, specifically how they defined agency and how agency contributed to their success.

Included in the discussion are the participants' conversations regarding how their mathematics identity assisted in developing agency or vice versa.

Agency for Ethan was defined as bringing about "change through conflict without conflict" (Interview 4). He claimed that is

the basis of what...compelled me to do as well as I did, the ability to bring on change through conflict without conflict. I mean, that has been my thing, that is, if you can bring on change without conflict, and not only that, but the majority of the mainstream not even recognizing how you are bringing on a conflict, that you are actually in the process of changing things. So it is almost like you are sneaking up on [mainstream] without any conflict. (Interview 4)

Ethan stated that at times he would "sneak up" on mainstream by dressing and acting in ways that mainstream would assume, but achieve academically in a manner that was not assumed:

I began to dress the way [mainstream] assumed I would dress, sometimes even act the way they assumed I would act, but achieve the way they didn't think I could achieve. ...It was...misleading them to think that hey, "This guy is just ordinary; we can assume whatever about him." Then when they would get the test scores back, [they would think] maybe there is something wrong with what we thought. It is almost like I snuck up on them. I began to do things like that because I wanted people to see that even though you may assume something as being associated with low achieving, that you can't assume...anything about a student and their learning experiences. (Interview 4)

Ethan's acute awareness of how African American males, and specifically African American male athletes, were perceived by the mainstream was his motivating factor to be in a constant state of subverting the mainstream perception:

I built, like they say, a conflict within myself, of saying, "I am not going to let that be me" and "I am going to defeat the purpose," and the fact that I am going to prove them wrong. ...I began to build a conflict within a conflict. So you say, "I am not," I say, "I am," and you say, "I won't," and I say, "I will," and you are going to say hey, "You can't achieve," I am going to say hey, "I am achieving." So that is one of the things that I used. And as far as relating back to mathematics, [this perception] was more apparent in the field of mathematics than in English, than any other core classes. Mathematics is one of those skills where it was...more assumed that the minority African American male, couldn't comprehend or conceptualize, or learn, or use mathematics, as well as the mainstream or the majority. And that is when I developed a sort of respect, or a thirst and hunger for mathematics. I wanted to learn more mathematics, to develop a better understanding of mathematics, and develop a better ability to use mathematics at a higher level. (Interview 4)

Ethan talked about not only subverting the intellectual perceptions of African American males, but the physical ones as well (Recall that Keegan subverted the subversion as well in physical appearance by wearing suits):

Not all African Americans do these things, not all African Americans, wear their hats backwards, or sag their pants. ...I used [negative stereotypes] as motivation to achieve so much. I used them as motivation to do well in college. Just like when the interviewers came. ...So I made sure I prepared myself for every interview, to say the right things, to look the right way, to look not necessarily the right way, but look the way the mainstream thinks it ought to be. (Interview 2)

Consistent with his definition of success, Ethan saw agency as the ability to bring about positive change. As Ethan specifically outlined his future plans as an educator, he illustrated his understanding of the connection between agency, power, and education. He stated:

Minority students cannot be forced to learn a core curriculum that is based on majority students, and that is one of the things I want to change. ...It all goes back to being in power, in that you have to ruffle some feathers, and to do that you must also educate yourself. So that is what I am doing in the field of education. (Interview 4)

Ethan's intellectual privileging of mathematics coupled with his success in mathematics contributed to the foundation of his sense of empowerment:

The field of mathematics...is probably the most complex and in-depth field that you could ever study or participate in. And with such respect toward mathematics and such high level of achievement in mathematics, helped me...attack other fields and aspects of life in a more confident manner. Meaning...if I can get my bachelors in mathematics, who knows what I can achieve on the academic level? Right now I am teaching, but when I first began teaching, I was scared of the teaching. [But then] I said teaching couldn't be anything like mathematical theorizing...teaching couldn't be anything on that level, and so I attacked teaching in a more confident manner. I am able to analyze and break down every aspect of everything that I do in a more logical manner because mathematics requires you to theorize, use a more logical manner. It requires you to think ahead. So in every aspect of life I am able to use it. I am able to think ahead, two or three steps before they even occur. Mathematics is using everything. Achieving such a high level of mathematics compels me to achieve an equally high level in life period. (Interview 4)

Ethan stated that the field of mathematics was instrumental in developing agency, not so much during his high school years, but more so during his college years:

Mathematics didn't help me as far as forming that agency, until I got to a higher level. I thought in middle school and high school anybody can do that, but when I got to the collegiate level of mathematics and I realized that if I am able to achieve at the collegiate level then there is nothing that will stop me. That is when I started to use mathematics and my achievement in mathematics as an agency. As far as, if I can do it now, I mean, if I can do it in mathematics, I can do it anywhere. (Interview 4)

Keegan defined agency from its root word *agent*, "having someone advocate for you, to advise you, to give you the proper direction, to have role models, to have teachers, and have parents, have those who hold you accountable" (Interview 4). He remarked that when he got discouraged or when his intrinsic motivation started to fade he would turn to these individuals—his agents—to "keep me consistent, to keep me trying to find out what X is" (Interview 4).

Agency for Keegan was implicit in his conversation regarding how he "kind of balanced it out" (Interview 4), his success academically and socially. He contended that if he did all of his

homework and participated in class and made at least a C on each test that it would always balance out to a B: “I played the game...I can be successful academically, but also I can be accepted by my peers” (Interview 4). Keegan contended that maintaining this balance between academics and the social cost him academically, but he felt the trade-off was warranted, noting that students who were too academic were lacking in personality. Keegan stated that in maintaining this balance he found that the most crucial element of success was just being

Keegan:

Daily...I just try to be myself. I try to be Keegan. I believe so often that you can try to be one thing, try to act more Black, or act more White, or ...act one way or the other and that is when you really don't know who you are. Once you decide to be yourself, to make no apologies about...what you like to do, what you like to listen to, who you like to hang around, then you are not going to worry about what others say, what others might say about you privately or publicly. I want to be myself, and that is who I am. ...Every time I was myself I was successful; that takes a long time to get in your head. As long as I act normal and like myself, people like me, but when I am not myself, they say, “He is arrogant, he is a asshole.” ...[A friend] said, “I would rather you hate me for who I am than love me for what I am not”; I still hold dear to what he said.

Implicit in this conversation “to be myself,” Keegan demonstrated his agency, as he made no apologies about what he liked to do, suggesting a constant state of subverting discourses.

Keegan believed that mathematics assisted in his agency by providing the means to solve problems:

It is helping me to solve problems, helping me approach problems and then trying to come about getting a proper answer. It causes me to examine problems and I think that is what math does, it causes you to look at a problem and how to solve that problem, try to find solutions in order to solve problems, and I faced that in political science. We would look at problems and ask, “What ways do we solve these political problems? How do we explain these problems?...How do we approach solving this problem?” (Interview 4)

Keegan noted similar applications of his mathematics background in graduate school.

Nathaniel defined agency using the statistical term *degrees of freedom*, suggesting that his agency, or freedom, was based on his past goals and accomplishments. In other words, his

degrees of freedom were a result of his self-motivation to achieve his short-term goals in order to reach his long-term goals:

As far as defining agency, I think it is a sense of degrees of freedom...the amount of freedom that...you have in...whatever system you are in. I mean, as far as me applying to med school, because I made decent grades...and I made a decent MCAT [Medical College Admission Test] score, I now have the freedom to apply to these schools and have a chance. ...I think that...having the scores to be able to have a chance to get into these schools...ties back into self-motivation, it is just knowing what you need to do to get where you need to get, to have that freedom at the end, as far as the whole agency thing goes. (Interview 4)

Consistent with Nathaniel's sense of self-motivation, he claimed that his sense of agency assisted in the development of his mathematics success rather than vice versa. He argued that one should always provide oneself with the opportunity to do whatever one wanted to do: "I probably need to at least give myself this opportunity...I always have the freedom to go back and try...if that is really what I want to do" (Interview 4). And for Nathaniel, as previously noted, opportunity equated to knowing what one needed to do to get where they wanted to get; he understood that mathematics provided that foundation.

Nathaniel implied that he demonstrated agency when he had negative experiences with others around the issues of race and racism. He stated that rather than being the "angry Black man" he would remain calm and just talk:

The smartest thing to do is just be calm; I don't have to be the angry Black man. So they may expect me to just blow up in their face, but I [remain]...calm and just talk calmly... because I get a lot more done if I sit there and talk, than if I just swung at somebody, or just sat there and cussed them out. (Interview 4)

Agency for Spencer could be described as his desire to please coupled with his fear of failure. Although Spencer understood that the life choices that he made were ultimately his choices, these two aspects were always prominent in the background:

I think that all those things [regarding success] are related...to the fear of letting down the people that I care about. ...I kind of see myself as sort of an extension of my family,

that everyone is behind me, and everyone is pushing me towards some common familiar goal of my being successful. ...But in applying a legal definition to [agency], I can see myself as being the agent of my family, and my family being the principle. And, in law, the principle has the power to control the moves of the agent and the agent acts at the direction of the principle, and I guess if you want to look at it in those terms, then I am sort of an agent for my family. Like I said, there is sort of this fear, there is this unspoken kind of force pushing me toward accomplishing some level of success. So if you look at it in that sort of sense, then, I am just sort of the employee of the family going out and doing the work of the family, and hopefully one day I will have the resources to take care of the people who are taking of me; all of the people who have made it possible for me to be at this point now. (Interview 4)

Spencer's desire to please coupled with his fear of failure facilitated his school success.

And, even though the pressures from friends to be "cool" were present, Spencer claimed that he "managed to balance these pressures and found ways to be 'smart' and 'cool' at the same time (Autobiography). When asked how he managed to balance these pressures, Spencer, similar to Keegan, stated that he figured out the formula for school success early on:

You just learn as you go through the process [of schooling]; different classes take a different amount of work. In my language arts classes, I would always make good grades; whenever I did papers and things like that, I could always, pretty much turn out a paper, a couple of nights before it was due and make a good grade on it. Whereas in my mathematics and science classes, I would have to study a little bit more. So when I said I figured it out, I mean I learned which classes I could perhaps, slack off in more, and still make good grades, and which classes I needed to spend more time on. (Interview 1)

Spencer's experiences of seeing the extremes of poverty and wealth provided his sense of agency to "resist some of the temptations that other people have [chosen], making them slip up along the way" (Interview 1). Furthermore, Spencer's acute awareness of stereotypes regarding African Americans, and African American male students specifically, motivated the development of strategies for dispelling those stereotypes:

I make sure that I raise my hand to answer the questions early, because I don't want [the professors] to have that stereotype of me...I try to cut those things off very early and I try to prove my worth, show that I belong. I try to do things like that, so that those stereotypes will not be as prevalent in my particular experiences. (Interview 2)

Spencer's agency was also evident in his keen reflective observation ability, enabling him to determine what is defined as appropriate behaviors:

By the time I got to Keeling High, I already had a sufficient understanding of appropriate school behaviors. ... [What led to that understanding is related] to a number of things, both school related and outside of school, specifically things like family upbringing, just being told and taught to behave certain ways. [Within the context] of school, I think my personality has been that, generally speaking, when I am new to a situation or to an environment I am very observant and sort of quiet and withdrawn into myself. ... I learned a lot through observing, and just through looking at my environment, seeing what kinds of things were, unapproved in school, as far as talking when the teacher is talking, ... knowing when to raise your hand to go to the restroom, and things of that nature. So I think it started off early ... having a good understanding of what was appropriate and what was not appropriate; and not only did I get an understanding of it, but ... I knew to use it. ... I don't think [knowing what appropriate school behaviors are] is a terribly big secret, I just think that the difference comes in those who choose to apply it. (Interview 4)

Spencer perceived a strong relationship between his current success and his past success in school mathematics:

I think that the end result of where I am in my life now, has been based, in a large part based on my early success in mathematics for a few different reasons. Mathematics has always been something that has been looked at as very high up in the education hierarchy. ... I can remember specific examples from middle school, where my success in math and science began opening some doors for me. At the middle school I went to we had a program called SECME ... the director of the program ... took me under his wing, and from that moment forward, I started to recognize how important it was to be good at math and science. ... Those experiences led me ultimately to Keeling High, and the mathematics and science magnet program. I don't think that I would have gone there otherwise; we didn't live in that region. So again, I think that my success in mathematics and science, and the whole agency thing, my mother recognizing that I was successful in those things and recognizing that math success and success in the technical subjects was very important. (Interview 4)

### Summary of Agency

*How did participants define agency and how does it function in their lives? What relationship did participants perceive between their achievement in school mathematics and agency?*

Diversity was abundant as the participants articulated their conceptualization of agency and how agency operated in their lives. Agency was defined as conflict without conflict, "the

basis of what...compelled me to do as well as I did, the ability to bring on change through conflict without conflict”; as being derived from its root word *agent*, “having someone advocate for you, to advise you, to give you the proper direction, to have role models, to have teachers, and have parents, have those who hold you accountable”; as “degrees of freedom...just knowing what you need to do to get where you need to get, to have that freedom at the end”; and as “being the agent of my family, and my family being the principle...the agent acts at the direction of the principle.” Within these definitions, traces of agency within a poststructural frame are present as well as agency within a humanist frame. Nevertheless, no matter how the participants responded to a direct question asking them to define agency the data from each participant, taken in the aggregate, reveal that each of these four young African American men, consciously or unconsciously, recognized himself as a discursive formation who could actively subvert sociocultural discourses as a means to decode and recode his identity—as a means to subversively repeat his constituted “raced” self.

Diversity was also found as the participants articulated how agency functioned in their lives. Agency functioned as a means of “being in power...to ruffle some feathers”; “keep[ing] me consistent, to keep me trying to find out what X is”; “go[ing] back...if that is really what I want to do”; and “pushing me toward accomplishing some level of success.” These articulations, similar to their definitions of agency, reveal traces of the language of poststructuralism and humanism. And again each participant’s data, taken in the aggregate, reveal that he, consciously or unconsciously, understood that his agency did not provide unlimited freedom to act, but rather freedom to constitute himself in an unexpected manner—if he chose to do so.

Furthermore, the uncharacteristic mathematics identity of each of the participants positively impacted his notion of agency, with Nathaniel being an exception. It was noted, “If I

can do it in mathematics, I can do it anywhere”; “It is helping me to solve problems, helping me approach problems”; and “I can remember specific examples from middle school, where my success in math and science began opening some doors for me.” These remarks regarding the relationship between mathematics and agency are not surprising, given that, as noted earlier, each of the participants held an acute understanding of the sociocultural structures present in U.S. society. In other words, even though each of the participants extended the utility of mathematics beyond mere school mathematics, he was also clearly aware of the privileged sociocultural status of mathematics and what that status had bought him.

#### Impact of Study on Participants

An important feature of action research is for the research process to be a recursive process that aims to assist people in investigating “reality,” in order to change it, in order to reinvestigate it in order to rechange it, and so on (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). Mindful of this feature, during the last interview, I asked each participant roughly the same sequence of closing questions: As you think about your engagement in this research study for the past 6 months, which included reading the manuscripts and being asked to reflect on your schooling experiences, how has the research study assisted you in reconceptualizing how you function or operate in society? How has your engagement in this research study impacted how you think about your experiences in high school, in college, and now in graduate school? How has your engagement in this research study impacted how you might function or operate in the future? What have you gained from being engaged in this research study? In other words, what will you walk away from this study thinking about or having gained (if anything)? The purpose of this sequence of questions was to attempt to determine if the participants’ engagement in the study might have long-term

transformative effects. The following paragraphs provide brief summaries of each of the participants' responses around this closing sequence of questions.

Ethan claimed that by engaging in the research study he became aware that it was “unfair that minorities are being taught what the majority feels is important, or that they are being taught what the mainstream wants them to be taught” (Interview 4). He noted that he now understood that there were many aspects of education that must be explored when educating minorities and the majority who “are in control of the school system” (Interview 4). As a secondary mathematics teacher in an urban school, Ethan believed that his engagement in the study assisted him in understanding the complexities of teaching and learning, noting “as an educator you must take into consideration every level, every aspect of learning of a student, and if you don't then that student will never achieve, and you can always hold yourself responsible” (Interview 4).

Ethan's closing comments regarding the study were also within the context of education:

We can use all the big words we want to, discourse, agency, anything, postmodern ...everything, but the fact of the matter is change must be coming. And for change to come...we must make somebody uncomfortable at the top. We must not only make them uncomfortable, but we must educate them on why things must change. Because if they don't believe that things must change, then things will never change as far as education wise. (Interview 4)

Keegan claimed that he found the study and his engagement in it useful and important, stating, “There is not enough literature written about those who have succeeded; it is easier to write about those who have failed and the reason why they have failed” (Interview 4). He said that his engagement in the study caused him to think back and reexamine many aspects of his life:

The [manuscripts] that I read caused me to examine how I look at myself, even now in higher education and how I viewed myself throughout my academic career, beginning all the way back to elementary school. ...Seeing what other factors, what other variables, have shaped my academic learning. What caused my success, what caused me to discover

myself and discover what variables determined my successes and my failures throughout my academic career? (Interview 4)

Nathaniel simply stated that engaging in the research study gave him a further appreciation for the research process, and those who do research. He drew a comparison between my passions for this study and his experiences in science labs as an undergraduate student, acknowledging researchers are individuals who have “devoted their lives to some discipline, [but] who are not necessarily getting paid a lot” (Interview 4).

Spencer noted that the study was a “good start” (Interview 4) of telling the other side of the story—the other side of the “achievement gap story.” He characterized the study “as a reverse engineering kind of thing” (Interview 4), suggesting that it made more sense to examine some success stories and determine what could be learned from those students. He believed that applying successful African American students’ schooling experiences to the larger minority population could make “success stories more the norm as opposed to statistical outliers” (Interview 4). Although Spencer acknowledged that his initial engagement in the study was done out of a “sense of responsibility,” he stated that as time passed he began to take a “more...proactive kind of view...because this is valuable research” (Interview 4). He hoped that he could “be some very small and insignificant part of a big large solution” (Interview 4). Spencer argued that the addition of some success stories regarding African American male students and academics might begin to change some opinions. He concluded his final interview, stating:

I am just happy to help you in getting some of the success stories out there...if it can be of some use to someone or some researcher who picks up your article 20 years down the line and if that can be the start of some sort of broad social change...that is wonderful. ...I have had so much interest in the study, because this is something that affects me as an African American male. It is going to affect my sons, my nephews, and my grandsons. So this is definitely something that I see a need for. (Interview 4)

Collectively, reporting the closing remarks of the participants illustrate that their engagement in the research study made available different understandings of their schooling and life experiences; the participants began to locate their experiences in the historical and social context in which they “were produced, developed and evolved” (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 25). These different understandings motivated deeper reflection on their past experiences and, I suppose, deeper reflection on their ability to transform their future experiences (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998).

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relations of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War; however much they who marched South and North in 1861 may have fixed on the technical points of union and local autonomy as a shibboleth, all nevertheless knew, as we know, that the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of the conflict. (Du Bois, 1903/1989, p. 10)

I begin this chapter with a brief summary of the study and its conclusions, revisiting the three research questions that guided the study. This summary is followed by a general discussion, providing the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. I conclude the chapter by outlining promising implications of the study for teacher education.

#### The Study

I began thinking about this research project back in 1997, which was my 2nd year teaching mathematics at Keeling High School. Keeling High was the mathematics and science magnet school for Newberry County, an urban high school in a suburban community, within 10 miles of a large city in the South. There were approximately 1,300 students at Keeling, with 99% of the students being identified by race/ethnicity as Black by the school system. Keeling's student population, however, was very diverse socioeconomically—ranging from the working poor to the middle upper class. There was great diversity among the students with regard to academic achievement as well. In fact, many of the students at Keeling High were radically above the academic statistical norm assigned to African American students. Although I understand that African American students have an equally likely disposition to embrace school and academics as White students, none of my formal education had informed me about

academically successful African American students. The discussions and literature read in my formal education about minority students (e.g., African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and so forth) and schooling was most often centered on the failures or “problems” of minority students—not on their successes. Consequently, I began to ask: Where are the African American students who embrace school and academics analyzed, compared, and discussed in the education literature? Where are their stories? And, more specifically, where are the discussions in the education literature, and in society generally, about the academically (and mathematically) successful African American male students? These questions motivated the purpose of this study.

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the schooling experiences of African American male students who embraced school, academics, and mathematics. In particular, using qualitative action research methodology (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998), located within a critical postmodern theoretical frame (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994), I examined the influence of sociocultural discourses on the agency of 4 African American men in their early 20s who demonstrated achievement and persistence in school mathematics. *Agency* in this context was defined as the participants’ ability to accommodate, resist, or reconfigure the available sociocultural discourses that surround African American males in order for them to effectively negotiate these discourses in their pursuit of success. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How did participants define success? What sociocultural factors did they attribute to their school and academic success?

2. What discourses about African American males shaped participants' perception of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students? How did they accommodate, resist, or reconfigure those discourses?
3. How did participants define agency and how does it function in their lives? What relationship did participants perceive between their achievement in school mathematics and agency?

The emphasis of this study was not on identifying particular sociocultural influences on the participants' success in school and academics, but on *how* particular sociocultural discourses affected participants' agency as they accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured those discourses in their pursuit of success. Because the study aimed to expose the multifaceted variations of how students resisted, opposed, or even reconfigured negative sociocultural discourses as they embraced those discourses that were positive it required an eclectic theoretical framework that included poststructural theory, critical race theory, and critical (postmodern) theory. Poststructural theory provided a frame for rethinking and redefining key concepts such as person, agency, and power, among others. Critical race theory provided a frame for understanding how the discourse of race and racism operates within U.S. social structures. And critical (postmodern) theory provided a frame for discussing the purposes of education research.

Within a poststructural theoretical frame the research study began with the acknowledgment of research participants—characterized as discursive formations (Foucault, 1969/1972), not as individuals—who negotiated societal discourses regarding African American males through an unconsciously (or not) developed doubled-consciousness (Du Bois, 1903/1989). This acknowledgment, I believe, freed the stories of the participants from being essentialized to the often told Horatio Alger Jr. story—*Oh, look how these young Black boys*

*overcame society's racial injustices and became successful, pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps—to stories that more respectfully and accurately explained how these young men achieved success—Oh, look how these young Black men negotiated society's racial injustices and became successful through subversively repeating their constituted "raced" selves.*

Within a critical race theoretical frame the research study began with the acknowledgment of school inequities based on the power of racism. The understanding of the power of racism held by the participants, I believe, facilitated their active resistance toward the negative power relations of racism present in schools and society as an act of ultimate defiance (Bell, 1992).

Within a critical (postmodern) theoretical frame the research study was a joint search (Freire, 1969/2000), a joint search by co-researchers (me, the *researcher*—a southern, middle-class, White, Christian, queer, gay man—and the *participants*—academically successful, young African American men) who as discursively constituted subjects with developed double-consciousnesses were jointly attempting to trouble the discourse of the achievement gap problem between Black students and their White counterparts by telling the “other side of the story.” This study, I believe, provided learning opportunities for the participants and me to more fully understand the participants’ successes in school, academics, and mathematics. And, in turn, I trust that the study will self-empower both participants and me with *conscientização* as it informs the community of (mathematics) educators with the stories of African American males who were successful in school and academics. Highlighting these stories could transform the inequitable and unjust schooling policies and teaching practices found in many U.S. public schools to policies and practices that are more equitable and just. I am engaged in this joint search because I

have an allegiance to equity and social justice in U.S. public schools, and specifically in the mathematics classroom.

### Conclusions

The 4 participants, all past students of mine, completed a demographic and schooling survey instrument, wrote brief autobiographies, and participated in four interviews over a 6-month time period in an attempt to answer the three research questions previously noted. The following paragraphs provide the conclusions to that inquiry.

The participants defined success either in broad social terms, as in helping others by effecting positive change; or in narrow human need and desire terms, as in living a happy life by caring for those who one loved. But no matter how the participants defined success, implicit or explicit in their definitions was the valuing of or need for education. Although the participants attributed a wide variety of sociocultural factors to their school and academic success, there were four factors that were identified by all 4 participants: (a) observing or knowing family or community members who had benefited from a formal education by achieving financial and societal success; (b) encouraging and forceful family and community members who made the expectations of school and academic (and mathematics) success explicit; (c) caring and committed teachers and school personnel who established high academic expectations for students and developed relationships with students that reached beyond the school and academics; and (d) associating with high-achieving peer-group members who had similar goals and interests. All four of these factors have been previously reported as influential in the school and academic success of minority students (e.g., see Hébert & Reis, 1999; Martin, 2000; O'Connor, 1997).

In the participants' specific discussions regarding their mathematics success, each participant revealed a robust "mathematics identity" (Martin, 2000, p. viii). Effectively, the participants all held strong beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, extending the utility of mathematics beyond mere school mathematics into their daily lives and chosen professions (i.e., teacher, preacher, doctor, and lawyer). The participants believed that their opportunities and constraints to learn mathematics were unbounded, given that mathematics was a culturally free discipline. And each of the participants was motivated to achieve advanced mathematics knowledge. How the participants acquired such uncharacteristic mathematics identities for African American male students was found, in part, in how they understood the sociocultural structures and discourses of U.S. society and how they accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured the specific discourses that surround African American males.

The participants were acutely aware of the sociocultural structures and discourses present in U.S. society and how they operated, and that most operated inequitably. Although the participants did not use the vocabulary of poststructural theory, critical race theory, or critical theory they certainly spoke the language as they provided their perspectives on the structure of U.S. society, and throughout their conversations in general. At times the language used by the participants was the language of humanism and at other times it was the language of poststructuralism. It was in the space—between humanism and poststructuralism—that the participants existed as they accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured the discourses that surround African American males in their pursuit of school and academic success.

The image that was painted of the African American male, in general, by all 4 participants, as a result of the available discourses, was the jewelry downed, baggy clothes, player thug who projected a nonchalant attitude toward school and academics. The participants

believed that the reproduction and perpetuation of this discursive image was due largely to the media. And, even as all 4 participants subverted this discourse, each noted that the discourse had a negative impact on his schooling. There were similarities in the participants' conversations regarding African American females as well. Most often, the participants spoke of the stereotypical discourse that projects the Black female as smarter than the Black male. The participants believed that the dominance of this stereotype results in lower school and academic expectations for African American male students, lowered by teachers and the African American community in general.

Not only did the participants subvert (i.e., accommodate, resist, or reconfigure) the discursive image of the African American male, but also the discourses of deficiency and rejection. The participants most often reconfigured theories located in the discourse of deficiency, such as cultural deprivation theory, culture conflict theory, institutional deficiency theory, and educational equality theory, as relating to the socioeconomic status of the student or to a different time period. When particular theories were accommodated, they were accompanied with caveats as to not overlay the theory or arguments claiming that the deprivation or conflict could be overcome. And other theories located in the discourse of deficiency, such as heredity theory, were clearly refuted by the participants.

The participants most often reconfigured many of the theories located in the discourse of rejection, such as cool pose theory, cultural inversion theory, and stereotype threat theory. Either the theory was effectively managed as to limit the negative effects on school and academic success or reversed as to provide motivation for school and academic success. When the participants resisted theories, such as the acting White theory and raceless persona theory, they argued that school and academic success was colorless. The participants accommodated the

theory of acting White, however, when attached to other “White” things such as dress, language, music, and so forth. And because the participants understood success as colorless they reconfigured the burden of acting White theory into the burden of acting un-cool theory. In other words, the participants acknowledged that school and academic success was perceived as un-cool at times—but not White.

Each participant recounted several instances in which he accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured specific discourses that surround African American males. At times the conversations among the 4 participants were strikingly similar, and at other times they were strikingly different. Nevertheless, even as the conversations were similar at times, they were never monolithic—not across participants, and not even within participants.

Similar to their conversations defining success, the participants’ discussions defining agency and how agency operated in their lives were equally as diverse. Agency was defined as conflict without conflict, as having someone advocate for you, as degrees of freedom, or as being the agent of one’s family. And similar to their conversations regarding the various discourses, the participant used both the language of humanism and poststructuralism as they defined and qualified agency. In total, each participant recognized himself as a discursive formation who could actively accommodate, resist, or reconfigure sociocultural discourses as a means to subversively repeat his constituted “raced” self. Accompanying this understanding was an acknowledgement that his agency yielded not unlimited freedom to act, but rather freedom to constitute himself in an unexpected manner, if he chose to do so.

#### Limitations of Study

Before I discuss two “real” limitations of this study, I respond to four presumed limitations regarding the study’s purpose and conclusions, theoretical framework, and methodology.

First, did I begin the research study with the conclusions of the study in hand? In a manner of speaking, I did. My 5 years of astute reflective observations of and listening to and learning from my successful African American students provided the foundation for conducting this study. These students effectively negotiated the hegemonic, White, middle-class, patriarchal ideology that exists in U.S. schools, even at a school like Keeling High. It was these very observations of and listening to and learning from my successful African American students that inspired the initial title for this study: *Why “Smart” Black Boys Are Smarter Than “Smart” White Boys*. This title, however, did not pass muster with my closest friends; it was therefore never presented to my doctoral committee. But through my own experiences as a “smart” White boy, I can distinctively recall that the positive discourses of possibilities that surrounded me as a White, middle-class, Christian, and (presumed) heterosexual boy throughout my schooling were unbounded. In other words, most every discourse that was presented to me through the structures of school, community, and society in general illustrated an endless possibility of positive choice. Or said in another way, the discursive formation of the White, middle-class, Christian, heterosexual, male child is undeniably the most privileged formation found in schools, and in U.S. society generally. This constant stream of positive discourses, however, was not, and is not, afforded to all students, specifically not to African Americans, Latino/as, female students in general, and so forth. So as Black boys are having to master (i.e., learn?) the curriculum valued in school, just as White boys do, they are also having to learn how to negotiate the hegemonic, White, middle-class, patriarchal ideology that has framed the structures of school, including the very curriculum that they must master—thus, making them smarter.

Consequently, based on my own experiences as a successful, White, male student and my experiences as a secondary mathematics teacher of successful African American students, I state

explicitly that this study was not an interpretive study in which I intended to conclude that successful, historically marginalized students negotiate the structures of school. Rather this was a critical postmodern study which I intended to illustrate that historically marginalized students must negotiate the structures of school, and society, *differently*—and with more of a conscious effort—than those students from the dominant culture.

Second, did the participants see themselves as having developed a double-consciousness and negotiating the hegemony of U.S. schools—or did I? To answer this question, I reiterate that within a critical postmodern framework the researcher applies theory to data; she or he does not wait for theory to “emerge” from data. Although I used theoretical perspectives that have been derived from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) (e.g., cool pose theory, stereotype threat theory, cultural-ecological theory, raceless persona theory, burden of acting White theory), I was not building theory in this current study. Nor was I attempting to verify or nullify the different grounded theories that were reviewed and discussed in this study. What I attempted to do in this study was to illustrate how these theories existed (or not) in the schooling experiences of academically successful African American male students, and how the participants accommodated, resisted, or reconfigured these theories. My a priori theoretical perspective, based on my 5 years of experience in teaching academically successful African American students who held secure racial/ethnic identities, was that they possessed a double-consciousness that facilitated their effective negotiation of the hegemony of U.S. schools. So my analysis of the data did not require the participants to use the terms accommodation, discursive formation, double-consciousness, hegemony, power relations, reconfiguration, resistance, subversive repetition, ultimate defiance, and so forth in their conversations, but rather required the

possibility of applying these concepts to the language used by the participants in their conversations. Their conversations provided such possibilities.

Third, did the contradictions and inconsistencies in the participants' conversations "invalidate" the data? Within a critical postmodern theoretical framework the person is understood as a discursive formation—not as a static individual. The concept *discursive formation* acknowledges that persons are fragmented selves juxtaposed against the unified self of humanism. For this reason, contradictions and inconsistencies were expected, and in fact, welcomed. In a manner of speaking, the contradictions and inconsistencies validated the data: It demonstrated that the participants were attempting to articulate their fragmented experiences rather than deliver the "correct" responses to the questions asked. If the participants' objective in responding to the questions asked had been to deliver the correct responses, they could have done so; their individual and collective academic records show that they were astute at delivering correct responses.

And fourth, did providing the participants with literature to read, reflect on, and respond to "corrupt" the data? The methodological procedure of engaging the participants in the current literature is a crucial component of participatory action research. Not only did this procedure provide the participants and me with a common vocabulary to discuss their schooling experiences, but also it motivated deeper reflections about their schooling experiences from the participants themselves. Developing deeper reflections and understandings of how one functions or operates within a historical and sociocultural context, by participants and researcher alike, is another important component of participatory action research. And, likewise, developing deeper reflections and understandings of how one's experiences and actions are subjected and limited by the discourses within a historical and sociocultural context is an important component of

research within a critical postmodern theoretical framework. Therefore, engaging the participants in the literature did not corrupt the data, as might be perceived by some researchers, but achieved the noted important components of participatory action research within a critical postmodern theoretical frame.

There are two aspects of the study, however, that are described within the discussion of methodological procedures (chapter 4), specifically research site and participant selection, which do limit the study. First, as noted earlier, Keeling High School was nestled comfortably in an affluent middle- to upper-class neighborhood. The building facilities of Keeling High were modern and well maintained. As students, teachers, administrators, and parents of the school traveled to and from Keeling High they passed manicured, gated communities of the elite—residences of African Americans. Furthermore, Keeling High was a mathematics and science magnet school; therefore, when I requested a classroom set of graphing calculators, I got them. When I requested computer software to be purchased and installed in the *mathematics* department's computer lab, it was purchased and installed. In other words, although Keeling High was a “Black” high school, it certainly was not like the numerous savagely unequal Black high schools found throughout U.S. urban cities that Kozol (1992) describes. Not only are the schools Kozol describes savagely unequal in regard to building facilities, funding, staffing, and opportunity to teach and learn, but also they are not nestled in between manicured, gated communities. Although I believe that academically successful African American students from these savagely unequal schools still negotiate the hegemonic, White, middle-class ideology of schools, they must do so differently. These students not only negotiate the hegemony found in schools successfully, but also the continued real physical consequences of racism and discrimination inflicted on Black schools.

Second, as noted earlier, all of the participants in the study had assimilated to some extent to the dominant culture, most often employing an accommodation without assimilation strategy. These young men were well aware that they were choosing to “look the right way...not necessarily the right way, but look the way the mainstream thinks in ought to be” (Ethan, Interview 2). Not only had these young men adopted accommodation without assimilation strategies with regard to physical appearance, but also with regard to their behaviors, language, and so forth. In other words, even though the participants of this study were very Black young men, meaning they embraced their self-defined identity as African American men, part of their negotiating strategy was accommodation. I argue that young African American men who chose not to be accommodating can still negotiate the hegemonic, White, middle-class ideology of schools with success, they just must do so differently. These students are engaged in a continuous state of subverting the dominant discourses—not an impossible feat, just improbable.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

The two noted limitations to this study suggest recommendations for future research. First, how do African American males who attend savagely unequal schools successfully negotiate the hegemony of schools and the mathematics classroom? Although studies have been undertaken that examined academically successful minority students who attended such schools (e.g., Hébert & Reis, 1999; O’Connor, 1997), these studies were not conducted from a critical postmodern theoretical perspective nor did they contain a mathematics component. And currently, there are no studies that have examined African American male students who sustain a continuous state of subversion while achieving school, academic, and mathematics success—if these students even exist.

Additionally, the participants of this study have agreed to be revisited in 5 years. The planned extension of this study is to explore how the strategies of negotiation practiced in the participants' younger years evolve as they progress through the initial years of enculturation into their chosen professions and to explore if there is a continued valuing of and noted benefit to their advanced school mathematics education.

Another recommendation is to duplicate the theoretical framework and methodology of the study with academically and mathematically successful students who are from other historically marginalized groups, such as African American female students; Latino male and female students; *openly* gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students; socioeconomically disadvantaged students; and so forth. These studies could motivate a cross analysis of how students who are not from the dominant culture effectively negotiate the hegemony of U.S. schools and the mathematics classroom—achieving school, academic, and mathematics success.

Similarly, the theoretical framework could be duplicated and the methodology modified by incorporating ethnographic data collection procedures. Sustained observations of successful minority students in classrooms, the hallways of school, the school's cafeteria, during school events, and so forth could provide data on the unconscious strategies used by successful minority students as they negotiate the hegemony of U.S. schools. Likewise, interviewing successful minority students' teachers, peer-group members, parents, and so forth could provide additional data.

#### Implications for Teacher Education

There are three implications for teacher education (preservice and inservice) that can be drawn from this study: two direct and one somewhat indirect. The first direct implication is to develop a renewed focus on the three Rs of education, specifically within the context of secondary

mathematics teacher education. The three Rs, however, that I am referring to are not reading, writing, and arithmetic, but “relationships, relationships, and relationships” (T. J. Smith, personal communication, April 2004). As noted earlier, within the context of schools, there was no other single factor identified throughout the participants’ data that matched the impact on school and academic success as the positive impact of caring and committed teachers who established high academic expectations for students and developed relationships with students that went beyond the school and academics. The importance of and positive effects of teachers who develop relationships with African American students that go beyond the school and academics have been clearly documented in the research literature (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Developing these teacher-student relationships is, I believe, instrumental in the effective teaching and learning of all students, and critically important for secondary mathematics teachers—given that most students have an aversion toward the discipline. Knowledge of how to develop these teacher-student relationships is not a substitute for subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, or curricular knowledge (Shulman, 1986) but is a crucially needed addition to these most limiting forms of knowledge.

Although the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) provides mathematics teachers (and teacher educators) with a cornucopia of suggestions of what effective mathematics teaching and learning requires (NCTM, 1989, 1991, 1995, 2000), virtually absent from these suggestions are discussions regarding the caring relationships that mathematics teachers should develop with their students.<sup>65</sup> Elementary and middle school teachers are often provided with opportunities throughout their teacher-education programs to learn about and reflect on how to develop caring relationships with students that motivate student learning.

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<sup>65</sup> A forth-coming dissertation study from Amy J. Hackenberg, a colleague at The University of Georgia in The Department of Mathematics Education, explores the impact of teacher caring relations on the algebraic reasoning and learning of middle school students.

Secondary mathematics teacher, I believe, need to be provided with similar opportunities in their initial mathematics methods courses and throughout their professional development. It is doubtful that any of the NCTM's (2000) "Principles for School Mathematics" (p. 11)—equity, curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, and technology—can be achieved without first providing secondary mathematics teachers with opportunities to learn about and reflect on how to develop caring relationships with their students, which, I believe, in turn, motivate mathematics learning. The conversations from the participants regarding their relationships with teachers (or lack thereof) support my belief that the foundation of teaching and learning—even mathematics teaching and learning—is all about human relationships.

Secondly, given that African American male students—and, I argue, all students constructed outside the dominant culture—must negotiate the discourses of school differently than students from the dominant culture, teacher-education programs need to prepare teachers in methods of how to develop learning environments that assist students in this negotiation process. In other words, teachers need to learn how to create classrooms that allow all students open space for play. I believe such a classroom is the result of a teacher who develops teacher-student relationships that reach beyond the school and academics and understands herself or himself as a racially discursive formation. This latter belief provides the foundation for the somewhat indirect implication for teacher education derived from this study.

The participants' experiences showed that White, middle-class, female teachers can be and are effective teachers with minority students—even Black boys. Although details of how White teachers evolve into effective teachers of the "Other" are not provided in the study, the conversations of the 4 participants of this study echoed much of the current literature around how the concepts of hegemony, race, racism, Whiteness, and so forth impacts the schooling of the

Other (e.g., see Giroux, 1997; Hilliard, 2001; hooks, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McIntyre, 1997; Pinar, 1993; Roman, 1993; Sleeter, 1993; West, 1994). The participants' comments and much of the noted available literature suggest that teacher-education programs should provide teachers the opportunity to explore Whiteness as a cultural, historical, and social construction, acknowledging it as a racial category with power, privilege, and ideology (Giroux, 1997).<sup>66</sup> In other words, White teachers cannot and should not sugarcoat the fact that there are racial differences between them and their minority students (Ethan, Interview 2).

This exploration and acknowledgement of Whiteness and difference would reveal that Whiteness is often the hidden norm in which all Othered differences are measured (Roman, 1993). An examination of Whiteness would enable school administrators and teachers to engage in critical discourse regarding the construction of racial identities and community cultural norms, addressing the issues of agency, power, the evaluation of knowledge, and the interaction of race, class, and gender. Furthermore, an examination of Whiteness, I believe, would assist teachers in developing caring relationships with their minority students; opening spaces for play in their classrooms.

In view of the fact that most educators are White and from the dominant culture, hegemonic ideology becomes a major obstacle in developing racially and culturally equitable and just schools and classrooms. In order for White educators to construct equitable and just schools and classrooms—developing effective learning environments for all students—they must be provided with learning opportunities to explore Whiteness as a race and culture, rather than understand the Other races and cultures as non-White. White educators, and the teacher-

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<sup>66</sup> Although I acknowledge that all educators are not White, the hegemonic ideology of Whiteness is the dominant ideology that structures schools (even an African American school like Keeling High) and the institutions that prepare school personnel. To begin a critical analysis of how this hegemonic ideology unjustly operates, educators, of all differences, I believe, must begin by exploring the discourse of Whiteness.

education programs that prepare them, must problematize White race and cultural identity in such a way that questions of White advantage, White privilege, and White ways of knowing and learning that dominate U.S. schools are addressed (McIntyre, 1997).

The current resistance of exploring Whiteness in teacher-education programs, and in the structures of education generally, distances White administrators and teachers (and educators generally) from critically examining the individual, institutional, and cultural forms of racism (McIntyre, 1997), resulting in hegemonic school policies and teacher practices. Hegemony in school policies and teacher practices takes the form of privileging the cultural ideology of White, middle-class, Christian, patriarchal, heterosexual America over the Other. School success, then, is determined by measuring individual student participation in this privileged ideology, forcing the Other to negotiate this privileged ideology and its subsequent school policies and teacher practices.

For the chief theme for consideration of the problem of education to be creating anew the ideal of democracy (Dewey, 1937/1987), I argue, the undemocratic hegemonic ideology that infects U.S. public schools must be exposed and eradicated. Exposing and eradicating this unjust hegemonic ideology will assist in alleviating the unjust negotiating that the Other must do in order to be successful in school and academics. And then, just maybe, schools would be more just—and “smart” Black boys would no longer have to be smarter than “smart” White boys.

## AFTERWARD

Throughout this study, I began each of the six chapters with a passage from Du Bois's 1903 collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folks*—"the political Bible of the Negro race" (W. Harris as cited in Gates, 1989, p. xiv). In the closing remarks to this study, I revisit Du Bois's prophetic and lyrical prose, posing questions that the passages, I believe, motivate for educators 100 years after the first printing of *The Souls*. My intention is not to provide answers to the questions put forth, but to facilitate a dialogue among educators.<sup>67</sup> The passages and accompanying questions should generate reflection on how many of the problems in U.S. society, and in education, that Du Bois highlighted 100 years ago continue to be problems today—in society generally and in U.S. schools and classrooms. As a novice education scholar and teacher educator, I aim to be of assistance in determining plausible solutions to these complex, and still existent, problems.

Du Bois (1903/1989) opened his collection of essays with the statement: "Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question... How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word" (pp. 1–2). This statement, I believe, holds true today in classrooms across the nation for many African American students, male and female alike. I often wonder how many well-meaning educators—White, Black, or any "race"—perceive African American male (and female) students as a problem. The negative discursive image of the African American male child is so embedded in the daily discourses of U.S. society that it even leads young African American men to succumb to characterizing the "troubling" Black boy or Black male adolescent as a "thug." How can educators exorcise this discursive image from U.S. schools and

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<sup>67</sup> The term *educators* is inclusive of classroom teachers, school administrators, teacher educators, education researchers, and so forth.

classrooms, and more importantly, from their own perceptions? And if not exorcised, how can educators create environments that reverse the discursive image, bringing the image of the thug into schools and classrooms as a subject of critique, revealing its negative attributes as well as its positive attributes?

Du Bois (1903/1989) skillfully used a passage from *The Declaration of Independence* to make clear that the “Negro problem...belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs” (p. 42). He wrote: “By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men. ...‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal....’” (p. 42). These words of Jefferson’s are the foundation on which the U.S. democratic republic is built. I understand that to believe that these self-evident truths operate in all segments of U.S. society is a bit naïve. Nonetheless, it is crucial that schools and classrooms, as segments of society, provide for the continuation and renewal of the experiment of democracy (Dewey, 1937/1987), striving for the rights that the world accords to humankind. How can educators create learning environments that ethically embrace the ideal of self-evident truths? How can educators create anew the ideal of democracy, at least in U.S. schools and classrooms?

Du Bois (1903/1989) defined his concept *double-consciousness* in the following passage: “The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil...this double-consciousness...two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 3). Du Bois’s concept of double-consciousness, I believe, continues to be applicable today, especially in education as African American students negotiate the White hegemonic ideology of U.S. public schools. People of color have recommended for years that White educators (re)teach themselves about the

hegemonic ideology that exists on multiple levels in U.S. schools and society and engage in self-reflection about the meaning of Whiteness, but most remain unwilling to do so (McIntyre, 1997). Even though school knowledge consists of the facts, concepts, and generalizations presented in textbooks, teacher's guidebooks, and other forms of media used by schools, it is directly and indirectly dependent on how teachers mediate and interpret this knowledge for their students (Banks, 1996). Consequently, the lack of critical examination of the Whiteness and hegemony of schools most often biases this mediation and interpretation, resulting in privileging Whiteness over the "Other." How can educators become knowledgeable of the ways in which they are implicated (or not) in (re)producing and regulating the unjust White hegemonic ideology of schools? How can educators create learning environments that reduce (if not eliminate) the White hegemonic ideology, providing for easier negotiation for Othered students?

Du Bois (1903/1989) argued that Negro lives are often essentialized, writing, "We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully...so much easier to assume that we know it all...having already reached conclusions in our own minds, we are loth to have them disturbed by facts" (p. 95). The essentializing of the African American experience, I believe, holds true for African American lives today. This essentializing is clearly evident in the gross generalization of African American male students who are often characterized as "pathological," lacking the behavioral and social skills and life experiences to be academically successful. The essentializing of the African American male student has often reduced him to the education labels of *at risk learner* or *special needs learner*, placing him in disproportionate numbers into lower-track and special education classes (Harry & Anderson, 1999; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, & Camp, 1990). How can educators learn to use the multiplicity of lived experiences of African American students as starting points for collectively building knowledge

in schools and classrooms? How can educators learn to examine honestly and carefully the conclusions in their own minds about African American students, disturbing the often-erroneous essentialized “facts” about African American students, and specifically African American male students?

Du Bois (1903/1989) poetically argued for the inclusion of the Negro “voice” within the discourse of society, and specifically within the discourse of education: “Herein the longing of black men must have respect: the rich and bitter depth of their experience...may give the world new points of view and make their loving, living, and doing precious to all human hearts” (p. 76). Although the African American voice is much louder today than it was a100 years ago, it is often still silenced within the discourse of education, and in U.S. society generally. This silenced voice is detrimental to the development of equitable and just schools and classrooms, given that an important source of information for educators in developing such schools and classrooms should be how African Americans recount their education experiences (Secada, 1995). How can educators learn to listen for and to the voices of African American students, using these voices to develop equitable and just schools and classrooms for all students? How can educators learn to abandon their often-misguided “understandings” of African American students, adopting new points of view through listening to and learning from African American students?

One of the most often cited passages from *The Souls* is Du Bois’s (1903/1989) statement regarding the problem of the 20th century: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relations of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (p. 10). World and U.S. history make available numerous incidents that have transpired that validate this prophetic statement and illustrate how the color-line was problematic for the 20th century—and has continued to be problematic for the 21st

century. How can educators become knowledgeable of the ways in which they are implicated (or not) in (re)producing and regulating the problem of the color-line? How can educators learn to reduce (if not eliminate) the problem of the color-line, at least in U.S. schools and classrooms?

In the preceding discussion, I provided just a dozen questions that Du Bois's passages motivate for 21st-century educators. I leave the reader to think of other troubling questions that Du Bois's prophetic and lyrical prose might motivate regarding not only African American children, but (also) all U.S. children who are constructed outside the hegemonic discourse of "the white, Anglo, heterosexual male of bourgeois privilege" (P. McLaren as cited in Torres, 1998, p. 178). I do not pose the noted questions naively. I acknowledge that the questions are challenging, requiring tremendous efforts from educators in determining plausible solutions. In response to the anticipated concerns raised by the reader regarding the challenging task that I have presented to educators, I invoke Dewey's (1897/1974) closing remarks from his pedagogic creed, which I fully embrace. With a few critical postmodern modifications to his remarks, I believe that

—the educator is engaged, not simply in the training of discursive subjects, but in the formation of the ethical and just social life.

—every educator should realize the dignity of her or his calling; that she or he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of ethical social order and the securing of ethical and just social growth (p. 439)

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## APPENDIX A

## PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

1785  
The University of Georgia  
 College of Education  
*Mathematics Education Department*

David W. Stinson  
 Doctor of Philosophy Student

April 20, 2003

Mr. Past Student  
 Home Address  
 City, State Zip

Hello Student:

I hope this letter finds you doing well. I am doing very well, having passed my written and oral comprehensive examinations this past semester (spring 2003). I am currently at the research stage of my Ph.D. program. I have learned a great many new things here at UGA over the past 3 years, becoming smarter at how to debate the issues of equity and justice in education.

Anyway, the reason that I am contacting you is that I am in need of 5 research participants for my dissertation. The (tentative) title and statement of the research problem and questions are as follows:

Title

*A Sociocultural Analysis of Agency of African American Males Who Demonstrated Achievement and Persistence in School Mathematics*

Statement of the Problem

Using qualitative research methodology this study will examine sociocultural influences on agency of 5 African American males between 20 and 25 years of age who demonstrated achievement and persistence in school mathematics. In this context, *agency* is defined as the participant's ability to accommodate, resist, and/or reconfigure the available societal discourses that surround African American males in order for one to effectively negotiate these discourses in their pursuit of success.

- The descriptor *achievement and persistence in high school mathematics* identifies that these young men achieved one or more of the following their junior or senior year of high school:
  - i. completed an Advanced Placement Calculus and/or Advanced Placement Statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better,
  - ii. completed a joint enrollment calculus or statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better; and/or
  - iii. scored in the 4th quartile (top 25%) of the mathematics portion of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT).

The participants are from a variety of defined families (i.e., two parent, single parent, grandparent as parent, etc.) and within a variety of socioeconomic statuses.

### Research Questions

1. How do participants define agency and how did it function in their lives? How did participants' agency aid in their achievement and persistence in school mathematics *or* how did their achievement and persistence in school mathematics aid in developing agency?
2. What discourses about African American males shaped participants' perception of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students? How did they accommodate, resist, and/or reconfigure those discourses?
3. What relationship do participants perceive between their past achievement and persistence in school mathematics and past, present, and future participation in education and society?

Because of my beliefs about education and the tremendous educational experience I had at Keeling High for 5 years, I believe (and this belief is supported by many scholars) that your story of schooling experiences, specifically your mathematics schooling experiences, is valuable information for the education community. My attempt with the research project is to get White teachers to begin questioning their misguided and erroneous beliefs about Black boys (and all children that are not from the dominant culture), moving public schools toward equitable and just education experience for all students. Details of my thinking and the scholarship that I am drawing upon can be found in a document that I will forward you via electronic mail.

The forwarded document is my written comprehensive examinations; the letter at the beginning of the document explains the examination process. Do not feel as though you have to read the entire 100 plus pages—the document is forwarded for your information. The document is not an exemplar of my writing, but does reveal, in detail, my current and non-static belief structure regarding the concepts of race, culture, education, mathematics, and education research and the role these concepts play in the ideal of an equitable and just democracy.

Furthermore, for your information is my current www site and the www site of the professors that serve on my doctoral committee.

The following www site has a current résumé that will inform you about what I have been doing here at UGA:

<http://jwilson.coe.uga.edu/EMT668/EMAT6680.2000/Stinson/David.html>

The www sites of my doctoral committee will illustrate that I have a diverse group of talented and well-published scholars that will be assisting me throughout the research process:

Dr. Denise S. Mewborn, Associate Professor-Mathematics Education, Committee chair:

<http://jwilson.coe.uga.edu/Mewborn/Denise/Default.html>

Dr. Paola Sztajn, Assistant Professor-Mathematics Education:

<http://jwilson.coe.uga.edu/sztajn/welcome.html>

Dr. Dorothy Y. White, Associate Professor-Mathematics Education:

<http://www.arches.uga.edu/~dywhite/white/white.html>

Dr. George M. A. Stanic, Associate Professor-Elementary and Middle School Education:

<http://www.coe.uga.edu/elementary/faculty.html>

Dr. Jerome E. Morris, Associate Professor-Social Foundations of Education:

<http://www.coe.uga.edu/socfound/faculty/morris.html>

The involvement from you during the research process would include the following:

1. Participating in two audio-recorded semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted by me (one in July 2003; one in August 2003). I will travel to you or the interviews can be conducted over the telephone.
2. Responding to discussion prompts provided by the other participants and me on a www Bulletin Board and Chat Room from WebCT at UGA twice a week for 8 weeks between (around) July 6, 2003 and August 24, 2003.
3. Participating in one focus group meeting, which will be audio- and video-taped sometime during the summer or early fall 2003. (The focus group will take place either in person or via internet chat.)
4. Writing a brief autobiography chronicling your schooling experiences.
5. Writing a brief autobiography chronicling your mathematics schooling experiences.
6. Completing a survey instruments that will include basic demographic information such as education, home life, siblings, socioeconomic status, etc.
7. Providing any other information or documents that you think might be helpful in telling your story (e.g., class projects, applications to undergraduate and graduate school, awards, etc.).

ALL information will be confidential! The University has a very rigorous process of approving research (which I have received from UGA's Institutional Review Board), ensuring that research with human subjects maintains the highest ethical standards. All proper names including participant, school, county, state, etc. used in the research study would be pseudonyms. In

addition, I still consider all of my students from Keeling High as my very own children, so I would never allow anything that might cause you harm or embarrassment to be included in the final research product (i.e., my dissertation). I had a past student participate in a pilot study spring and summer 2002; I can put him in contact with you and he can assure you that no harm or embarrassment came to him.

I also understand that seeing as you are an exceptional young man that you are extremely busy. I would try to make the time and effort required by you during the research study to be minimal, but I will be honest in saying that participation in a qualitative research project does require time and effort on the part of the research participant.

Before you make a decision about participating or not in the study please e-mail and/or call to discuss the possibility further. And please, if you chose not to or cannot participate in the study I do understand, but e-mail me and let me know how things are going just the same. I would love to hear from you!

My numbers and e-mail addresses are below; please feel free to contact me at anytime.

With warmest regards,

David W. Stinson

And you thought you were done with Mr. Stinson :-)

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## APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY<sup>68</sup>

1. **Name:**
  
2. **Address** (specify local or permanent):  
     Street:  
     City:      State:      Zip:      County:
  
3. **Phone Number(s)** (including area code):
  
4. **E-mail address(es):**
  
5. **Provide a pseudonym to be used during the project:**
  
6. **Age:**           **Birthday:**
  
7. **Are you currently employed?** Yes      No
  
8. **What is your profession?**
  
9. **How would you describe your present living arrangements? Are you:**  
     Single, never married      Single, previously married      Married (years) \_\_\_\_\_  
     Living with a partner      Other \_\_\_\_\_
  
10. **Do you have any children? If yes, how many and what are their ages?**

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<sup>68</sup> Adapted from Taylor-Griffin, S. (2000). *Successful African American men: From childhood to adulthood*. New York: Kluwer Academic (pp. 126–128); and Southwest Texas State University. (2001). *Standard demographic survey items*. Student Affairs Assessment. Retrieved August 10, 2003, from <http://www.vpsa.swt.edu/assessment/Demographic.htm>



**19. What extracurricular activities were you involved in** (e.g., football, band, student council, mathematics team, etc.; elementary through high school)?

**20. What after-school, summer, and/or mentoring programs did you attend** (e.g., 4-H, Boy Scouts of American, 100 Black Men, etc.; elementary through high school)?

**21. What was your class standing when you graduated from high school** (e.g., valedictorian, top 5%, top 10%, etc.)?

**22. High school graduating grade point average (GPA):**

**23. Test scores from high school:**

AP:	Subject:	Score:	
SAT:	Verbal:	Math:	
ACT:	Verbal:	Math:	
GGHST	Verbal:	Writing:	Social Studies:
	Math:	Science:	
Any other standardized test scores:			

**24. Any other information you believe to be important from your primary and secondary schooling years.**

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**College Data**


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**25. What college/university do/did you attend?**

- a. Undergraduate:
- b. Graduate:

**26. Class Level (circle-one):**

- a. Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior
- b. Graduated (give semester and year) \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Graduate student
- d. Post baccalaureate (certification, second-undergraduate, please specify)
- e. Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**27. What mathematics courses did you take in college, year, and grade?**

Course	Year	Grade
e.g., Abstract Algebra	Junior	A

**28. What special awards/citations were you awarded during college?**

**29. What honors organizations were you involved in during college?**

**30. What extracurricular activities were you involved in during college?**

**31. What mentoring programs and/or internships did you participate in during college?**

**32. What was your class standing when you graduated from college (e.g., honors, *summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, *cum laude*)?**

**33. What is/was your college GPA?**

**34. Post-graduate test scores:**

GRE:      Verbal:      Quantitative:      Analytical:

LSAT:

MAT:

Any other standardized test scores:

**35. What is/was your academic major in college?**

**36. Do/Did you receive any type of federal, state, or college-sponsored student financial aid (grant, loan, scholarship)?** Yes      No

**37. What is/was your primary source of financial support for college (circle only one item)?**

- a. Parents
- b. Employment
- c. Loans & Grants
- d. Scholarships (type) \_\_\_\_\_
- e. Support from spouse
- f. Personal savings
- g. Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**38. Any other information you believe to be important from your college years.**

---

**Family Data**


---

**39. How many people were in your family during the majority of your high school years, including yourself (i.e., how many people lived in your home)?**

**40. Do you have siblings? If yes, how many sisters? brothers?  
Where did you rank (e.g., oldest, middle, youngest)?**

**41. What were the ages of the people that you lived with your senior year in high school (give relation of the individual and their approximate age, e.g., mother, 44; sister, 12)?**

**42. Provide a brief statement of your relationship with your family while you were in high school (one to three sentences).**

**43. What was your parents' or guardians' source of income?**

Job \_\_\_\_\_ Pension SSI \_\_\_\_\_  
Public other \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**44. What was their profession?**

Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father \_\_\_\_\_ Guardian \_\_\_\_\_

**45. Would you describe your family socioeconomic status when you were in high school as (circle one please):**

Wealthy      Upper-middle class      Middle class      Lower-middle class  
Poor      Very poor

**46. What was the approximate combined annual income of your parents or guardians before taxes *last year* (circle one please)?**

- a. Less than \$20,000
- b. \$20,000 to \$39,999
- c. \$40,000 to \$59,999
- d. \$60,000 to \$79,999
- e. \$80,000 or \$99,999
- f. \$100,000 or higher

**47. What was the approximate combined annual income of your parents or guardians before taxes while you were in high school (circle one please)?**

- a. Less than \$20,000
- b. \$20,000 to \$39,999
- c. \$40,000 to \$59,999
- d. \$60,000 to \$79,999
- e. \$80,000 or \$99,999
- f. \$100,000 or higher

**48. Educational Level:** Please indicate the highest level of your parents or guardians educational background:

**a. Mother** (circle one please):

No high school	Some high school	High school diploma or GED
Some College	Bachelor's/Four-year degree	
Graduate/Professional Degree		Do not know

**b. Father** (circle one please):

No high school	Some high school	High school diploma or GED
Some College	Bachelor's/Four-year degree	
Graduate/Professional Degree		Do not know

**c. Guardian** (circle one please):

No high school	Some high school	High school diploma or GED
Some College	Bachelor's/Four-year degree	
Graduate/Professional Degree		Do not know

**49. What is the highest level of formal education obtained by a parent or parental figure with whom you lived with during the majority of your high school years (circle one please)?**

- a. Did not receive high school diploma or GED
- b. Earned a high school diploma or GED
- c. Attended junior/senior college but did not graduate
- d. Received an associate's degree
- e. Received a bachelor's degree
- f. Attended graduate school
- g. Received a master's degree
- h. Received a doctoral degree (Ph.D., Ed.D., etc.)
- i. Received a professional degree (law, medicine, dentistry, veterinary, etc.)

## APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT AUTOBIOGRAPHY<sup>69</sup>

Please write a brief autobiography (story) of your life highlighting the significant events as you progressed through your schooling years (from your earliest recollections). Please include in your story (but do not limit yourself to) the following points:

- Discuss whether you believe that your events/experiences were unique to being an African American/Black male.
- Identify any extracurricular activities that you were involved in either through school or through other civic and community organizations (e.g., church) that contributed to your academic and school success and any significant person(s) that contributed to your current status in life.
- Discuss your teachers. About how many White teachers and how many African American teachers have you had throughout your schooling experiences, including college? Did you notice a difference between how White teachers treated African American male students and other students? Did your teachers' expectations, attitudes, and actions have an impact on your success in school?

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<sup>69</sup> Adapted from Moody, V. R. (1997). *Giving voice to African Americans who have been successful with school mathematics*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Georgia, Athens; see page 132.

## APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT MATHEMATICS AUTOBIOGRAPHY<sup>70</sup>

Please write an autobiography (story) of your mathematics experiences (from your earliest recollection) in school. Please include (but do not limit yourself) the following points:

- Discuss in detail how you perceive your mathematics experiences in relation to being an African American/Black male. What was it like being an African American/Black male during your mathematics schooling experiences?
- Please identify any factors that contributed to (or could have impeded) your success with school mathematics. Discuss your perceptions of what you believe led to your success with school mathematics.
- What is your current status with mathematics (e.g., What are your likes and dislikes about mathematics? How useful has your achievement and persistence in mathematics been to your success? Does your future occupation/profession require mathematics? etc.)?

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<sup>70</sup> Adapted from Moody, V. R. (1997). *Giving voice to African Americans who have been successful with school mathematics*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Georgia, Athens; see page 132.

## APPENDIX E

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FIRST INTERVIEW

1. How did you identify yourself in high school and what were the factors/individuals that most influenced this identification?
2. Was there a relationship between your mathematics experiences (specifically, high school mathematics experiences) and how you self-identified?
3. What was your most rewarding high school experience? What was your most disappointing high school experience? Explain the factors, events, individuals, and/or organizations that led to these experiences.
4. What was your most rewarding high school mathematics experience? What was your most disappointing high school mathematics experience? Explain the factors, events, individuals, and/or organizations that led to these experiences.
5. Who was your most positively influential teacher? Who was your most negatively influential teacher? Can you describe specific events (in or out of the classroom) that illustrate her or his influence on you?
6. Please identify a peer that you believe is successful. Explain why you believe she or he is successful and the experiences that you believe have led to that success. Do you consider this person to be successful in math?
7. How do you define societal success? Do you consider yourself successful? In what areas? Why or why not? Do you consider yourself successful in math? Why or why not? If you identify yourself successful in math, what factors, events, individuals, and/or organizations led you to being successful in mathematics (provide in the order of influence/impact)? Please describe these events and the key individual(s) involved in these events.
8. What relationship do you perceive between your past high school mathematics success and past, present, and future success in society?
9. What do you believe would change (if anything) if you were a Black female? White male? Hispanic male? Non-U.S. Citizen? Poor? Wealthy?

## APPENDIX F

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SECOND INTERVIEW

(Telephone interview protocol for readings 1–3, mailed—electronically and U.S. postal—October 20, 2003)

**Reading One**

Ogbu, J. U. (1978b). Black-White differences in school performance: A critique of current explanations, *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 43–65). New York: Academic Press.

**Question 1:** Ogbu (1978b) identified the cultural deprivation theory (p. 44), culture conflict theory (p. 46), institutional deficiency theory (p. 49), educational equality theory (p. 51), and Jensen’s theory (p. 54) as theoretical perspectives that prevailed within the educational discourses of the early 1900s to the 1970s regarding the achievement gap between Black and White students; most of these theories are still present in the discourses today.

**Please comment as to whether you experienced or if you perceived classmates of yours as having experiences in schools that resulted from these theories, and specifically in yours or theirs mathematics schooling experiences.**

**Question 2:** Ogbu (1978b) on pages 61–62 wrote about Black females in relation to Black males, writing, “The real explanation [regarding the differences in Black female and male achievement] lies in...that American society, while it discriminates against blacks in general, gives preferential treatment to black females in education, occupation, and income (Clark 1967:142; Harrington 1967:250)” (p. 63).

**Please comment on this statement and others made by Ogbu regarding the differences between Black females and males in achievement. What were/are some of your academic/professional experiences in relationship to your female classmates/work colleagues?**

**Reading Two**

Majors, R., Tyler, R., Peden, B., & Hall, R. (1994). Cool pose: A symbolic mechanism for masculine role enactment and coping by Black males. In R. Majors & J. U. Gordon (Eds.), *The American Black male: His present status and his future* (pp. 245–259). Chicago: Nelson-Hall.

**Question 3:** Majors et al. (1994) argued that many Black males in response to obstacles that they experience such as racism, discrimination, and educational and employment inequities adopt a “cool pose” disposition. He argued that when Black men engage in cool pose they channel “their creative talents and energies into the construction of masculine symbols and into the use of conspicuous nonverbal behaviors (e.g., demeanors, gestures, clothing, hairstyles, walks, stances, and handshakes)” (p. 246).

**Did you participate in behaviors that could be classified as “cool pose” behaviors? And if YES, what impact did they have on your schooling experiences, and specifically your mathematics schooling experiences?**

**Question 4:** Majors et al. (1994) made the following comment regarding Black students with White teachers:

There is often conflict between white teachers and Black males because teachers misunderstand the intent of culture-specific behaviors. Quite simply, white middle-class teachers and school authorities often perceive provocative walking styles, “rapping,” use of slang, expressive hairstyles, excessive use of jewelry, wearing hats (and wearing hats backwards), wearing the belt unbuckled, untied sneakers, and so on as arrogant, rude, defiant, aggressive, intimidating, threatening, and in general, behaviors not conducive to learning (Foster) (p. 255).

**Please comment on your experiences with White teachers, and teachers in general regarding these behaviors, and specifically your mathematics teachers.**

**Question 5:** Majors et al. (1994) noted, “Blacks, and especially Black males, have failed to develop an Afrocentric cultural ideology or world view that could help them to mitigate the adverse effects of racism, discrimination, compulsive masculinity, self-destructive behaviors, and violence” (p. 256).

**Did you learn to mitigate the negative society forces from a developed Afrocentric cultural ideology or worldview? If YES, where did you learn that worldview; and if NO, what means did you use to mitigate the negative forces?**

**Question 6:** In the conclusion to this book chapter, Majors et al. (1994) remarked, “The thesis of this chapter is that historical and culture factors force Black males to accept the traditional definition of masculinity but, unlike most White males, Black males lack the means to enact traditional roles of masculinity” (p. 258).

**Respond to the validity of this statement from your experiences. Did the fact that you were successful in school, and specifically successful in high school mathematics, provide you the means to enact “traditional” roles of masculinity as identified by Majors et al. (1994)?**

### Reading Three

Steele, C. M. (1997). A threat in the air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance. *American Psychologist*, 52(6), 613–629.

**Question 7:** In defining *stereotype threat* Steele (1997) wrote:

But this article focuses on a further barrier, one that has its effect on the already identified, those members of these groups [African Americans, women, etc.] who, having survived structural obstacles, have achieved identification with the domain (of present groups, school-identified African Americans and math-identified women). It is the social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation or doing something for which a negative stereotype about one’s group applies. This predicament threatens one with being

negatively stereotyped, with being judged or treated stereotypical, or with the prospect of conforming to the stereotype. Called *stereotype threat*, it is a situational threat—a threat in the air—that, in general form, can affect the members of any group about whom a negative stereotype exists (e.g., skateboarders, older adults, White men, gang members). Where bad stereotypes about these groups apply, members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype. And for those who identify with the domain to which the stereotype is relevant, this predicament can be self-threatening. (p. 614)

Steel continued:

For the less domain identified [that portion of subgroups who have not embraced schooling and mathematics], this recognition is less threatening or not threatening at all, because it threatens something that is less self-definitional.

Stereotype threat, then, as a situational pressure “in the air” so to speak, affects only a subportion of the stereotyped group and, in the area of schooling, probably affects confident students more than unconfident ones. Recall that to be identified with schooling in general, or math in particular, one must have confidence in one’s domain-related abilities, enough to perceive good prospects in the domain. (p. 617)

**As an individual that did identify with school success, and specifically mathematics success, do you believe that stereotype threat has ever operated in the decisions that you have made in your pursuit toward success? And if YES, what effect did stereotype threat have on your actions?**

**Question 8:** Steele (1997) provided the following example of stereotype theory:

To experience stereotype threat, one need not believe the stereotype nor even be worried that it is true of oneself. The well-known African American social psychologist James M. Jones (1997) wrote,

When I go to the ATM machine and a woman is making a transaction, I think about whether she will fear I may rob her. Since I have no such intention, how do I put her at ease? Maybe I can’t...and maybe she has no such expectations. But it goes through my mind. (p. 262)

Jones felt stereotype threat in this situation even though he did not believe that the stereotype characterized him. Of course, this made it no less a life-shaping force. One’s daily life can be filled with recurrent situations in which this threat pressures adaptive responses. (p. 618)

**Within your life experiences have you had similar experiences, specifically in your schooling experiences? And if YES, please describe not only the experiences but also how the experience made you feel and what action(s) it motivated?**

**Question 9:** In making suggestions for wise schooling policy and practice Steele (1997) wrote: Some wise strategies, then, may work for both identified and unidentified students from these groups, but others may have to be appropriately targeted to be effective. I offer some examples of both types.

For both domain-identified and domain-unidentified students:

1. Optimistic teacher-student relationships...
2. Challenge over remediation...

3. Stressing the expandability of intelligence...
- For domain-identified students:
1. Affirming domain belongingness...
  2. Valuing multiple perspectives...
  3. Role models...
- For domain unidentified students:
1. Nonjudgmental responsiveness...
  2. Building self-efficacy... (pp. 624–625)

**Please review Steele’s suggestions for wise schooling policy and practice found on pages 624–625. Did you experience any of these suggestions? And if YES, which ones were most effective for you?**

## APPENDIX G

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR THIRD INTERVIEW

(Telephone interview protocol for readings 4–6, mailed—electronically and U.S. postal—November 5, 2003)

**Reading Four**

Ogbu, J. U. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Education Researcher*, 21(8), 5–14.

**Question 1:** Ogbu (1992) writes at length regarding the core curriculum approach and the multicultural education approach (pp. 5–7) to improving education among minority groups. He concluded, writing:

The important point here is that neither the core curriculum approach nor the multicultural education approach will appreciably improve the school performance of some minority groups until they and other school interventions, innovations, and reforms are informed by an understanding of *why* children from specific minority groups are experiencing learning and performance difficulty. (p. 7)

**Based on your experiences and your reading of Ogbu’s analysis of the core curriculum approach and the multicultural education approach what do you believe to be some of the reasons why children from specific minority groups experience learning and performance difficulty? Do you believe, feel, think, etc. that you experienced learning difficulties simply due to the fact that you are an African American male? If YES, where did these learning difficulties originate from and how did you overcome these difficulties? How did you overcome these difficulties in your mathematics learning?**

**Question 2:** Ogbu (1992) defined *cultural inversion* as the tendency for involuntary minorities [such as African Americans] to regard certain forms of behavior, events, symbols, and meanings as inappropriate for them because these are characteristics of White Americans. At the same time the minorities value other forms of behavior, events, symbols and meanings, often the opposite, as appropriate for themselves. Thus, what is appropriate or even legitimate behavior for in-group members may be defined in opposition to White out-group members’ practices and preferences. (p. 8)

**Does the concept of cultural inversion explain any of your experiences in your primary, secondary, college, or graduate education? If so, provide some examples. Are there any examples specific to your mathematics education?**

**Question 3:** Ogbu (1992) defined the dilemma of involuntary minority students, such as African American, as having to choose between “acting White” (i.e., adopting “appropriate” attitudes and behaviors or school rules and standard practices that enhance academic success but that are perceived and interpreted by the minorities [other African American students] as typical of White Americans and therefore negatively sanctioned by them) and “acting Black,” “acting

Indian,” “acting Chicano,” and so on (i.e., adopting attitudes and behaviors that the minority students consider appropriate for their group but that are not necessarily conducive to school success). (p. 10)

**Throughout your school success, and specifically your school mathematics success, did you ever believe, feel, think, etc. that you were choosing between “acting White” or “acting Black”? If YES, what were some of the occasions when you experienced Ogbu’s theory of “acting White”? Please provide detailed examples. Or if NO, please explain how and why you escaped Ogbu’s theory? Or, does Ogbu’s theory make any “sense” to you?**

#### Reading Five

Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a factor in Black students’ school success: Pragmatic strategy or Pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(1), 54–84.

**Question 4:** Fordham (1988) in her opening comments to her essay wrote:

I will describe and analyze one strategy for achieving success that [African American] high school students (as well as adults) utilize: that is, the phenomenon of becoming raceless. Specifically, this paper examines the complex relationship between Black adolescents’ racial identity and their school performance, and the role that the larger social structure plays in that relationship. I argue that despite the growing acceptance of ethnicity and strong ethnic identification in the larger American society, school officials appear to disapprove of a strong ethnic identity among Black adolescents, and these contradictory messages produce conflict and ambivalence in the adolescents, both toward developing strong racial and ethnic identities and toward performing well in school. (p. 55)

**In your pursuit toward school success, and specifically school mathematics success, did you every believe, feel, think, etc. as though you were adopting a raceless persona as defined by Fordham? Did you believe, feel, think, etc. as though the structure of school valued some ethnic behaviors over others, that is, did you believe, feel, think, etc. as though the structure of school rewarded “White” behaviors over “Black” behaviors? And what does the characterization of “White” and “Black” behaviors mean to you?**

**Question 5:** After Fordham (1988) provided an example of the tensions experienced by African American students in their pursuit toward success in school, she wrote:

Given the situation I have just presented, it is not surprising that many Black adolescents are keenly aware of the stigma associated with being successful in school, since school is seen as an agent of the dominant society. ...I posit that *ambivalence* and *conflict* about academic effort appear to be at the center of Black students’—especially the high achievers’—responses to school and schooling. Hence, they develop complex strategies that enable them to resolve, or, at least cope with, the ambivalence they experience. One such strategy is intended to minimize the influence and impact that the schooling process might have on their relationships to peers and to the community; the strategy follows what some researchers have termed the “anti-achievement ethic” (Grant, Hathaway, Saleton, & Sansing, 1986). Students who utilize this strategy, unfortunately, tend to fare poorly in school. The strategy that seems to be used frequently by adolescents who

succeed in school is the phenomenon that I describe as developing a raceless persona. (p. 61)

**Were there times in your schooling experiences, and specifically mathematics schooling experiences, that you (or you perceived your classmates) adopted an “anti-achievement ethic”? If YES, provide an example. Do you think that the “anti-achievement ethic” and “raceless persona” phenomenon affects African American male students differently than female students? If YES, please provide an example.**

**Question 6:** Fordham (1988) differentiated between her high-achieving African American female and male students. Her introductory remarks regarding high-achieving African American male students contained the following:

A common theme in the responses—verbal and behavioral—of the male high achieving students is their commitment to the ideology of the American social system, and the sense of conflict and uncertainty about their dual relationship with the larger dominant society and the indigenous fictive-kinship system of the Black community. This uncertainty and the resultant conflict force them to question their identity repeatedly, leading to a response pattern that highlights their relationship to the dominant society while at the same time maintaining their relationship to the Black community and the existing fictive-kinship system. Hence, the male high achievers differ from their female counterparts in that they appear to be much more victimized in the school context by the “double consciousness” attendant on the dual socialization pattern that appears to be an endemic feature of childrearing practices prevailing in the Black community. In other words, presenting a raceless persona appears to be much more difficult for the male students in the sample group. Nevertheless, as in the female high achievers, racelessness appears to be a quality which enhances the academic potential of the male students in the research sample. (p. 74)

In the above passage Fordham referenced Du Bois’s (1903/1989) concept of “double-consciousness” (P. 3), which has an effect on African American males due to the child rearing practices of African American male children. Du Bois described his concept of the double-consciousness that some African Americans developed, writing:

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 other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, 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. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1989). *The souls of Black folk* (Bantam classic ed.). New York: Bantam Books. (Original work published 1903)

**What “sense,” if any, do you make of Fordham’s reference to Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness”? Do you believe, as Fordham implied, that the child rearing practices carried out on African American male children are different from African**

**American female children? If YES, why and how are they different? Please provide some examples.**

### Reading Six

Fordham, S. & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "burden of 'acting White.'" *The Urban Review*, 18(3), 176–206.

**Question 7:** Fordham and Ogbu (1986) introduced their concept of the "burden of 'acting White'" in the following passage:

Under the circumstance, students who want to do well in school must find some strategy to resolve the tension. This tension, along with the extra responsibility it places on students who choose to pursue academic success in spite of it, and its effects on the performance of those who resolve the tension successfully and those who do not, constitute "the burden of 'acting white.'" (p. 186)

**Please comment on Fordham and Ogbu's concept of "the burden of 'acting White.'" Did you ever experience this additional burden in your pursuit toward school success, and specifically school mathematics success?**

**Question 8:** Fordham and Ogbu (1986) identified a unique and "additional" burden for African American males students who were successful in school. Martin, one of Fordham's research participants, highlighted this additional burden:

The most discouraging factor, in his [Martin's] view, is the fear of being labeled a "brainiac" or, worse, a "pervert brainiac." To be know as a brainiac is bad enough, but to be know as a pervert brainiac is tantamount to receiving a kiss of death. For a male student to be known as a brainiac, according to Martin, is to question his manhood; to be known as a pervert brainiac leaves little doubt. He claims that there are persistent rumors that some male students taking all or a large number of the Advance Placement courses are homosexuals; this is fare less the case for male students who do not take the advanced courses. Also it is believed at Capital High [the site of Fordham's research] that males who do *not* make good grades are less likely to be gay. (p. 194)

**Please response to this "additional" burden placed on African American male students who succeed in school. Did you ever believe, feel, think, etc. as though your "manhood" was brought into question because of your school success, and specifically school mathematics success? If YES, what strategies did you enact that neutralized this burden? Please provide some examples.**

**Question 9:** Fordham and Ogbu (1986) concluded their essay, writing:

All the high-achieving [African American] students wrestle with the conflict inherent in the unique relationship of black people with the dominant institution: the struggle to achieve success while retaining group support and approval. In school, the immediate issue is how to obtain good grades and meet the expectations of school authorities without being rejected by peers for acting white. Our examples show that successful students at Capital High generally adopt specific strategies to solve this problem. (p. 198)

**Please comment on Fordham and Ogbu's conclusion. If you agree with their conclusion, please provide some examples of the specific strategies that you used during your pursuit toward success, and specifically school mathematics success. And if you do not agree with their conclusion please provide your explanation of how you managed your school success, and specifically your school mathematics success.**

## APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR FIRST PILOT INTERVIEW

1. Please state name, age, and current student status.
2. What mathematics are you currently engaged in?
3. Please give a detailed account of your first encounter with mathematics and proceed to the present, as best as you can recall. Specifically, please give as many details of your high school mathematics experience throughout the interview.
4. How did you identify yourself in high school and what were the factors/individuals that most influenced this identification?
5. Was there a relationship between your mathematics experiences (specifically, high school mathematics experiences) and how you self-identified?
6. How do you define mathematics success and were/are you successful in mathematics (past, present, and future)?
7. What were the factors/individuals that most influenced this mathematics success?
8. How do you define societal success and were/are you successful (past, present, and future)?
9. What relationship do you perceive between your past high school mathematics success and past, present, and future success in society?
10. Are there any other comments you would like to make regarding mathematics, high school, and the significant role mathematics plays in our current society?

## APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SECOND PILOT INTERVIEW

1. Could you tell me about your upbringing, that is, how were you reared? Tell me about your parents, grandparents, siblings, neighborhood, friends, etc.
2. Tell me about your schooling, from pre-school to today.
3. Who has had the most significant positive (and negative) influences on your schooling successes? How and why?
4. What other social factors (i.e., church, neighborhood, clubs, etc.) aided your schooling successes? How and why?
5. Tell me about your teachers, and specifically your mathematics teachers. (About how many White teachers and how many African American teachers have you had throughout your schooling experiences, including college?)
6. Did you notice a difference between how White teachers treated African American male students and other students, and specifically your mathematics teachers?
7. Did your teachers' expectations, attitudes, and actions have an impact on your success in school, specifically your mathematics success?
8. From the last interview, we identified that you have been more successful (measured by grades) in collegiate mathematics than high school mathematics. Could you explain some of the experiences you have had in your classes as a Black man on a predominantly White campus, and specifically your experiences in your mathematics classes?
9. Do you think that classmates had/have different expectations of you when you were in high school and today at college? How and why? Explain the differences from attending an African American high school (high school was 99% African American) and attending University of []. What has been some of the biggest differences, and again, specifically in your mathematics classes?
10. Why do you believe that there are so few African American men in mathematically related fields of study? At University of []? At colleges/universities? And why were there so few males in the advanced mathematics classes at your high school?
11. "A young man born this year has a one in twenty chance of living some part of his life in jail...unless he is Black, then his chances jump to one in four" (Moses, 2001, p. 11). What do you believe to be the causes for the disproportionate amount of young Black men in U.S. jails and prisons?

12. Do you think that there could be a relationship between success in high school and the probability of serving time in jail? Explain. Could there be a relationship between success and/or failure in high school mathematics and the probability of being successful in schooling and/or in future life?
13. Do you believe that you experienced equitable, just, and democratic schooling?

## APPENDIX J

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR THIRD PILOT INTERVIEW

1. What was your most rewarding high school experience? Your most disappointing high school experience? (Explain the factors/events/individuals/organizations that led to these experiences.)
2. What was your most rewarding high school mathematics experience? Your most disappointing high school mathematics experience? (Explain the factors/events/individuals/organizations that led to these experiences.)
3. Who was your most positively influential teacher? Your most negatively influential teacher? Can you describe specific events (in or out of the classroom) that illustrate her or his influence on you?
4. We have spoken in the previous two interviews a great deal about success. Please identify a peer that you believe is successful. Explain why you believe she or he is successful and the experiences that you believe have led to that success. Do you consider this person to be successful in math?
5. Do you consider yourself successful? In what areas? Why or why not? Do you consider yourself successful in math? Why or why not? If you identify yourself successful in math, what factors/events/individuals/organizations led you to being successful in mathematics (provide in the order of influence/impact.)? Please describe these events and the key individual(s) involved in these events.
6. What do you believe would change (if anything) if you were a Black female? White male? Hispanic male? Non-U.S. citizen? Poor? Wealthy?

## APPENDIX K

## CODE LIST

<b><u>No.</u></b>	<b><u>Description</u></b>
01	Success defined
02	Factors of success
03	Schooling experiences
04	Curriculum views of
05	Self views of
06	Society views of
07	AA males views of
08	Mathematics views of
09	Plans for future
10	Cultural deprivation
11	Culture conflict
12	Institutional deficiency
13	Educational equality
14	Heredity
15	Cool pose
16	White teachers
17	Stereotype threat
18	Cultural-ecological
19	Raceless persona
20	AA females views of
21	Burden of acting White
22	Relationship with mathematics
23	Agency views of
24	Agency versus mathematics
25	Impact of research