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An Exploration of Sense of Belonging Among Black Males Attending a Predominately White Institution

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Attending a Predominately White Institution

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An Exploration of Sense of Belonging Among Black American Males Attending a

Predominately White Institution

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Abstract

This study was designed to gain insight on how Black male students attending a predominantly White institution defined and described sense of belonging. In addition, the researcher sought to see if Black male students at the research institution developed a sense of belonging. Using a qualitative approach, the researcher interviewed five Black male students. The participants were students of sophomore to senior standing. Results showed that Black males students defined sense of belonging as acceptance and comfort. Additionally, the results showed that Black male students were able to create a sense of belonging at their predominantly White institution. Participants discussed the role involvement and support played in creating their sense of belonging.

Key words: sense of belonging, Black identity, hierarchy of needs

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Rare, underrepresented, and hard to retain are words that researchers have used when describing Black men on college campuses (Strayhorn, 2012). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2011), of the 18 million students attending institutions of higher learning in the United States, Black males make up fewer than 1 million. In addition to gross underrepresentation, many Black males face cultural, societal, academic, and lifestyle challenges other groups may not (Brooks, Burt, & Jones, 2012). Past research has shown that university administrators, faculty, and staff have neglected to identify problems affecting Blacks on college campuses (Jones & Michelle 2006; Roberston & Mason 2008; Schwitzer 1999). Failure to properly identify the issues that ail Black males is not only an injustice to this population of students, but may provide an explanation for why these students are unsuccessful on college campuses.

Probing into the issues Black males are facing on college campuses provided ample information about their risk factors but limited information about their experiences and sense of belonging. This study investigated a sense of belonging of Black males attending predominately White public four-year institution located in the Midwest.

Brooks, Burt, and Jones (2012) stated that retention is the condition of keeping and focusing on maintaining several factors including: a welcoming environment, high member morale, and organizational processes. For Black males, these three factors are especially relevant when addressing their college retention. A welcoming environment can impact retention by increasing students' sense of belonging. This study utilized the

qualitative mode of inquiry to gain insights into the complex interplay Black males' sense of belonging at a predominately White institution.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the present study was to examine how undergraduate Black males define and describe their sense of belonging of attending a predominately White institution (PWI). In addition, I examined from a Black males' perspective on how the institution has created a sense of belonging.

Research Questions

In order to meet the study's objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do Black males define and describe their sense of belonging?

2. Do Black males have a sense of belonging at their PWI?

Significance of the Study

Retention continues to be a discussion at the forefront of higher education discourse. Among the conversation is not only how to increase retention of students, but more specifically how to increase the retention of Black males. Nationally 67.6% of Black males who entered college failed to graduate in six years (Harper, 2012). This number is staggering and begs the question, what factors are hindering Black males' persistence? This study explored an area that may contribute to the retention of Black males on predominately White college campuses by providing ways institutions can assist students in formulating their sense of belonging. Through understanding, from a Black undergraduate male's perspective, the ways in which they connect and identify with the institution that will provide information for professionals to develop supportive, inclusive, and appropriate resources and opportunities.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified that could bring into question the transferability and trustworthiness of the study. First, information was gathered from five Black male undergraduate students attending a mid-size Midwestern public institution. The participants' views are not the shared views of all Black men attending the institution or in college. Instead, it reflects the experiences of the five participants involved.

The interpretations of the findings are subject to the bias of the researcher's race, ethnicity, and gender. Additionally, due to the sample size, culture of the setting, and the location of the study, the findings may not be able to be transferable toward informing other college campuses regarding how Black males describe and define sense of belonging. In order to insure the accuracy of the data collected, the researcher provided each participants a copy of their transcripts to insure trustworthiness.

As a Black male who attended a small predominately White public four-year liberal arts institution in the South, I experienced the pleasures of being an active member of the campus society. I was afforded the opportunity to be surrounded by like-minded friends and mentors who guided me professionally and personally. Although I was able to find my place/purpose on campus, other Black males attending the institution were not. During my time there, I experienced the interworking of many different campus offices, and many of the resources the institution had to offer. As I progressed in my status and class standing, I began to observe, what I perceived as, an injustice toward Black students. As a resident assistant and student government vice president, I initiated more programming opportunities for students of color, which led to an increase of Black

student attendance. This provided me with a platform to further educate my peers on the resources the school had to offer. In addition to providing my peers with educational information, I realized that the social aspect of the meetings was just as important; the programs also provided Black students an environment where they connected and got involved on campus. This sense of belonging that students gained through their involvement in programing could have impacted their decision in remaining enrolled at the institution.

Definition of Terms

      Black – refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa and Afro-Caribbean (US Census, 2010). Black and African American will be used interchangeably.

      Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) – colleges or universities where the student population is primarily white (Smith, 2010).

      Historically Black Colleges and Universities – colleges or universities where the student population is primarily black.

      Institution – an organization, establishment, or society devoted to the promotion of a particular cause or program, especially one of a public, educational, or charitable character (Dictionary.com, 2016).

      Sense of belonging – refers to a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others (Strayhorn, 2012).

      Retention – "a measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the

percentage of first time bachelors (or equivalent) degree seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall" (NCES, 2011 p.1).

Summary

Chapter I offered the readers an introduction of the study that was conducted. The researcher identified the purpose and significance of the study. Also, the research questions that guided the study were introduced. Chapter II includes past research and literature regarding Blacks in higher education, retention, sense of belonging, and the theoretical framework in which the researcher used as a lens to interpret the data.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

This chapter is a review of research on Black males in higher education in the United States, and how a sense of belong impacts their retention and persistence at predominately White institutions. This review provides insight into the issues many Black men are facing on college campuses and what preventative measures have been taken to increase the retention of this population when examining their sense of belonging. This chapter includes a brief history of Blacks in higher education, retention of Black males in higher education, student involvement and engagement, sense of belonging, and conceptual frameworks.

Brief History of Blacks in Higher Education

There was a time in this country when it was illegal to educate slaves or freed people of color; however, this did not stop Black men and women from wanting to learn (Allen, 1992). The need for a system to educate Blacks grew, thus fostered the creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Allen, 1992). In 1837, the first HBCU was established, Cheyney University (Allen, 1991). There are 103 HBCUs in the United States today, both private and public. The purpose of these institutions was to educate the descendants of former slaves (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001). In addition to the HBCUs, there are approximately 50 predominately Black colleges or universities. Predominately Black colleges and universities are institutions where student enrollment is greater than 50% for Blacks (Brown et al., 2001).

Brown v. the Board of Education 1954 was the beginning of integrated public education and the end of legal discrimination at federally funded institutions (Allen,

1992). According to Allen (1992) prior to this court case, over 90% of Blacks were educated at HBCUs. After the U.S. Supreme Court decided to reject the *separate but equal* doctrine established after *Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896,* the number of Blacks attending HBCUs dwindled due to pressures to desegregate the higher education system (Allen, 1992). The *separate but equal doctrine* was legal discrimination where there were separate facilities based on race that were supposed to provide equal service and opportunities (Allen, 1992). Despite the ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown,* most HBCUs continued to receive less funding and poorer facilities compared to traditionally White institutions. (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). Due to inadequate funding to provide a comparable education, many HBCUs closed or merged with traditionally White institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). According to Provasnik and Shafter (2004) by 2001 only 12.9% of Black students were enrolled in HBCUs. The merging of HBCUs and PWIs and the increased enrollment of Blacks at PWIs created a unique matter. The PWIs were not equipped with sufficient resources to provide their new Black students with the support needed for them to succeed.

Sixty-one years later, professionals at PWIs are still on the pursuit of identifying how to best support Black students (Strayhorn, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), the percentage of Blacks enrolled in college has slightly increased over the past ten years. As for Black males ages 18 - 24, the numbers enrolled have decreased over the past four years from 35.2% to 30.6%. Although the overall numbers of Blacks are increasing, Black students are still not graduating at the same rates as their White peers, more specifically Black males.

Retention of Black Males in Higher Education

Although there has been an increase in the number of Blacks attending PWIs, the number of Black males enrolled is not experiencing the same trajectory (Strayhorn, 2012). In addition to the gross underrepresentation of Black males in higher education, many are faced with cultural, societal, academic, and lifestyle differences from other college students prior to enrollment (Brooks et al., 2012). For example, Black males in the K – 12, are more often identified for special education than other students or are placed in vocational nonacademic classes where they are not intellectually stimulated or challenged (Cooper & Jordan, 2003). These students' educational experiences are often different because of low expectations, a feeling of inferiority, and a sense of defeat in their academic pursuits (Cooper & Jordan, 2003). In order to develop a positive sense of self, [Black] identity, and to be successful academically and in life, research states that Black men need guidance throughout their education (Boykin, 1986; Johnson & Johnson, 1981). According to Cooper and Jordan (2003),

> If Black boys are to be sufficiently prepared to meet the challenges [in today's society], it is important that they come to see themselves as intellectually and effectively competent in both academic and social circles and that they are able to enroll in as well as graduate from institutions of higher education (p. 3).

Black males are scarce in higher education because of cultural norms and values that are a part of the United States social, political, and economic institution (Gibbs, 1988; Hare, 1987; Jordan & Cooper, 2003). Black men are not enrolling in post-secondary institutions because they are being systematically programmed to fail (Kunjufu, 1986). An example of creating systemic failure can be seen in the studies conducted on the status of Black males in New Orleans Public Schools during 1986 to

1987 (Fashola, 2005). The report of the study on *The Status of the African American Male in New Orleans Public Schools* (as cited in Fashola, 2005) reflected that although Black males make up 43% of the public school system in New Orleans, they accounted for 57.7% of the non-promotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the dropouts. The state of the Black man is so prevalent that Harris and Duhon (1999) stated that Black men have not received this much attention since the *lynching debates* of the early 20th century. Many, not all, Black males experience the aforementioned barriers and they carry these experiences with them to college, which does affect their chances of being retained.

Student Involvement and Engagement

Universities have acknowledged the dwindling numbers of Black males on college campuses, and have attempted to address the issue by increasing their engagement. The National Survey for Student Engagement (2011) describes student engagement as "the amount of time and energy students put into their studies, other educational purposeful activities, coupled with the ability of an institution to deploy its resources and organize activities supporting student learning" (p.1). Engaging students in activities that encompass and supports all students from different socioeconomic statuses and cultural backgrounds is vital in assisting students with degree completion. Moreover, the engagement of Black males is significant because this group is at risk for not matriculating to graduation (Brooks et al., 2012).

One group of Black males that receives the benefits of student engagement is student athletes. The indication of higher graduation rates among Black student athletes, (49%), is evidence that an intensified support system is beneficial for Black male students

compared to the graduation rate for Black male students not involved in athletics (38%).

NCAA (2009) notes that division I athletic departments provide academic support

services, orientation programs, tutoring, mentoring, and financial support. The immense

support that is provided to student athletes is noteworthy because generally student

athletes perform lower on college entrance exams. Nevertheless, they are persisting

through college at higher rates than Black males who are not receiving this level of

support.

A Sense of Belonging – Theoretical perspectives

The importance of reviewing existing literature on the impact a sense of

belonging has on the retention of Black males attending PWIs is vital when identifying

the factors that prevent this population from connecting to the university. These factors

include, but are not limited to marginalization and insufficient academic and social

support. In order to understand how Black men make sense of their belongingness on

campus, it is worth looking at three theoretical perspectives: Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs, Cross's Psychology of Nigrescence Model, and Schlossberg's theory of

Marginality and Mattering. This section will be divided based on Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs incorporating the other two theories throughout. Sense of belonging is a construct

that higher education is familiar with; however, the impact sense of belonging has on

Black males has yet to be fully explored (Strayhorn, 2008).

A sense of belonging and acceptance is a basic human desire and need, and at

times a sense of belonging may supersede the physiological and security needs as stated

in Maslow's hierarchy (Strayhorn, 2012). Belonging is referred to "as [one's] perceived

social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of

mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.17). The ability to fulfill the need of belonging may become difficult if the needs preceding it are not met. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is made up of five motivational needs, which requires that the most basic needs be met before progressing toward self-actualization. The five stages of Maslow's hierarchy of needs include physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. In Cross's (1971) Psychology of Nigrescence Model, he explains the five stages of racial identity development. The five stages include pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization/commitment. As one moves through the stages, one is developing a positive racial identity. Schlossberg's theory of Marginality and Mattering explains the importance of mattering and the effects it has on individuals. These theories are used together to gain insight and understanding of the Black male student experience.

Physiological. The first stage in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is physiological. One must satisfy their physical needs such as nutrition, oxygen, and sleep. For a college student, this need can be met by having a meal plan and a place to live and sleep. Without doubt, there are students who cannot afford a meal plan or the cost it takes to live on campus or even off campus and their physiological needs are not met; subsequently, this may prevent their progression to the next stage of Maslow's hierarchy, safety.

In relation to Maslow, Cross (1971) created the Psychology of Nigrescence Model based on five stages of progression, with pre-encounter as the first. When in the pre-encounter stage, one is aware that he is Black, but their race and culture is of low

salience. This could be for a number of reasons. Cross discussed how the beliefs and values of a Eurocentric country are taught to all, regardless of color, and people ascribe to them. Not all the beliefs and values that are portrayed by the dominant group of underrepresented groups are positive. For example, if a common generalized stereotype embedded in the beliefs of the dominant group is that Blacks are criminals, and if this is the belief that one ascribes to, why would Blacks want to identify with Black culture. According to Cross, a response for someone in this stage of development could look like, "I am a human being that happens to be Black" (p.164), or if they encounter an act deemed as racist their response could be, "That's just the way it is" (p. 164) or they will try to rationalize such occurrence. People in this stage of development have spent tons of mental energy deflecting the issue of race, and have neglected a part of their identity.

Surprisingly, those in this most basic fundamental stage of their racial identity development have yet to ask *who am I as a Black being?* In relation to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the survival as a being rested on the most primitive physiological needs, nutrition, oxygen, and sleep to reach self-actualization. If a Black male does not feel threatened and have his needs taken care of, he may find it easier to become involved in student groups. However, if they have had some form of encounter they may seek the safety in finding peers that look like them and have had similar past experiences. In Cross's Psychology of Nigrescence Model, one must ask *who am I as a Black being* in order for the development of their racial identity to survive.

Safety. Safety is the second stage of Maslow's needs. This stage includes protection from elements, a sense of security, and stability (Maslow, 1943). The safety stage in the hierarchy unequivocally affects the motivation for a student to continue at an

institution. Currently, for Black male students, their sense of feeling safe is insufficient. The insufficiency is due to wondering if he will be followed by law officials, if someone will use derogatory language towards him, or if he will be accused of something he did not do (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2015). These pre-encounters, encounters, and other micro-aggressions build up over time and cause Black male students to remain vigilant for their own protection and safety. Part of this fear and anxiety has emerged from the mass media coverage and the negative perception of Black men creating an atmosphere where Black male students may not feel safe on college campuses (Parker, 2014). Students will look for support and safety in various ways on campus; and this may include mentors, student organizations, and faculty and staff they can rely on.

During the encounter stage of Cross's (1971) model, one experiences an event(s) so profound that the impact triggers a racial awakening, challenging their identity in the pre-encounter stage. After this marginalizing event, he is now aware that "no matter how well he conforms to White standards, most Whites will always perceive him as Black and therefore inferior" (Helms, 1990 p. 25). Similar to Cross, Schlossberg (1989) discusses the effect of marginality. According to Schlossberg, members of underrepresented groups may experience marginality temporally or it could be permanent. The by-product of being marginalized is not feeling like one belongs or matters. While in the encounter stage, one feels lost and confused and perhaps even unsafe because their identity in pre-encounter has been shattered. He or she no longer has a naïve view of the world as it pertains to race. The feelings of someone in this stage are best described by McClain (1983).

"In one day my mind has sped from the naïve thought that everything would be

all right in the world if people would just intermarry, to the naïve thought that we

should establish a black homeland where we would never have to see a white face

again" (p. C1)

For a Black American college student, this could happen before or during the collegiate

experience. If it happens during his college experience, the encounter could be the

witnessing of or experiencing racism for the first time or through some significant

incident related to his race. Though not all encounters are negative, they can affect one's

sense of belonging in a college environment (Strayhorn, 2012). Not all encounters will

look alike, but the outcome is the same, and that is the exploration of their Black identity.

Identifying whom Black males turn to during these encounters is important in

understanding how they utilize resources on campus.

Love and Belonging. In the stage of love and belonging, one needs or yearns to

feel a part of something, which is achieved when an individual feels safe in their

environment (Maslow, 1943). This can be seen through the establishment of

relationships with others and organizations. According to Strayhorn (2012), who studied

the importance sense of belonging played in college students from underrepresented

groups, belongingness is essential to Black male students in at least two ways. The first is

that they view belongingness as a desired goal or "optimal psychosocial condition"

(p.82). One of the participants in Strayhorn's study discussed how college is an

adjustment and that there are not many "safe spaces" on campus where a Black man can

go for that; therefore, one just has to try hard to fit in and make it work (p.82). In addition

to belongingness being a goal, Black men in Strayhorn's study also identified

belongingness as a motive for academic and social behaviors. This includes seeking help

from teachers, devoting sufficient time to study, joining mentoring programs, and

participating in student organizations. For example, "for some Black men, joining a

Black Greek lettered organization provides them with opportunities to interact with

others who share similar perspectives, cultural values, and collegiate experiences"

(Strayhorn, 2012, p.83). Undoubtedly the aforementioned experiences eased the Black

males' adjustment to college, aided them into understanding their experience at a PWI,

connected them with others who are going through similar experiences, and fostered

belongingness among members in their organizations.

Stage three of nigrescence has two parts, both relating to their identity

development as a member of a group and understanding what that group membership

means (Cross, 1991). During the immersion part of this stage, the person's identity is in

limbo. They are beginning to deconstruct their old identity while simultaneously trying to

construct a new one. Cross (1991) speaks of immersion as being a "strong, powerful,

dominating sensation that is constantly energized by rage, guilt, and developing sense of

pride" (p. 203). Thus, the Black male student will likely seek out membership in groups

of all Black students rather than engaging with students of White culture. Anything

associated with their identity in the pre-encounter stage (Whiteness) is perceived to be

evil, and they tend to have a romanticized view of Blackness. A student in this stage of

nigrescence is looking for ways to connected with their Black identity and may join

student organizations associated with their culture; change their dress and hairstyle,

become interested in more Black artists, films, and literature (Cross, 1991). The student

becomes fully immersed in the culture, and is "shedding" their former self. Throughout

the course of immersion, the student may develop the *Blacker-than-thou* syndrome. The latter part of stage three is emersion. In emersion, the student experiences an emergence from their emotionally driven dualistic view of race facilitated by personal growth and a recognition that their Black role models operate from an advance state of identity development (Cross, 1991). This may be evidenced by the student's desire to join groups outside of the Black peer group, such as student senate. At the end of their metamorphosis, the student realizes that there is continued growth and moves toward internalizing their new identity. As the student develops so does their sense of belonging on campus and they may seek out different groups at different points in their experience.

Contextually speaking, belongingness can take on a heightened importance depending on the situation and the person. According to Strayhorn (2012) the need to belong or fit in increases significantly when individuals are experiencing situations that are difficult, unfamiliar, and in a context where the individual may feel marginalized, unsupported, or unwelcomed. Therefore, if this need remains deprived, the student will actively seek to fulfill it thus affecting their academic outcomes.

Esteem. Once the need to be loved and to belong is met, one's esteem needs are then allowed to develop (Maslow, 1943). When in the stage of esteem, one is working to achieve competence, independence, respect and recognition. This is done through involvement in student organizations, sports, academia and hobbies. Those in this stage are looking for personal growth and ways to contribute to the world (Maslow, 1943). Similar to Maslow's esteem stage, Schlossberg (1989) found that with her theory people also desire attention, appreciation, and a desire to feel important in order to feel valued by others. For a student, fulfilling their esteem needs could be taking a major leadership

position and learning how to work with a diverse population of students while creating an inclusive environment. If the student is performing well at his job, he will receive recognition. This recognition lets the student know that he is competent at his job thus fostering positive self-esteem. He now knows that he is a valued member of the team.

As an individual is striving to have a positive self-esteem based on Maslow's Hierachy of Needs, in Cross's theory they are working toward internalizing a positive Black identity. (Cross, 1991). Meaning, one is able to create an identity that includes their personal identity and the Black identity they ascribe to. No longer is White their primary reference group, and the quality of one's belongingness is no longer determined by external factors (Helms, 1990). Now that one has a stable Black identity, they reject racism and reestablishes relationships with White associates they deem worthy (Helms, 1990 p. 29). For Black students, they are able to reenter the dominant culture of the campus community by joining organizations that are not predominately Black with a positive view that comes from person strength.

Self-actualization. When seeking to fulfill the need of self-actualization, one realizes their personal potential, self-fulfillment, and seeks personal growth for the betterment of self (Maslow, 1943). Essentially, anyone in the self-actualization stage wants to maximize his or her potential. They are aware that they have talents and skills, and want to use them to the best of their ability. For example, after a student leader has developed a level of competence in their role, he or she will seek out other opportunities to best utilize their position and to become the best student leader they can be.

The final stage of Cross's (1971) Psychology of Nigrescence Model is internalization and commitment. In this stage, not only has the individual internalized a

positive Black identity, but also they are committed to making a social change surrounding the issues of the Black community. The action piece is what separates stage four and five. Some will discontinue their involvement with the Black movement, stage four, while those in stage five seek to incorporate their new identity into meaningful activities for the group (Cross, 1971). A student entering into this stage may seek an executive position on student government in order to serve as someone who can voice the concerns of Black students to those in power.

Utilizing Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, Cross's (1971) Psychology of Nigrescence Model, and Schlossberg's (1989) theory of Marginality and Mattering brings forth insight on the interconnectedness of belongingness and identity formation. When looking at the role of sense of belonging, one has to acknowledge that it looks different for everyone (Strayhorn, 2012). When speaking of the many identities that make up a person, it is critical that one finds a space where all of their identities can belong (Strayhorn, 2012). For example, being a Black college student on a predominately White institution while preserving one's Black culture. The identities do not work separately, but are interconnected. Therefore, when one is searching to fulfill their need to belong, they are looking for a space where all of their identities are accepted.

Summary

Throughout Chapter two, the literature provided the challenges of sense of belonging and retention that many Black male students are confronted with on predominately White institutions. The research presents the impact of Black students

developing their Black identity and how that plays a role into their sense of belonging

and desire to continue at their institutions. Moreover, the literature provides a holistic

view of how involvement, racial identity, and sense of belonging effects the retention of

Black men attending a predominate White institutions.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This study examined the experiences of Black American undergraduate males' sense of belonging. A qualitative research design was employed to explore the experiences of the participants. The focus of this chapter shares the methods used to accurately provide the readers with the process for collecting this information.

Study Design

In this study, the researcher explored how Black males attending a predominately white institution defined and described a sense of belonging, and in what ways has the institution created a sense of belonging. By interviewing five Black male students, the intent of this research was to understand Black males' experience through interviews that were guided by the research questions. Coupled with prior research, the data collected from the participants provided a better understanding of how a sense of belonging impacts the college experience of Black males.

Through qualitative inquiry, the experiences of five Black male students, and their sense of belonging was explored as it impacts their connection and experiences at the institution. The study investigated the various perceptions of the participants' experiences (Fraenkel, Hyun, and Wallen, 2012). Through in-depth interviews, the investigation identified the common themes from the participants' experiences.

Participants/Sample

The participants in the study included five Black undergraduate male students who were enrolled at the rural midsized Midwestern institution with sophomore to senior standing. The Office of Multicultural Affairs provided a list of male students that were

eligible to participate in the study. The criteria for participant selection included: identifying as male and Black by the definition described for this study, must be 18 years of age or older and must be enrolled full-time. Special attention was given to seek participation from individuals that the researcher did not already have an established relationship with outside of the research. From the list of qualified candidates, five students were randomly selected to participate.

Participant 1 is a 24-year-old Black male transfer student from a community college in a large urban city. He is a business major currently at senior standing based on credit hours. His involvement ranges from membership in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO), hall council, and the transfer leadership program, and is an orientation leader program for transfer students.

Participant 2 is a 22-year-old Black male from the suburbs of a large urban city. He is a transfer student from a private college. He is a criminal justice major at junior standing. He is heavily involved with the Black male mentoring program on campus, a member of the Black Student Union, African Student Association, and the Criminal Justice Club. After graduation, he plans to enroll into the police academy, and work in the police force in Chicago.

Participant 3 is a 22-year-old Black male from a large urban city, who has only attended the research site institution. He has served in many positions within NAACP including president. Currently he is the president and founder of a new student organization whose purpose is to highlight the achievements of Black students on campus. He is also a member of a campus ministry and the Black Student Union. He is a senior secondary education major.

Participant 4 is a 20-year-old Black male from small rural town in the Midwest, who has only attended the research site institution. Currently, he serves a resident assistant. He is also a member of the Black male mentoring program on campus, an officer in the Black Student Union, and an officer in the entrepreneurship club. He is a business major of sophomore standing.

Participant 5 is a 21-year-old Black male from a midsized Midwestern town, who has only attended the research site institution. He is a mid-level education major with junior standing. He is an active member of historically white Greek letter organization and a volunteer for the local afterschool program.

Site Location

The study took place at an institution situated in small rural predominately town in the Midwest with a population of about 20,000 residents. The institution has roughly 8,500 enrolled students with student demographics of 68 percent White and 17 percent Black. The institution was a regional serving, masters granting public institution. The level of comfort plays an important role in the interview process; therefore, the participants and researcher mutually selected an appropriate location in which the interview was conducted (Shuy, 2003).

Instrument

Semi-structured interview. The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with the five participants. All interviews took place in a secluded area selected by the participants. In order to be consistent, each interview was conducted with a standardized list of questions (Appendix A). Although there was a standardized semi-structured interview process employed, a semi-structured style of interviewing allowed for the

researcher to explore other topics that arose (Mason, 2002). The questions were

developed to extract the participant's personal perspectives regarding how they defined

and described their sense of belonging, and how the institution aided in the process.

      Researcher. As the primary researcher of this qualitative study, the researcher

sought to identify Black males sense of belonging at a PWI. In order to increase the

trustworthiness of the study he used Guba's (1981) Model of Trustworthiness of

Qualitative Research. "Guba's model is based on the identification of four aspects of

trustworthiness that are relevant to both quantitative and qualitative studies: truth-value,

applicability, consistency, and neutrality" (as cited by Krefting, 1991 p.218). In

qualitative research, truth-value lies in exploring the human experience as they were lived

and perceived by the participant, and is subject oriented. In order to establish *credibility*,

the researcher provided an adequate representation of the participant's account, and

compared the data against the other participants from which data were drawn. When a

researcher presents a human experience with such accurate descriptions or interpretations

that the experience is immediately identifiable by someone with the shared experience,

the study is considered credible (Sandelowski, 1986). Next, Guba explains the

importance of applicability in qualitative research. Although qualitative research cannot

be generalized, Guba refers to transferability as the criterion for *applicability* to be

assessed. Researchers can meet this criterion when the "findings fit into contexts outside

the study situation that are determined by the degree of similarity or goodness of fit

between the two context" (Krefting, 1991, p.216). The researcher ensured applicability

by looking at examining the similarly lived experiences of the participants to Black

males' experiences in previous research on the same research area. Consistency is the

third aspect of trustworthiness. For qualitative researchers, consistency is measured by *dependability*. Guba's concept of dependability implies that the variability among the participants must be accounted for, that is, variability that can be ascribed to identified sources. "Explaining sources of variability might include increasing insight on the part of the researcher, informant fatigue, or changes in the informant's life situation" (Krefting, 1991, p.216). The researcher acknowledged the differences in the participants and noted that these experiences affects the participants' perceptions to employ dependability. This emphasizes the unique experiences of the informants and increases trustworthiness. The final aspect of trustworthiness is neutrality. In qualitative research, neutrality is referred to as *confirmability*. Confirmability is achieved when truth-value and applicability are established. Employing this model ensures rigor without diminishing the relevance of the research (Krefting, 1991). Since the primary researcher employed a qualitative approach, his focal points were the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Data Collection

The data was collected in a face-to-face one-on-one interview from participants whom meet the criteria set forth in this study. Face to face interviews allowed the researcher to observe the verbal and nonverbal data (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004). When the researcher and the participants are able to be in the same room, it gives the researcher access to facial expressions, gestures, and other para-verbal communications that may enrich the meaning of what is being said (Carr & Worth, 2001). In order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the study, a number was assigned to each participant. The level of comfort plays an important role in the interview process; therefore, the

participants and researcher mutually selected an appropriate location in which the

interview was conducted (Shuy, 2003).

The interview questions developed were designed to address the research

questions that guide this study. The interview was audio recorded to allow the researcher

to analyze the exchange, which provided richer contexts for interpretations (Kvale, 1996).

The recording was saved to a memory card, and each recording was transcribed.

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the audio recordings to text. Following transcription,

the researcher coded the data to watch for emerging themes. Strauss and Corbin (1998)

"define coding as the analytic process through which data are fractured, conceptualized

and integrated to form theory" (p.70). The information gathered from each participant

was compared. The comparison allowed for the essence of the data to be identified. To

ensure the information was interpreted accurately, the researcher provided the

transcriptions and emergent categories to the corresponding participants for member

checking in person. The process of member checking enhanced the credibility of the

research (Krefting, 1991). In addition to member checking, the researcher provided two

impartial qualitative researchers with the transcriptions independently to conduct peer

examination (Krefting, 1991). After the codes were created independently, the two

researchers compared their codes for accuracy and to increase credibility.

Treatment of Data

The participants in the study were assigned numbers to maintain anonymity.

Consent forms, transcriptions, emails, and any other documents that could possibly reveal

the identity of the participants were kept on a password protected computer to which is

only accessible by the researcher. Data collected from this study will be kept for 3 years after completion, and then discarded per IRB policy.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher described the qualitative approached used to conduct the present study. In order to insure the safety and anonymity of the participants, the researcher explained the procedures taken to protect confidentiality. Chapter IV will consist of the analysis of data collected from interviews.

Chapter IV

Analysis

This chapter contains the analysis of data collected from interviews with five Black male undergraduate students as it pertains to their sense of belonging. The study sought to gain insight from the Black males regarding their definition and description of sense of belonging at a PWI. The study also sought to determine if Black males had a sense of belonging at their perspective institution. This section includes the analysis of data and the themes that emerged from the exploration of the five Black males' experiences.

Defining Sense of Belonging

In order to understand Black males' description of *sense of belonging*, it was important to first understand how they define it in their own words. All participants, in responding to the question about how they define sense of belonging, spoke about being accepted and feeling accepted from their own personal perspective. Participants also shared other insight in to how they feel accepted from their own personal experience.

In defining sense of belonging, Participant 1 responded with, "Sense of belonging to me is unconditional love that you feel for another person. No matter what your personality is that other person knows that you care about them." Participant 2 defined sense of belonging as "being a part of a group that accepts you," and Participant 3 responded with "I would define sense of belonging as being accepted …by different cultures."

As participants further defined sense of belonging a few moved away from acceptance and used other definitions. Participant 4 talked about being comfortable and supported to, and stated:

Being in an environment where you feel comfortable but not too comfortable, to where you can't grow... I'd say Black Student Union is trying to push people to grow and that's my sense of belonging. In return I'm getting something from them.

While Participant 5 talked about belonging as being needed and that sense belonging is not an automatic thing you get, it's something you work toward. Participant 5 stated:

I think it's a feeling of being accepted and needed. It's not a perfect world and not everyone gets along and people will reject you for who you are and that's just how it is. I think that a sense of belonging is what you make of it. It can be something you go home and cry about. It can be something you go out and find. It's something that you just have to find for yourself. It's not [going to] come to you, and it may not always be fair. I don't have any better words for that. It's a very sticky question.

In being asked to define sense of belonging each participant spoke about it from their lived experiences and their definitions were evidence of this.

Describing Sense of Belonging

When describing their experiences, all of the participants spoke of a person or a group of people with whom they felt connected. This sense of belonging was described from an individual perspective, however there were common themes that emerged as they

spoke about their lived experiences. The four following themes emerged, involvement, support from faculty and staff, and support from friends.

Involvement. When asked to describe their sense of belonging all of the participants spoke about their involvement in various student organizations on campus. All of the participants were in multiple student organizations and the majority of the organizations they were were involved in were predominately Black student organizations (i.e. Black Student Union). Their involvement ranged from social fraternities and academic organizations to working as a resident assistant.

Participant 2 was involved in several student organizations. To name a few, he was involved in a Black male mentoring program, Black Student Union, African Student Association, and the criminal justice club. When asked why did he get involved, Participant 2 responded with:

> Networking and also just to meet new people and just to keep myself busy. When I first came here, I didn't really know anybody or anything as a transfer student. So I decided to just get involved and get my name out there and also just to make myself more marketable for the future.

Participant 2 used involvement as a way to connect with others at the institution due to being a new transfer student.

Participant 3 and Participant 4 were both involved in similar organizations. Both were members of Black Student Union and African Student Association. In addition to Black Student Union and African Student Association, Participant 3 is a member of Unity Gospel Ministries. He stated:

I have been a part of [the gospel choir] all of my four years here. Singing isn't my

thing, I was still able to be a part of the group. That's a really good organization

to have on a college campus. Coming from a Christian background, I was nervous

about finding a new church home. I was really excited about joining that team

because you know I figured out that there are people who do love God. Unity

members helped throughout my journey here.

Participant 4 described his involvement with Black Student Union extensively. Through

his involvement with this student organization, he discovered his passion for educating

his Black peers. "Black Student Union is like a gateway for me to help educate minority

males and females on campus." He spoke of how the organization challenged him to

strive for greatness, and how he tried to spread greatness to the black community on

campus. When Participant 5 was asked about his involvement, he stated:

The things I'm involved in on campus are some of the volunteering with my

major, mid-level education. So I volunteer with kids with the after school

programs, I'm in an IFC fraternity, I also work in the dining hall as a student

manager. I'm just trying to keep my head on straight.

Most of the participants were actively involved in predominately Black student

organizations. Throughout their interviews, many expressed the need to give back to and

enhance the Black community on campus. Participant 4 spoke of educating the

community, "[Black Student Union] is like a gateway for me to help educate minority

males and females on campus." Participant 2 talked about wanting to groom his fellow

peers to be successful, "I contribute to the minority population and help out other student

organizations by serving on university committees," and Participant 3 wants to use his

voice to create equity on campus, "I work behind the scenes. I may have a meeting with the university president about issues the student body is facing that students may never know about."

Benefits of involvement. When asked to expound upon his aforementioned statement, Participant 2 proceeded by saying,

"… being involved in [the mentoring program] teaches me responsibility and accountability for others and myself. Also, sometimes we have to make sacrifices for the greater good for other people sometimes. Like being involved, we might have to sacrifice something, like your own leisure time to help somebody else out."

All of the participants understood the importance and benefits of involvement. When asked what advice would they give to incoming Black males, they all stated that they would tell him to get involved.

Support and Mentoring. Participants described receiving support from someone (e.g. friends, peers, mentors, faculty, and staff) as they discussed their sense of belonging. Support came in many forms form faculty, staff, and other Black students on campus. The relationships created with some faculty and staff eventually led to mentorship relationships. Participants were able to build these relationships through their involvement on campus.

Mentoring group participants. All of the participants mentioned involvement in the institution's Black male mentoring program at one point during their undergraduate experience. Only one student spoke at length about his involvement and the benefits he received from his involvement in the mentoring program. Some of his perceived benefits

from involvement included developing skills (i.e. programming, public speaking, and etc.) that were transferrable to other student groups he held membership (Black Student Union and African Student Association). Additionally, he spoke about two mentors from the Black male mentoring program that impacted his experience while in college, stating:

> "[Mentor 1] and [Mentor 2], they helped shape who we are in [the mentoring program]. They pretty much set us on the path of becoming better Black leaders on campus and throughout the world. There are things I've learned like leadership skills… that I've taken from them that helped me grow."

Participant 2 also discussed how his mentors from provided him with motivation and encouragement to do better academically.

Faculty and staff mentoring. Participant 1 recalled his experience at his previous institution where he had a Black male advisor "look out" for him. In describing this relationship Participant 1 stated,

> He [Advisor] was like a mentor to me you know. He took an interest in me and he basically stayed on me about graduating, about my degree and everything. And I appreciated that because nobody else took the time out to check and see how I was doing. When I got to [my current institution], nobody did that.

Through seeking opportunities to get involved, Participant 1 found another mentor through the transfer leadership program. Participant 1's description of his new mentor at the current institution was "After seeing him, he was sticking out like a sore thumb. He was the only Black guy pretty much who was at the top of the organization." Participant 1 described the connection between them as a "mentor vibe." After securing the position as an orientation leader transfer student program with his mentor, Participant 1 stated, "I

stayed in this program specifically because of [mentor]." During Participant 1's tenure in

the program, he identified that he experienced racism as a student worker, and in this

situation he looked to his new mentor for support. Participant 1 shared some a

conversation he had with his mentor.

> You know, I stuck with it and a few times I wanted to quit, but [my mentor] came
>
> up to me and told me, you know, you are Black... They [are] expecting you to do
>
> this. You know, they are expecting you to show up late. They [are] expecting you
>
> to not want to do this. They [are] expecting you to not want to be here. You have
>
> to prove them wrong... They really, you know what I'm saying, showed me that
>
> even if I do want to quit that I can't let them win. So I stayed in the program.

What encouraged Participant 1 to persevere and remain an orientation leader was the

relationship with his mentor in the program. Unfortunately, shortly after becoming an

orientation leader, Participant 1's new mentor left the institution. Participant 1's response

to his mentor leaving was "...I was stuck in this program that I didn't feel like I needed to

be in." Now that his mentor was no longer in the office, Participant 1 explained that he

was no longer willing to deal with racial encounters he faced in the program and left the

position.

Participant 3 talks about the mentoring relationship that developed during his

freshman year at his current institution.

> [My mentor] was a professor of English. I had him for English 1001, great
>
> professor. He was a White guy, and he was like really good at his craft. He
>
> noticed that I was writing all my essays about slavery, race, and racism.
>
> Coincidentally, that was his research focus, and I had a chance to actually spend

two years with him as a good mentor. He influenced me to go into education, and to get involved with conferences related to my interest area. He helped me to succeed as an African American student.

When examining the responses from all of the participants, their mentors' roles extended well beyond academic support.

Support from friends. In addition to having mentors serve as a support system, many of the participants spoke about a group of friends that supported them. During the interview, Participant 4 was asked to share a personal struggle and how he overcame it. Participant 4 spoke of his struggle with suicide, and those who supported and encouraged him.

I was a part of essence of man 2015. When I was doing the pageant, it forces you to get out of your comfort zone. You have to talk about a subject that you feel like you can express the most, and I chose suicide. In high school, I was very suicidal, and so that was something that I had overcome. I never told anyone, not even my parents. My [pageant mentor] of the pageant, my coach, and pageant brothers helped me…doing that made me feel more comfortable with myself and more confident.

All of the participants shared that in addition to socializing with their friends, they all studied together and motivated one another to remain focused on school. Participant 3 stated,

"These types of friends actually kept me going, you know, in school because we all had that same goal of graduating and getting a degree." Participant 4 had a similar response.

We just hang out. We chill together. We've cooked together. We study together. We hangout and have fun. I like being around those people. I just like how diverse of group we are because not only do we know how to have fun, but when it's time for work, we do work together. Sometimes since we are around each other so much and we're friends, we get side tracked a little bit and get off track, but we kick ourselves back into gear. We motivate each other and stuff and it's really cool.

Black Males Acceptance at the Institution

In an effort to understand how the participants perceive their acceptance at the institution, the researcher asked a series of questions to gauge how the participants felt accepted there. Their acceptance was described through their involvement in student organizations and contributions they have made to the campus community. Throughout the participants described experiences, they have made significant relationships throughout their time at the institution.

The participants identified who or what allowed them to feel accepted at the institution, in addition to what may have hindered their level of acceptance at the institution. As the participants described their acceptance, they acknowledged that their involvement played a meaningful part. Two of the participants spoke about how their membership and leadership in different student organizations made them feel accepted. Participant 2 stated:

I would say people accept me based off of my personality. Also for my contributions to the minority population as far as being involved in [the mentoring

program], and also helping out with other [student organization]; like being on a committee or something.

Participant 3 shared:

I feel accepted by being a part of the leadership, of like the student leadership here. I consider myself a leader. A lot of staff and faculty consider me a leader. I know there are certain types of events, and everything that goes on and honestly I'm one of the first they'd call. So I feel accepted. I feel like it's not only with the student body that's accepting me, but administrators are accepting me and the staff and faculty are accepting me.

Additionally, participants spoke about their connections to people at the institution which made them feel accepted. Participant 4 spoke about his involvement on campus and how it has helped him find a group of people to connect with especially during challenging times. He stated:

I definitely feel accepted by the people I see. There's a lot of hard working Black men here at [my current institution], and it feels good being considered one of those people. I do feel like I belong here and of course sometimes I feel like an outcast in certain situations. There was one time where I had gotten so busy that I had no social interactions, and I had gotten kind of lonely, but that's the life I chose. When I am with friends and my organizations I feel like I belong.

Participant 5 stated:

I feel accepted just walking down the street to be honest. I feel like even the state of [the town the institution is located in]. I've been to a nearby town that I was like, if I could just see one Black person I'd be happy. Especially in the classroom

where there's like me and a mixed dude and that's about it. Like if I could just find one Black person or one mixed person I will be fine, which I did, and I was fine. We got passed that.

Although majority of the participants felt an overall acceptance at the institution, it is important to note that their sense of belonging was developed despite their negative encounters at the institution. The participants in this study were asked to speak specifically about if they felt valued by the institution. Participants' perception of their value to their current institution varied, but largely reflected an ambiguous feeling about their value. Participant 1 stated:

> I mean, it's only so much you can do. You know it's only so many things that you can do for a particular group of people. You know if you've been stuck in your ways for so long it's not like you can automatically change it up. I use to hear rumors that [my current institution] was closing a long time ago because black people started coming to the school. I didn't believe that you know, but then I look around and it is more black people here, and enrollment is definitely going down. I think the institution values us on paper. I definitely think so on paper.

Participant 3 felt that the institution valued Black students to an extent.

> I think to a certain extent they do. I think we are challenged here because there aren't that many African Americans and when we are identified, they may identify me with another group who has caused issues. So it's the whole marginalization type of thing. You know I'm being put in that category of trouble maker, when that's not me, but since I'm a part of that culture or that group I'm being punished.

Participant 3 spoke of a marginalizing experience at the institution when he experienced a situation where he felt his entire race was being punished by the actions of a few. He described a situation when a Black dance team reserved a ballroom at the student union for an event. During the event, a fight erupted and university property, tables and chairs, were broken. Shortly after the event, Participant 3 wanted to reserve the ballroom for a student organization in which he was a leader. When he went to reserve the space, the student union reservation office had created additional protocol and procedures his group had to adhere to in order to reserve that space. This became problematic when he discovered that the same additional protocol was not enforced for a student group whose membership is predominately White. Participant 2 stated, "In all honesty, I don't think that [the institution] really does value us. It's like we are here and the institution puts up with us."

Participant 4 struggled to answer the question regarding his and Black students' value because he saw some efforts being made, but identified that it was not enough and more could be done. Participant 4 said:

It's bad that I can't even think of an answer right now. They try, but there is a lot between trying and doing and trying sometimes is not enough. There was a diversity conference two or three weeks ago. A lot of the students or all the students should have been there. Like how [the institution] makes community service mandatory for people, the diversity conference should have been mandatory for students. There was a lot of good information there that a lot of people aren't going to. It more than just black lives matter.

Participant 5 said that he understands that the university values diversity, and Black students add to the diversity of the university. He responded with,

> I think it values us in the sense of obviously diversity, that's a big thing that a school needs, and I feel that without us, my race, [at my current institution] wouldn't have as many people as it would. We'd probably be a community college. Even if they don't want to value us, they have to.

Summary

This study was designed to further understand how Black undergraduate male students defined and described their sense of belonging and if the Black males in the study were able to establish a sense of belonging at their predominantly White institution. All of the participants' centered their definition of belonging around acceptance. In their descriptions of sense of belonging their responses included elements that made them feel accepted; therefore, fostering a sense of belonging. Each participant spoke of support from membership in student organizations, friends, and mentors. When speaking of their acceptance and belongingness at the institution, the participants referred to their campus involvement, their group of friends, and their connection to a university employee. A follow up question was asked regarding if they felt valued by the institution. The response from the participants varied, and the message ambiguous. Although many of the participants experienced some unpleasant events, they have formed strong relationships with individuals which allowed them to establish a sense of belonging at the institution.

Chapter V

Discussion

This qualitative study was conducted to explore how Black undergraduate male students described their sense of belonging while attending a predominately White institution. The study examined the participants' definition and description of sense of belonging. In addition, the researcher investigated if the participants' developed a sense of belonging at their PWI. This chapter includes the discussion, implications, future research topics, and the conclusion of the study.

Discussion

The lived experiences of the participants in this study shed light on their sense of belonging at a PWI. Four important findings emerged: (1) Black males generally felt accepted at the institution; however, this was enhanced when they had opportunities to socialize with others of the same race, (2) having a support system (e.g. friends, peers, mentors) was vital for Black males' experience at the institution, (3) having racial encounters may inhibit Black males' establishment of a sense of belonging, and (4) social and academic involvement positively enhanced the experience and may ultimately lead to retention at the institution for Black males.

In this study the Black males defined sense of belonging as being accepted, loved unconditionally, and being in a space where they felt comfortable. This is similar to Strayhorn's (2012) notion of belonging as one's perceived social support on campus, feeling connected, cared about, accepted, and valued by others. Participants also described the significance of social support (peers, friends, and mentors), and being accepted by their friends as part of their experience of belonging. When describing what

acceptance looked like, most spoke of their leadership within student organizations on campus. Therefore, one can safely deduce that this involvement was the conduit for their positive feelings of acceptance.

In order to develop a positive sense of self, and be successful academically and in life, Black male students need guidance throughout their education (Boykin, 1986; Johnson & Johnson, 1981). The findings of this study support the notion that guidance is vital for Black male students to be successful academically and in their college life. Most participants discussed having mentors and how their mentors provided them with guidance throughout their college experience. Mentors did not solely serve as academic support, but they aided the students through racial encounters, and helped them develop valuable skills that they will need later in life. In addition to having mentors, all of the participants mentioned relying on their friend groups for support. Comparable to Rodgers and Summers (2008), the participants found their support system from other Black students, their friends, faculty, and staff members.

This study also showed the value participants placed on involvement in student organizations, particularly in Black student organizations (in-group). The importance of in-group social organizations was heavily discussed in research conducted by Rodgers and Summers (2008). When examining the concept of in-group for Black male students, similar in Rodgers and Summers' study, the findings revealed that these spaces provided an avenue for Black male students to create a sense of belonging in a safe space. Within these in-groups, Black males were able to create a subculture on campus. According to Kuh and Love (2000), subcultures create the opportunity for Black students to bridge the cultural gap among the Black campus community and the majority population.

When speaking of the many identities (i.e. race) that make up a person, it is critical that one find spaces where all their identities can belong (Strayhorn, 2012). Upon scrutinizing the findings and previous research, the participants' racial identity development was a factor that aided in the discussion of their experiences. The data collected from the participants when asked if they felt the institution valued them or the population they identified with highlighted the importance race played in the participants creating sense of belonging at the institution.

Understanding belonging through racial identity.

The findings showed a relationship between Black male students' racial identity and their level of belonging. The more negative racial encounters Black males faced, they were less likely to establish a sense of belonging at the institution. On the other hand, Black males who were operating at a higher level in their racial identity were more likely to establish relationships and had higher levels of belonging. In understanding the participants' stage of their racial development, Cross' (1971) Psychology of Nigrescence Model was employed.

Participant 5. When looking at Participant 5's involvement, he was not involved in any predominately Black student organization. He is a member of a historically White fraternity, and talked about easily establishing a sense of belonging within this group. When conversations of race on campus emerged, Participant 5 acknowledged the unhealthy underlying racial tension, but spoke of the dynamics from an outside perspective. When discussing racism, he responded by saying "that's just how it is." According to Cross (1971), this is a response from someone in the pre-encounter stage who tries to rationalize racial occurrences.

Participant 1. As a transfer student, Participant 1 knew the importance of involvement and engaging with individuals from different backgrounds. This prior knowledge of college life influenced Participant 1 to diversify to friend group. During a social night out, one of the Participant 1's White friends called him a nigger while under the influence. This moment coupled with several other encounters discussed in his interview caused him to distrust White people. Participant 1 changed his friend group to consist of only Black peers, and immersed himself in the campus Black culture by actively joining predominately student organizations. Like others in this stage, Participant 1 was to a degree anti-White and chose to spend his time in all-Black student groups.

The latter part of stage three is emersion. In this stage individuals begin to development a positive Black identity. According to the findings in this study and the description provided by Cross's (1971) Psychology of Nigrescence, many of the participants, like participant 1, were in the immersion/emersion stage of their racial identity development. This can be seen from their involvement in predominately Black student organizations (i.e. Black Student Union, the gospel choir, the Black male mentoring program, and the NAACP). During this stage, the interactions that the participants had with their peers and mentors were identified as vital for their racial identity. Socializing in an environment where other Blacks may be operating at a higher level in their racial identity development allow Black males to progress in their own identity development. It is noteworthy that participants in this stage of their development felt a stronger sense of belonging compared to previous stages. This could be due to the participants established support system they created from their involvement, friends, and mentors.

As Black males progressed in their Black identity development, they began to internalize their new identity. Black males in this stage are able to navigate through college with a more positive attitude, look for personal growth, and ways to contribute to the community. This can be seen when Black males begin to take leadership roles in student organizations and are beginning to contemplate how they can contribute to the Black campus community and aid in the group's success as a whole. Once Black males have given back to the Black community on campus and have developed high esteem, the need for self-actualization emerges.

Participant 2. During Participant 2's time at the institution, he spoke of his involvement of student organizations and the benefits he has received from his membership. For example, membership in the male mentoring program allowed him to development his leadership skills, and work with staff members that eventually became his mentors. His involvement in the mentoring program also allowed him to work through his racial identity with his peers and the Black males staff members that were mentoring him . Participant 2 spoke about his encounters with racial at the institution. Throughout the discussion of his encounters, he spoke of anger and pain, but also the refuge he found in his Black peers. As the discussion continued, Participant 2 began to talk about the predominately Black student organizations he joined and his peers helped him cope. Coping for Participant 2, in regards to racism, has changed over time. He now understood that if he had another encounter he had a support system to turn to, and also that he could not live in seclusion among his Black peers. Participant 1 emerged and sought out opportunities in the majority population again. He began to internalize who he

was a Black man, and he began to contemplate on how to move Black students forward on campus.

Participant 4. Participant 4 has been actively involved since his arrival to the institution. He has served as a resident assistant and board member of Black Student Union. Participant 4 spoke fondly of his overall experience at the institution, but articulated that the work institution administrators need to do more about diversity and diversity education. He does not place all of the work on the administrators. As the new president for Black Student Union, Participant 4 plans to use his platform to educate not only his Black students, but all students on the importance of diversity and inclusion.

In the final stage of Cross' (1971) model, Black males have internalized their positive Black identity, and are committed to making social change surrounding the issues of the Black community. The action piece is what separates stages four and five. This action piece can be seen when Participant 3 establishes a new student organization on campus to recognize Black academic excellence. Black males' in this stage actively seek out opportunities in which they can advance their community on campus. It is important to note that student organizations cannot be created by students alone. Participant 3 need the support of administrators at the institution to establish his new student organization.

Participant 3 – Internalization and Commitment. Participant 3 has experienced the racial encounters, the immersion and emersion process, he has internalized his Black identity, and now his is committing to his Black identity he was constructed for himself. As a past president of Black Student Union and a member of the male mentoring program, Participant 3 was able to learn and grow from those experiences. As time

progressed, he saw need for social change on campus, and began to speak out against unequal treatment among racial groups. He also spoke about the need to educate his fellow classmates when they lacked knowledge or information. Participant 3 stated that he had to give back to the Black campus community because they helped cultivate him into a campus leaders.

Implications for Institutions of Higher Education

This study revealed how Black male students defined and described their sense of belonging and how they were able to establish a sense of belonging at the institution. The results indicated that Black males were able to establish a sense of belonging at the institution despite having negative racial encounters. When the participants discussed their value to the institution, they spoke of the lack of programming and inconsistent policy enforcement between Black and non-Black student groups. In order to combat this, student affairs professionals need to assess the needs of Black males, and create a programming model that is more reflective of their needs. In addition to assessing their needs, it is critical for the administrators to explore how they are enforcing policies. This inconsistent behavior can be addressed through yearly training process for all employees. In addition to policy training, all university employees need on-going training on what diversity and inclusion. By having this mandated training, employees will be better able to serve all of the students, more specifically Black males.

The findings of the study revealed the importance for Black male students to have a mentor. These mentors should not only help them navigate through higher education, but through the various encounters the student may face during his collegiate years. Mentorship appeared in different ways in this study. For some, relationships were

formed naturally after being sought out by the student; and for others, they were formed

in a structured mentoring program developed by administrators. Although most of the

mentor relationships were formed with Black staff, faculty, and peers, not every Black

student will choose a Black mentor. In order to create an environment to foster

mentorships, faculty and staff at the institutions need to be encouraged to have intentional

positive interactions with Black male students. Administrators need to create a mentoring

program that trains and supports mentors from different backgrounds (i.e. races, gender,

and disciplines) who will develop positive interactions with students. Creating an

environment where the student feels comfortable aids the students in creating a sense of

belonging. When Black males have mentors, it helps counter some of the problems they

face and promotes academic success and positive self-esteem (Blackwell, 1989; Grant-

Thomson & Atkinson, 1997).

Student affairs practitioners need to have intentional positive interactions with

Black male students as they enter the institution. During the interactions, the student

affairs practitioners need to educate the students on the benefits and importance of getting

involved on campus. In order to guide Black males to student groups that meet their

needs and interest, student affairs practitioners can familiarize themselves with the

student activities website that list the many student organizations available at the

institution. Tinto (1993) found that involvement increases social integration, institutional

commitment, and decreases retention rates.

Recommendation for Future Research

This study should be replicated at other PWIs similar in size and demographics.

The research has provided some insight as to the areas of sense of belonging for Black

male students. For future research, an explicit exploration of their racial identity development needs to be examined as this group creates their sense of belonging on campus. Future research should also examine how the intersection of other identities (i.e. sexual orientation) affects Black males' sense of belong on college campuses. Additionally, it would be important to replicate this study using Black females. Lastly, I would recommend conducting a similar study at HBCUs.

A more explicit examination of the role sense of belonging has on the retention of Black undergraduate male students needs to be researched. An explicit examination of retention will allow researchers to determine what types of involvement allow Black males to feel more connected to the institution. By deciphering the possible correlations between different types of involvement and retention will aid institutions of higher learning in creating a more inclusive environment for Black males.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified that could bring into question the transferability and trustworthiness of the study. First, information was gathered from five Black male undergraduate students attending a mid-size Midwestern public institution. The participants' views are not the shared views of all Black men attending the institution or in college. Instead, it reflects the experiences of the five participants involved.

The interpretations of the findings are subject to the bias of the researcher's race, ethnicity, and gender. Although the researcher was able to answer the research questions, the interview protocol was a limitation in this study. It did not explicitly explore the multiple layers of belonging. Participants discussed how race played a factor in their sense of belonging at the institution. The researcher's instrument did not explicitly

examine the possible correlation between race and sense of belonging in this study. Additionally, due to the sample size, culture of the setting, and the location of the study, the findings may not be transferable toward informing other college campuses regarding how Black males describe and define sense of belonging. The researcher conduced one interview with each participant which limits the transferability of the data to increase transferability, multiple interviews over a longer period of time would have provided richer data on the subject. In order to insure the accuracy of the data collected, the researcher provided each participants a copy of their transcripts to insure trustworthiness. To increase trustworthiness of the research, the primary researcher provided a copy of the transcripts to a faculty advisor to code independently. The faculty advisor had extensive knowledge of coding and qualitative research and assisted with the coding and analysis process.

Conclusion

Through qualitative inquiry, the research was able to capture the experiences of the five participants. They defined and described their sense of belonging. The outcomes of this study showed Black males defined their sense of belonging as acceptance and comfort. When exploring what their sense of belonging looked like, the Black males in the study began to describe their sense of belonging as their involvement in predominately Black student organizations and through mentorship. The findings showed that sense of belonging for Black males is intertwined with their involvement. Their involvement at the institution aided in their commitment to the institution, ultimately leading to them being retained.

Throughout the study, the participants' racial identity played a critical factor in their sense of belonging and involvement. Therefore, understanding the significance of their racial identity and how it impacts their experiences is important. The last outcome of the study revealed that Black males' do have a sense of belonging at the institution. The participants in the study found their sense of belonging and security from their peers, predominately Black student organizations, and mentors.

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Appendix A - Interview Protocol

1. What made you choose your current institution?

2. Tell me about the things you are involved in on campus.

    a. What made you get involved?

    b. How long have you been involved?

    c. Tell me about the make up (dynamic) of the group.

3. Tell me about your friend group(s).

    a. How did you meet?

    b. Where did you meet?

    c. What do you do together?

4. Tell me about people who have impacted your experience here at current institution? How have they impacted you? Describe in detail the impact the individuals have had on you?

5. Tell me about the places you've lived during college?

    a. Who were your roommates?

    b. How satisfied were you with your arrangement?

6. What kind of student are you?

    a. What factors affects your academic performance?

    b. Are there any people that affect you academically?

7. Tell me about a time you struggled academically, and how you got through it?

8. In what ways do you feel accepted at EIU?

    a. Where do you feel most accepted at EIU?

    b. Where don't you feel comfortable or accepted?

      c.   Are there certain people or groups that make you feel that way?

9.   Tell me about a time you thought about leaving the institution.

      a.   What kept you here?

      b.   Who influenced your decision?

10. Tell me about a personal struggle, and how did you get through it.

11. In what ways do you think the institutions values you or the population you identify with?

      a.   Give me some examples.

12. What advice would give other Black males coming in to EIU?

      a.   concerning how to create a connection at EIU?