Race, Identity, and Communication: Experiences of College Students from Underrepresented Groups

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Eastern Illinois University

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Race, Identity, and Communication: Experiences of College Students from Underrepresented Groups

BY

Raya D. Petty

THESIS

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2018

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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Race, Identity, and Communication:
Experiences of College Students from Underrepresented Groups

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Eastern Illinois University
This thesis is dedicated to my parents and sisters. Thank you for the continuous support and always being in my corner, supporting my decision to attend college and continuing to higher education. You keep me mindful of my worth and help me to never doubt my potential.

To my students who serve as my constant motivation, thank you for letting me be your voice. You remind me why my research is so important. I hope this project encourages you to continue to overcome obstacles and achieve success.
Abstract

There is a significant difference of the completion of college between minority students and white students. The achievement gap is influenced by race and socioeconomic status of the students. The purpose of my study was to examine the relationship between academic performance and achievement and sociocultural factors including race and socioeconomic status. My thesis will affirm previous research that recognizes a need for resources specifically dedicated to assist marginalized groups in higher education. It will bring attention to minority students, first-generation college students and students with a low socioeconomic status. The project includes a literature review that explores identity, intersectionality, microaggressions, stereotype threat, labeling, impostor syndrome, and critical pedagogy. These concepts will allow for an understanding of the factors that contribute to minority student academic achievement while addressing the issues pertaining to systematic racism that may interfere with their achievement. I take a qualitative approach to address the ways minority students communicate about their identity and their experience in higher education. The study utilizes respondent interviews and focus group methods to examine factors of the minority student identity which contribute to or interfere with academic performance and their overall success. Successfully addressing this will lead to an effective proposal for shortening the academic achievement gap.

Key words: Underprepared, underrepresented, underprivileged, minority student, first-generation college student, critical pedagogy, higher education, inclusive excellence, achievement gap, identity, intersectionality, microaggressions, stereotype threat, impostor syndrome.
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................................ 5

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review ....................................................................................... 7

Chapter 2: Research Methods ................................................................................................................. 20

Chapter 3: Analysis .................................................................................................................................. 27

Chapter 4: Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 47

References .................................................................................................................................................. 52

Appendix A ................................................................................................................................................ 56

Appendix B ................................................................................................................................................ 57
Chapter One:

Introduction

Students who are historically underserved have the lowest graduation rate (Jashick, 2008). Numerous studies on college student retention and academic performance show that minorities are more likely to face obstacles that play a large role in the success of that student (Ballard, Gilmore, Keith, & Ore, 2008). Their race and social class alone can present obstacles that may interfere with their academic achievement. The achievement gap in education refers to significant disparities in academic performance between groups of students (Ansell, 2011). It is often described to address the gaps between African American and Latino students compared to their white counterparts as well as those from low-income households compared to students with a higher socioeconomic status.

As a first-generation college student, transitioning to a college setting was an eye opening experience and I had to quickly learn how to adapt to avoid being overwhelmed. This experience, among other factors like attending a public school and living in an inner city and low-income neighborhood, has lead me to my passion of community outreach and development with a focus on education and promoting higher education. Living in a poor neighborhood and not having many examples of successful people can create a lot of internal noise that may cause students to doubt whether they could become successful in graduating college and starting a career. I believe more attention should be placed on understanding and addressing the needs of marginalized groups. There should be specific efforts targeted towards communicating with underprivileged, underrepresented groups in order to address barriers and increase the success rate of minorities graduating college and entering into specific career fields.
Addressing issues that may stem from underprivileged or vulnerable groups can positively impact their performance as it has impacted mine. I will draw on research on first-generation college students, however, given my experience, my thesis will focus on African American students regardless if they are first-generation or not. My ultimate goal is to start initiatives and programs that directly target the negative influences and stereotypes against minority students that may influence their decision to attend college and impact their success during college. I argue for more support and other necessary resources for underprivileged students to ensure they perform high academically and graduate from college on time, therefore shortening the achievement gap.

In summary, this project can serve as a foundation to investigate characteristics of at-risk individuals\(^1\) in universities. Studying the factors that contribute to minority student success can allow educators, staff, and policy makers to discover strategies that can be implemented in order to better serve marginalized groups that in turn will shorten the achievement gap. The achievement gap is an ongoing issue that should be addressed. My project will help us gain a deeper understanding of how students in underserved populations, African American students at predominantly white institutions in particular, experience higher education and how they communicate about their identities and experiences.

**Literature Review**

This section reviews existing literature that examines identity and intersectionality, internal and external communication practices, and critical pedagogy. The communication framework explores imposter syndrome, microaggressions, stereotype threat, and labeling. These

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\(^1\) Using the label “at-risk” is helpful to identify marginalized students but can also reinforce dominant thinking and impact learning. This will be discussed further in the *labeling* section of the literature review.
concepts will serve as a lens to analyze and understand the experiences of African American students at a predominantly white institution of higher learning.

**Identity and Intersectionality**

Identity refers to a person's collective image. Our identity is often based on social categories that we assign ourselves in relation to others. Every individual has multiple identities but the most salient ones, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation receive the most attention. People become conscious of their racial identity early and identity is critically important to how we interact with others (Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003). Over time, we are socialized to better understand our expectations based on the categories we belong to. It is through our multiple identities and definition of self that we connect with the world. Naturally, we accept categories as real. When in fact, social identity categories have been socially constructed by dominant discourses and everyday performances. Intersectional approaches are typically rooted in the critical cultural traditions of communication theory and research (Johnson & Bhatt, 2011), which examines power structures and the marginalized groups that are effected by those power structures. Critical theorists also expose social conditions and messages that oppress groups and produce and reinforce stereotypes (Patrick, 2013). In the following section, I review relevant literature that takes an intersectional view of identity in relation to higher education.

It is becoming increasingly important for instructors to be sensitive to issues on race and gender and to incorporate the related issues into the classroom (Hendrix et al., 2003). "The ultimate task is to address the problems and constraints related to multiple identities coexisting within classroom contexts, while commenting on practical ways that identities may be celebrated and valued via effective teaching and learning-centered approaches" (Hendrix et al., 2003, p.179). Research still does not fully address how students and professors have to negotiate
multiple identities on a daily basis. Classroom instruction is influenced by internal and external factors that ultimately influence the link between the individuals in the classroom. Thus, "student/teacher relationships are far bigger than classroom interaction; they are impacted by the departmental, institutional, and societal climate" (Hendrix et al., 2003, p. 180). The authors propose an acknowledgment of personal identity during the teaching process.

Marginalized groups are forced to negotiate their identity with others. Cultural contracts theory demonstrates how identities are socially constructed, explored and negotiated based on certain contract. This theory rests on three premises: identities require affirmation; identities are constantly being exchanged; and identities are contractual. The first contract type is *Ready-to-sign*. This contract type is prenegotiated. It is designed to maintain a dominant worldview and disregard the interests, values, beliefs, norms of the marginalized group. The second contract type, *quasi-completed cultural*, is the most common contract type. It is partly prenegotiated and partly related to one's identity. Persons in this contract prefer to maintain some level of comfortability with their worldviews and may participate in code-switching to do so. The third contract type is *cocreated cultural*. This is "social agreements that affirm us as cultural others, and the provide a means of relational coordination across cultures and signal that the relationship is fully negotiable and open to differences" (Hendrix et al., 2003, p. 184). It is crucial for scholars to understand interactional dynamics in the classroom and effectively coordinate relationships.

Examining the intersections of identities provides a way to show how a person can experience both privilege and oppression simultaneously (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003). The authors explore ways in which creating resistive space in a classroom provides opportunity to build alliances. "The communication classroom is one space in which these navigations of difference
and fostering of alliances can occur, particularly because we enter and engage the classroom in highly embodied ways" (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003, p. 233). To successfully build an alliance, teachers must be careful to engage in liberal practices versus solely theorizing about liberation as it can separate the knowledge from the person that embodies it. Building alliances and critiquing power structures is resistive act. Teacher must show willingness and accountability in their interactions to challenge dominant ideologies that reinforce oppression. “There are more ideological forces, institutional policies and practices, and social norms that reinforce hierarchy and elites keeping their privileges in place than there are ideologies, policies, practice and norms encouraging and rewarding intercultural alliances” (Collier, 2002, p. 14 in Johnson & Bhatt, 2003).

Orbe (2008) draws on dialectical theory and cross-cultural adaptation theory to provide a framework to understand how first-generation college students negotiate and perform multiple aspects of their identities. Dialectical theory “conceptualizes social life as an open dialogue” (Orbe, 2008, p. 83). It focuses on how individuals use communication practices to negotiate everyday life contradictions. These contradictions are influenced by “unified opposites” in social life (Orbe, 2008) and the constant negotiation of these tensions can lead to relational growth and personal transformation. Cross-cultural adaptation theory, in this sense, works hand in hand with dialectical theory to explain first-generation college student identity negotiation. It refers to “the entirety of the evolutionary processes an individual undergoes vis-à-vis a new and unfamiliar environment” (Kim, 2005, p. 379 in Orbe, 2008). The focus is on the communicative process individuals interactively negotiate their changing identity. The author proposes that there are six primary dialectical tensions are at the core first-generation college student identity negotiation: Individual and social identity; similar and different; stability and change; certainty and
uncertainty; advantage and disadvantage; openness and closedness. If we understand identity as an “ongoing negotiation of dialectical tensions” (Orbe, 2008, p. 92) there can be positive growth and effective communicative practices that manage the tensions.

According to the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), identity is “inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged” (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 230 in Orbe, 2004). Identities are located within four different “frames”: within individuals, within relationships, within groups, and communicated between relational partners and group members. The first frame is a result of a person’s self-cognition, self-concept, and sense of well-being. The second frame involves the enactment of identity to others using indirect or direct message to reveal their identity. The third frame focuses on how identity emerges through our relationships and how those relationships construct our identities. The fourth frame occurs in the context of a larger community where the person possesses a group identity that represents its members. Orbe (2004) draws on Communication Theory of Identity to explain how first-generation college students negotiate identity. He found that first-generation college students’ identity was influenced largely by situational context (home versus school) and type of campus (selective, public, community college, or university). In addition, their status appeared to be more salient when it is intersected with other co-cultural identities especially race, socioeconomic status and gender. Finally, first-generation college students appear to lack any sense of community with other groups of first-generation college students.

Research has addressed what faculty and staff can do to better serve first-generation college students, and other vulnerable groups. Orbe (2004) notes that faculty members can play a role in “facilitating a cultural environment that enhances the success of first-generation college
students” (p. 146). The author proposes three challenges for teachers: first, acknowledge the diversity within the classroom beyond the obvious race, gender, and age. This gives attention to visible and less visible aspects of a student’s identities. Second, do not automatically assume that one aspect of a student’s identity is naturally more salient to their overall self-concept than others. Third, listen carefully to the identity messages that students send in their verbal, nonverbal, and written messages. These challenges also work simultaneously to general issues regarding identity, differences, and effective communication (Orbe, 2004). How faculty and staff members discuss various identities is also important.

Fassett and Warren (2004) propose a change in language about identities. As long as we continue to talk about educational identities as though they are static and unchanging, we will continue to remake them that way (p. 37). Warren (2003) also supports this notion. “I want educational agents to move from a static notion of race, class, sexuality and gender to a view of identity as an historical construction that is not just socially constructed in the here and now” (p. 9). If we understand that identities are socially constructed, we are in a better position to successfully challenge ideologies. “When identity is seen as fixed, stable, and emanating from within an individual, it is much easier to blame that person for their problems” (Jones & Calafell, 2012, p. 965). If we understand that identity is not produced from within a person and instead produced by society, the blame can then shift from the individual towards society. This shift is likely to occur if we change in our preconceived notions of identity. Calafell (2004) suggests that we challenge our assumptions about race and identity “to embrace truly new and unique convergences and spaces of coming together” (p. 201). Embracing these integrated spaces involves both dominant and marginalized groups understanding their identities. Jones (2010) notes that “engaging in intersectional reflexivity requires one to acknowledge one’s intersecting
identities, both marginalized and privileged; and then employ self-reflexivity, which moves one beyond self-reflection to the often uncomfortable level of self-implication" (as cited in Jones & Calafell, 2012). Through self-reflection, individuals may better understand their intersecting identities and eventually acknowledge the way in which they contribute to the oppression of certain groups.

It is critical to address the influence of sociocultural factors in different areas in order to successfully move forward in challenging dominant ideologies and practices that permeate higher education.

"Understanding how different academic and non-academic outcomes are differently patterned by race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender, including within and between group differences, is an important research area that may assist in understanding the potential causal pathways and explanations for observed inequalities, and in identifying key population groups and points at which interventions should be targeted to address inequalities in particular outcomes" (Becares & Priest, 2015, p. 17).

Inequalities often stem from dominant beliefs which are influenced by sociocultural factors. These inequalities must be observed and challenged to present better outcomes for marginalized groups. "Understanding and accepting one’s racial identity is a large component in individual success which in turn is a component in academic success" (Ballard, Gilmore, Keith, and Ore, 2008, p. 7). Considering that the media depicts many negative images of minorities, it is critical for a student’s racial identity to be utilized in a positive manner to enhance their success.

Universities may make efforts to promote a positive racial environment by enrolling a large number of minority students in an attempt to diversify campus but do not provide the necessary attention (Ballard et al., 2008). These attempts fall short of addressing inequalities and may
further marginalize these groups. Marginalized groups may challenge negative perceptions about their identity in order to combat dominant ideologies. If the negative perceptions are internalized, the individual may suffer. Additionally, external communication practices may contribute to an unwelcoming climate for marginalized students.

**Internal and External Communication Practices**

Both verbal and non-verbal communication can reinforce dominant ideologies and practices. Dominant groups hold the power to control communication that reinforces certain values and beliefs. Dominant groups may stigmatize non-dominant group members as deficient because they do not use the same dialect or vocabulary dictated as “standard.” For this project, communication will be broken down into imposter syndrome, microaggressions, stereotype threat, and labeling.

**Impostor Syndrome**

One of the ways that negative perceptions are internalized is through imposter syndrome. Impostor syndrome is a concept that describes individuals who fear being exposed as a “fraud.” Those who suffer from the impostor syndrome are typically unable to internalize their accomplishments or cannot believe their achievements are high-achieving. This phenomenon has been linked to psychological distress for minority students. Cokley et al. (2017) suggest that impostor syndrome can lower self-esteem, exacerbate issues of well-being and mental health that minorities experience already due to discrimination on college campuses. While most people will experience feeling like an impostor, African American students reported more perceived discrimination. It is suggested that the impostor syndrome is more salient for ethnic minorities because they are aware of the negative stereotypes associated with their intelligence. To reduce stereotype threat, some scholars suggest fostering positive dialogue and creating a classroom
climate in which instructors address put-downs, stereotypes, and name-calling and promote prosocial behavior (Ngoma, 2018). While imposter syndrome is mostly an internal intrapersonal phenomenon, microaggressions are external.

**Microaggressions**

Minority students have to negotiate conflicts that arise from perceptions of their racial group. Some students have expressed that their identity as a minority at a predominately white institution has placed them in a position to be the voice for their entire race (Solorzano, 2000). Minority students have to endure barriers on the macro-level and micro-level. Racial microaggressions are unconscious and subtle forms of racism. Racial microaggression is defined as “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority” (Davis, 1989, p.1576 in Solorzano, 2000). Marble (1992) points out that the group that believes itself to be superior has the power to carry out racist behavior. “Dominant groups often attempt to legitimate their position via ideological means or a set of beliefs that explains or justifies some actual or potential social arrangement” (Solorzano, 2000, p. 61). Although subtle, microaggressions have a large impact on African Americans and other students of color. One consequence is a “negative racial climate and African American students’ struggles with feelings of self-doubt and frustration as well as isolation” (Solorzano, 2000, p.69). Microaggressions can also impact the minority student’s academic performance in overt ways such as dropping a class, changing their major or leaving their university. Minority students must combat the unconscious attitudes from dominant groups as well as stereotypes against their group.

**Stereotype threat**
Stereotype threat suggests that awareness of negative stereotyping can psychologically threaten a group. More specifically, awareness of negative stereotype about African American students’ intellectual ability can “impair both academic performance and psychological engagement with academics” which may play a role in the underperformance of the African American students (Aronson, Fried, & Good 2002, p. 113). The authors acknowledged that race does in fact matter and correlates with academic achievement as African American students are trailing their white counterparts. Their research found that when African American students were asked to indicate their race before taking the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), their test scores were significantly lower than when they were not asked to indicate their race. “The prospect of confronting to a negative stereotype about African Americans might be enough to undermine an African American college student’s performance and achievement and thereby negatively contribute to the collegiate racial climate at his or her institution” (Solorzano, 2000, p. 62). Thus, stereotyping and discrimination create additional obstacles for marginalized groups and further disadvantage them persisting and thriving in higher education.

Discrimination against African Americans based on the stereotypes have improved drastically over time (Aronson et al., 2002). The changes have contributed to reduced poverty and unemployment and an increase in optimism. Despite the improvement of life for African Americans, however, black students still fall behind white students in academic success. Reducing stereotype threats have proven to show an increase in African American student achievement. One important aspect of stereotyping is labeling individuals and/or groups.

**Labeling**

Properly labeling a problem helps to move toward effective intervention (Fassett & Warren, 2004). Researchers and educators consider this approach to help their students by
developing work to “identify which students are at risk of educational failure, posit why they might be at risk, and develop approaches that teachers, parents, administrators, and students may take to see that educational success becomes a more likely future” (Fassett & Warren, 2004, p. 240). Too much attention on individual traits, however, implies that “the problem of educational failure lies within seemingly stable, enduring traits of individuals” (Fassett & Warren, 2004, p. 240). It is important to acknowledge that student traits (i.e., race, gender, class) are a predictor of risk as it relates to ethnocentric bias but how we talk about those traits also constructs a social reality that perpetuates marginalization, as language also reinforces dominant thinking. With that in mind, Fassett and Warren (2004) advocate for a change in language. Social constructions, such as “at risk”, can impact the learning. This point is emphasized in an essay “Language of Failure”. The author notes how “everyday discursive practices influence the ways understandings of success and failure become normative.” (Fassett, 2003, p. 46). Educational institutions present a platform to address and change the everyday discursive practices. Addressing communication practices such as imposter syndrome, microaggressions, stereotype threat, and labeling in higher education aligns with the commitments of critical pedagogy.

**Critical Pedagogy**

Critical Pedagogy is important with its focus on education as a whole with emphasis on dominant versus nondominant academic practices (Hendrix et al., 2003). “In a restrictive pedagogical atmosphere, cultural practices and student struggles over meaning do not intersect” (Hendrix et al., 2003, p. 182). Critical pedagogy centers culture, identity, and power in its framework that critiques educational practices. Critical pedagogy is also concerned with transforming oppressive power structures. Critical pedagogy’s goal is to emancipate marginalized groups and challenge and forms of domination and oppression. It is said to be a
response to the inequalities and power structures that exist in educational institutions (Aliakbari, 2011, p. 77).

Critical pedagogy rests in the belief that everyone deserves education regardless of race, gender, and class. Successful application of critical pedagogy will help marginalized groups gain their voices and identities back to actively fight for social change. The students can reflect on their experiences and discover why things are the way they are. Instructors can act as pioneers and facilitate students’ understanding of their role in society and rewrite their experiences and perceptions. Students can evaluate the “validity, fairness, and authority within their educational and living situations” (Aliakbari, 2011, p. 80). One effort to increase fairness is the enrollment of minority students. “University efforts to increase minority enrollment are short-sighted when the resources expended to recruit these students is not matched by the resources used to support students through a successful college career” (Ballard et al., 2008, p. 11). So, in addition to recruiting minority students, critically reflexive pedagogy should be employed to help create resources and programs to support minority students and ensure a fairer educational system.

This framework and supporting literature will assist me in answering my research question: How do underserved students experience higher education and how do they communicate about their identities and experiences?
Chapter Two: Research Methods

This chapter details the methods of the research study. The study utilized a qualitative approach to examine how black college students understand the relationship between academic performance and achievement and sociocultural factors including race and socioeconomic status. The study aimed to answer the following research question: How do underserved students experience higher education and how do they communicate about their identities and experiences? This chapter includes a description of the study design, participants, and data collection, analysis and treatment.

Qualitative Research

Some experiences cannot be meaningfully expressed by numbers (Berg, 2007). Qualitative research allows for analysis that is not subject or limited to mathematical transformation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Instead, qualitative research, which aligns with the interpretive paradigm of theory and research, seeks to understand the subjective realities of research participants. Through this process, qualitative research strategies should result in richly descriptive data. My project fits into a vein of qualitative research that examines culture and identity (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Specifically, research that has examined identities from a critical and intersectional perspective.

For example, research by Cummins and Griffin (2012) discussed articulating pedagogy as acts of love from the black male perspective. The authors used focus groups and interviews to create dialogue specifically to allow black men speak about and confront the discourse and practices which cause them to be invisible and “hypervisible” (Cummins & Griffin, 2012, p. 92). Similarly, Griffin, Ward, and Phillips (2014) acknowledge how black male voices can be used for storytelling, or “counterstorytelling” (p. 1355). As with these two representative research projects, my project aims to understand the barriers that minorities experience as they try to
achieve success, and to reveal their struggles as we turn a critical eye toward oppressive practices in higher education. I employed individual and focus group interviews to understand the experiences of my research participants.

**Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect in-depth responses. In total, two focus group and seven respondent interviews were conducted. For all interviews, it is important to build rapport to help the participants feel at ease. Rapport is relationship-centered and is defined as “an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond” (Frisby & Martin, 2010, p. 147). I built rapport by explaining the purpose of the study and the interview. In addition, I disclosed my personal experience and my direct influences to the research topic, including my experiences as a first-generation, minority college student from a low-income household. This type of interviewer self-disclosure can set up the flow of the interview as it gives insight on the researcher’s style and intentions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

For my respondent and focus group interviews, I developed open-ended questions and used a semi-standard approach so the participants have the opportunity to elaborate and share stories about their experiences.

Respondent interviews involve open ended questions where respondents comment directly on their experiences and explain what they think about their social world (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This interview structure also gives the researcher an opportunity to pose follow-up questions and probe for additional responses. During an interview, we expect the participants to tell us about events that allow us to understand their personal experience and perspective through stories and explanations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The participants also produce explanations on “how they apply what they know in certain areas of their lives, how they moved
from one stage of their lives to another, how they interpret certain texts, and so on” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 174). In addition, interviewing allowed me to gather information that may not be easily or effectively observed in other methods. Qualitative interviewing is also used to verify or validate information from other sources of data, in my case, focus groups. By employing both types of interviews, I was able to triangulate the data, which strengthens the case or claim through multiple methods (Berg, 2007).

Focus groups are most utilized with the intent to exploit “group effect” where members feed off of one another’s responses and are stimulated by the ideas and experiences expressed by each other (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Two types of group effect can occur: Complementary interactions involve members agree on an expressed view and add their own interpretation. Argumentative interactions involve members having opposing worldviews which can reveal how those ideas are formed and placed into action. Group interviews can be successful in aiding participants’ recall of events shared by other participants in the interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Merton et al. (1956) points out three specific problems that I had to be mindful of during the focus group: the interviewer must keep a single participant from dominating the group; the interviewer must encourage reluctant respondents to participate; the interviewer must obtain responses form the entire group to ensure full coverage on the topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). On the other hand, advantages of conducting group interviews include the potential to collect elaborate rich data and aid recall.

**Participants**

The target population for this study was black college students. To participate in the study, students had to (1) identify as Black/African American and (2) be at least 18 years of age. All participants were current students at a Midwestern Predominantly White Institution (PWI).
Participants were identified by the Director of Minority Affairs at Eastern Illinois University and recruited through email announcements (Appendix A). Seven female students and six male students were interviewed. For confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms. Additionally, other identifying characteristics have been obscured (for example, geographic locations generalized to Midwest, etc.). Participants included:

- **Jamila**: Female; Freshman
- **Derrick**: Male; Freshman
- **Jada**: Female; Freshman
- **Alexis**: Female; Freshman
- **Denzel**: Male; Freshman
- **Cedric**: Male; Freshman
- **Serena**: Female; Freshman
- **Sean**: Male; Sophomore
- **Raven**: Female; Sophomore
- **Rhonda**: Female; Freshman
- **Malcolm**: Male; Freshman
- **Kayla**: Female; Freshman
- **Aaron**: Male; Freshman

**Study Procedures**

The focus groups and individual interviews were recorded after review and approval from Eastern Illinois University’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on January 25, 2018. Interviews were audio-recorded using a digital audio recorder with the participants’ consent, as indicated by their signing the consent form. The interviews were conducted one-on-one with one participant at a time. A consent form (Appendix B) was given to all participants. All interviews were conducted in a meeting space in facilities owned and operated by the university where the participants could speak privately and free of distractions and interruptions. During the qualitative interviews, I asked a series of core open-ended questions and adapted follow-up questions to the individual participants. Here are the questions that I presented to the participants during the one-on-one interviews:
1. How was higher education viewed in your family?
2. How was higher education discussed in your family? (Follow up: Can you describe those discussions?)
3. What factors influenced your decision to attend college?
4. Did you have any role models that you talked to about college before you got to college?
5. What advantages, if any, do you think you experienced as a minority college student?
6. What disadvantages, if any, do you think you experienced as a minority college student?
7. Do you consider being a minority part of your identity? Why or why not?
8. Did your race, gender, or other identities ever influence your college experience? (If, so, how?)
9. In what ways has your family influenced your academic performance?
10. How would you characterize your interactions with faculty and staff during college?
11. Can you discuss a time when you felt like an outsider in college?
12. What services do you think colleges could offer to help minority college students?
13. Do you feel a sense of solidarity with (or connection to) other minority students? Tell me why.
14. What advice would you give other minority college students?
15. Describe the mentoring relationship(s) that most affected you as a college student.
16. Overall, what was the most rewarding experience you had in college?
17. Overall, what was the most challenging experience you had in college?

Focus groups were also conducted with up to five participants. Here are the questions that were presented to the participants during the focus group:

1. How was higher education viewed in your family?
2. Did you have any role models that you talked to about college before you got to college?
3. What advantages, if any, do you think you experienced as a minority college student?
4. What disadvantages, if any, do you think you experienced as a minority college student?
5. How would you characterize your interactions with faculty and staff during college?
6. What services do you think colleges could offer to help minority college students?
7. Do you feel a sense of solidarity with (or connection to) other minority students? Tell me why.
8. Overall, what was the most rewarding experience you had in college?
9. Overall, what was the most challenging experience you had in college?

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were reviewed by the researcher. The interviews were transcribed and coded. Codes are the links between data that the researcher establishes to label, separate, and organize data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Categorization involves assigning meaning to properties by the concepts, constructs, or themes of similar items. The transcriptions were used to find themes in minority student's experience in college. This is an important step for making sense of qualitative data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

I reviewed each transcription and categorized responses into themes. The themes were established by identifying similarities in participants’ responses that answered the research questions. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) classify themes as constructs that can be identified before, during, and after data collection. I followed Williams et al. (1990) and Miles and Huberman’s (1994) method of starting with general themes derived from literature and additional themes and subthemes as the interviews are conducted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Drawing from Urban and Orbe’s (2010) process, I first sorted out data that directly pertained to race, identity and
communication. The following step involved examining the responses to find relationships within the experiences. I then re-read the transcripts to confirm or disconfirm the findings on race, identity and communication. Next, I continued to review emerging themes that took form in relation to one another. Finally, I sorted chunks of data based on the themes that emerged for the final analysis.
Chapter Three:

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black college students. This chapter discusses the findings from the study. I include my personal experience and narratives throughout the analysis as a supplement to the data collected and to highlight the intersubjectivity that exists in our common experiences. Additionally, adding my story aligns with the critical commitments of my project as the stories of the experiences of black people are often marginalized. When minority experiences are discussed, it is often from the view of the dominant group which further marginalizes minorities while centering whiteness as the dominant group. This marginalization creates a separation between academics and the everyday experience of minority students. (Spellers, 1998). Given our shared identities and experiences, interweaving my narrative speaks back to the “silencing” of such stories in academia.

In the interviews, each participant was asked about their experience as a minority college student including mentor relationships, family involvement, challenges they faced in college, and interactions with the faculty, staff, and peers. There were some commonalities in responses about their college experience. The themes include: family influence and involvement, relationships with professors and staff, feeling like an outsider, relationship with white and black peers, and overall minority experience.

Family Influence and Involvement

I don’t recall a time in my life where college was not an option. Despite being a first-generation college student, I knew that college was the next step following high school. Although my parents did not attend college, they valued higher education and they were very supportive during my process of deciding on the college that I would attend. However, I soon
realized that there was little they could add and I was forced to make many major decisions on my own because they lacked experience in this area. Along with that, living in a low-income, inner city neighborhood, left me without many role models. Suddenly, these factors became synonymous with barriers and the process to attend college became more difficult. Yet, with higher education being so valued, I had to find someone to speak to about this process and that eventually became high school counselors. The participants in my study shared similar views on their family involvement and having limited role models. Derrick recalled, “In my family, it’s basically mandatory because a lot of people in my family didn’t go to college and they want me to pursue better than what everybody else did.” Similarly, Sean talked about his parents’ view on higher education. “Although my parents didn’t graduate from college, the preached very highly on education. So basically I had to go to college after high school.” The participants acknowledged that their family did not attend college themselves but they were still encouraged and even expected to attend college.

Some students were not only expected to attend college but were expected to achieve good grades. Negotiating motivation and support is a constant tension for first-generation college students (Orbe, 2008). The motivation stems from an understanding that they have a privilege to attend college. A huge source of motivation is feeling as if they represent their entire family. For ethnic minority students, there is an additional feeling of representing a larger community. Drawing back to the frames of Communication Theory of Identity, identity is located in a larger community context where the individual possesses an identity that represents the members within the group (Orbe, 2004). This expectation in turn creates pressure to present themselves in the best light. Denzel believes his family has been a motivation for his academic achievements, “I can’t even miss class and I’m like 300 miles away from them. Failure was not an option. We
get punished for having Cs... but it motivates me.” Rhonda had a similar experience, “Last
semester I got a C and I told my mom. And she told me I could do better. I can’t come here to
waste time.” These students made it clear that there was a level of expectation for receiving good
grades in school.

Malcom confirmed that his family motivated him to continue in college. “I know there
were many times where I wanted to quit but they always support me in what I do. Most likely me
staying in college is what they’re going to push first.” He knew that his family wanted him to
pursue a college degree so they encouraged him to not quit. Similarly, Alexis knew finishing
college was expected of her. “For me, I was the child that my family expected a lot of. I couldn’t
leave even if I wanted to.” Alexis believed she was always held to a high standard. Other
participants shared the ways in which their family impacted their academics and decision to attend
college.

“My mom didn’t go to college right after high school but she went to community
college. But when I was in high school she didn’t let me get below a C, no, below a B
or I would get my phone taken. They want me to do good and they still check my
grades.” – Kayla

“It’s not a big factor because most of my family didn’t go to college. My sister was
first-generation so starting with her, everyone is looking for the grandkids to get a
degree. They hold me up to a certain standard. They expect so much from me so I have
to live up to that or try.” – Serena

“My mom, her dream was to become a teacher. But there was a school that would teach
students how to be teachers but she didn’t get into it I guess because of her SAT or
whatever. And I think she started working in the factory industry and she’s been
working there her whole life. And she’s always told me and my brothers and sisters that she doesn’t want us to work in a factory. Like she wants us to pursue our dreams and what we want for ourselves.” – Aaron

Orbe (2004) found that relationship with family and friends have a greater influence on how an individual’s identity is enacted. First-generation college students are “inextricably linked to family and community.” (Orbe, 2008, p. 86). The excerpts above demonstrate the way first-generation college students understand and appreciate how their success can be interconnected with the success of their family. First-generation college students identify their families as key sources for support. Their decision to attend college and/or their success during college has been influenced by members of their family. Having a supportive network can motivate students to earn good grades and stay in college despite the obstacles. Aside from family, professors, staff, and peers can play a role in the minority college experience.

**Relationship with Professors and Staff**

For my undergraduate career, I decided to attend Ohio State University, one of the largest Predominantly White Universities (PWI) in the Midwest. Someone told me “If you are not close to your professors, you’re losing.” I understood that it was important to have a relationship with my professors but that was easier said than done. It was difficult to approach my professors for help because I felt they didn’t think highly of me because of my race. There was something about having white professors, or simply being at a PWI, that made me think about all of the racial stereotypes towards black people. I was constantly pressured to be the best student possible to be perceived as smart so that I could combat the negative stereotype of black people being unintelligent. With these stereotypes in mind, I found it difficult to participate because I was constantly judging my own thoughts. I did not allow myself to share answers to homework
assignments or ask questions because I feared it made me look like a dumb black girl that was not worthy to attend a top university with all of the white people around me. Solorzano (2001) argues that “the prospect of conforming to a negative stereotype about African Americans might be enough to undermine an African American college student’s performance and achievement...” (p. 62). It wasn’t until my sophomore year when I met my first black professor that I felt the freedom to speak up in class. That was the height of my academic confidence.

According to Orbe (2004), confidence is a learned behavior. The dialectical tension certainty—uncertainty explains how the transition to college can trigger doubt. Confidence is typically established through college accomplishments. Despite being a high-achiever, however, first-generation college students, and arguably minority students, question if they will fit in, handle college work and balance stress related to school, family and work. I asked the participants to characterize their interactions with faculty and staff:

“They try to treat everybody the same. But in some instances you can see how they choose people over you and give them a better grade and help them pass...Because they think white people are smarter than us.” – Raven

“My biology TA, you can see him move towards the white people and help them. But when I go for help he would ask me dumb questions. Like rhetorical questions, like I’m dumb.” – Kayla

Both Raven and Kayla believed their instructors did not treat them the same as their white peers. Some participants acknowledged that the identity of the professor and/or staff played a role in the relationship. Malcolm brought up a relationship he had with one of his professors: “I have one instructor that’s cool but I don’t get along with the other ones but I think it’s just my personality.” I asked him why he believed he was able to get along with this
particular instructor compared to the others. He responded, “Maybe because she understands where I come from. Like, because I’m black and she’s black.” Derrick also believed he had a close relationship with a particular instructor because of her race. “Certain staff members you click with and some they are just there. It depends. You are the only person that we really talk to. And I don’t know if it’s because you’re black, you were my only black student teacher. I know that may play a role.” Derrick understood that sharing an identity may be factor in the way people communicate and build relationships.

In Raven’s case, the professors and staff that she connected with were the ones that could relate to her personal experiences. “I interact with a lot of faculty and staff on campus. Some understand your struggle, some don’t because they don’t know where you come from and your struggles.” Hendrix et al. (2003) proposes that instructors acknowledge their personal identity as it can impact the student/teacher relationship. In addition, instructors should incorporate issues of race and gender in the classroom and address problems associated with having multiple identities (Hendrix et al., 2003). Having necessary support for the minority students will ensure they perceive the professors and staff as fair.

Minority students have to combat racial stereotypes and adjust to the classroom climate in order to succeed. Rhonda mentioned, “If you come in and you’re slacking off they say “oh, there goes another black child who ain’t doing nothing.” That’s how stereotypes get started and I don’t want that.” Some instructors may not intentionally disregard minority students, but they can perform acts that the minority student ultimately perceives as racist. These unconscious insults and behaviors, or microaggressions, are unconscious and subtle but can be impactful (Solorzano, 2001). Cedric believed his instructors had a different mindset towards him compared
to his white counterparts. "I feel like the teachers automatically look at the minorities as lazy. I can see with some of the teachers, the difference in how they would treat minority students."

Black students are exposed to the belief that white Americans are the preferred group in the United States and they become aware of stereotypes and distortions that reinforce white superiority (Tatum, 2017). The author also argues that for black students, the more they identify with their racial group, the more vulnerable they can become to a stereotype threat. They understand the "intellectually inferior" stereotype against their group. They may be more committed and pressured to perform well academically in order to disprove this stereotype.

During an exchange in the focus group, I asked the participants if they experienced any advantages as a minority college student:

"I don't think we experience any advantages." – Jamila

"I think we do though. We have the advantage of taking people by surprise. They expect us not to succeed or they don't expect much from us. And when we do the complete opposite, it's like we're sneaking up...we're under the radar." – Derrick

The other participants nodded in agreement. Later in the discussion, Jamila referred back to Derrick's point:

"I think that since we are looked at to fail or not do as good as others, our work would be looked over more strongly and harshly than other people's work. So, they hold us to a higher scale than everybody else." – Jamila

In a separate interview, Denzel acknowledged that there were resources (i.e., scholarships) that were geared to helping minority college students. However, his interactions with the staff were not positive so that made him want to avoid the staff which caused him to miss out on the resources. "There are scholarships but I don't take advantage of them. I feel like
they look at us like "you're poor, you're black, you need this. Let me help you." instead of me just being an ambitious young black person that wants to take advantage of the resources so I don’t even want to talk to them.” This excerpt supports my earlier claim that universities increase minority enrollment but may not provide resources that effectively support those students. It is becoming increasingly important for faculty and staff to be sensitive to issues on race and create a climate that enables minority students to succeed.

I also asked Denzel to characterize his interactions with professors and staff, and he recalled additional negative interactions.

“There are some that are of a different ethnicity than me and they’re ok. But a lot of them that I’ve actually talked about with other minority students, they’re being a bitch towards us. It’s like “wow, you’re being really cold. Even if you go to their study hours, we’d come in and they’re pretty caddy or like ‘oh you don’t know this?’” – Denzel

These interactions with faculty do not forge identification or alliance. In order to successfully build an alliance with students, Johnson and Bhatt (2003) claim instructors need to be accountable and willing to challenge dominant ideologies. Contrary to essentialist beliefs, social constructionism suggests that human beings do not have “natural” characteristics, instead are socially constructed (Allen, 2005). Additionally, Fasset and Warren (2004) argue that too much attention to labeling can imply that the failure of the educational system lies within the individual based on stable traits of that individual. This is supported by a similar claim from Jones and Calafell (2012) suggesting that it is easier to shift blame from society to the individual when identity is viewed as stable and produced by individuals. Along with that, stereotype threat suggest that this awareness can academically and psychologically impair the individual. Orbe
(2004) identifies ways instructors can enhance their communication effectiveness with all students. Enhancing communication effectiveness and enhancing students' success involves embracing multiple diversities by acknowledging diversity in the class and listening to the identity messages that students send. This can be a point of reflection on practices that may privilege some groups over others. Some of the participants were able to recall specific acts they believe have disadvantaged them as a minority college student. Jada believed that her white peers have an advantage over her: "I feel like for my white peers, our professors are more lenient on them." Aaron said, "There were times that I did come to them for help and sometime they did help me. But sometimes I felt like they did that because they felt sorry for me. Like they felt obligated to help me." He understood that some interactions with his instructors may stem from stereotypical perceptions about him.

As discussed in the literature review, the *cocreated cultural contract* involves relationship coordination across cultures (Hendrix, et al., 2003). It extends beyond "mere talk about harmony and cohesiveness" to demonstrating "unconditional appreciation and valuation of the other person" (Hendrix et al., 2003, p. 185). During an exchange during the focus group, Jada and Jamila characterized positive interactions with instructors based on perception of their instructors being caring and concerned about their performance.

"I think with big classes the teachers don’t really try to get to know you. The big classes are more like "if you want to get to know me you can email me or check in to my office hours" or something like that but they don’t really care too much." – Jada

"I think when teachers show that they care it makes me want to build a relationship with them. But if teachers don’t show they care or ask me what’s going on...if you see a student is doing poorly in a class...like one of my teachers reached out to my
RA to see if anything was going on because I wasn’t going to class, so stuff like that shows me that you care, that would make me feel some type of way.” – Jamila

Despite the obstacle with having a negative classroom climate and combating racial stereotypes, students understood the importance of establishing a relationship with professors. Serena shared, “At first, I wasn’t very interactive with them. Now that I know I have to reach out to people when I need help.” Sean understood that that there was also an advantage to building a relationship with instructors:

“I feel like you definitely need to get to know your teachers a little more. Maybe that’s how you get a boost. They see that you’re a hardworking student. And once you befriend your teachers and you show them that you tried, you get a little advantage in class.”

Majority of the participants were able to recall negative interactions with their professors or staff. Cedrick, on the other hand, said “I haven’t had any bad interactions. Most of the faculty is helpful. I haven’t had any bad experiences with any of them.” Aronson et al. (2002) suggests that discrimination against minorities based on stereotypes have improved over time yet black students are trailing behind their white counterparts. Even if students are successful in building relationships with their professors, they still have to face many situations on campus, both social and academic, that will impact their overall college experience.

**Feeling Like an Outsider**

Since I only had one black professor during my undergrad career and I rarely had classes with my black peers, often times I felt like an outsider. The most significant outsider experience was in my undergraduate Spanish class. Not only was I the only black person in the class but I was also the only minority. Again, this pressure to perform my best on behalf of all black
students ultimately interfered with my performance. Although I studied the Spanish language throughout all four years of high school, I never participated in my college course and I performed poorly on exams. During group activities, I often worked alone and I did not seek help from any of my peers. As we noted in Chapter 1, imposter syndrome links psychological distress for ethnic minority students to a negative campus climate. According to imposter syndrome, students who suffer from this phenomenon have difficulty internalizing their achievements (Bauer-Wolf, 2017). Solorzano (2001) argues that microaggressions can impact the students' performance in specific ways as dropping class or leaving the universities. Eventually I dropped the course and decided that I was not on the same level as my white peers. Participants in the study reflected on being excluded and feeling like an outsider. The participants' outsider experience stemmed from being a visible minority in class. Derrick shared his experience is one of his courses: “I wouldn’t say outsider but out of place. That’s a better way to put it. So like in my English class, I’m literally the only black male. Its two black girls and everybody else white and it’s like 32 of us.” Raven and Aaron also observed the outsider experience in their classrooms: “Focusing on black people, we are always separated from groups. And if you look in classrooms, there are more whites than blacks.”

“So far for me it’s the way people look at you. It’s a PWI and most of my classes I was the only black person in there. I knew what to expect when coming to a PWI but it’s a difference from expecting what’s to come and actually being in that situation. It was just a lot of eyes on me. I was either looked at real weird, like I’m an extraterrestrial or something, or people would randomly come up to me because they feel sorry or something or just because I’m black, I don’t know.” – Aaron
Solorzano (2000) asserts that self-doubt, frustration, and isolation are consequences of a negative racial climate. In the western society, “we often find ourselves lodged between the *either* and the *or*” (Spellers, 1998, p. 230) which constrains us but also creates a *us* and *them* mentality. Dichotomous thinking articulates differences in terms of superiority/inferiority. Placing an emphasis on diversity rather than either/or a dichotomous way of thinking can create space for inclusivity (Spellers, 1998). Black students on predominantly white campuses experience more feelings of alienation, sensed hostility, and racial discrimination, and lack of integration (Tatum, 2017). Negative interactions with white peers can also contribute to a negative racial climate.

**Relationship with White Peers**

Living in a large and apparently diverse city as Chicago, I was eventually exposed to people with many different racial backgrounds. However, attending a university where you may be the only black student in your class not only had an impact on my academics but my overall college experience. This outsider feeling can even lead to feelings of regret and doubt and an overall feeling of misplacement. When asked about their college experience, participants shared narratives about their interactions with their white peers inside and outside the classroom. Similar to my experience in my Spanish class, Kayla often felt left out: “I feel like you’re not approached by the other people. Like in my biology class, my teacher keeps saying to make study groups but...you don’t get picked? Right.” Although, the participants, and myself included, could not say their white peers explicitly admitted avoiding them because of their race, they still believed it was racially motivated. Sean specifically discussed the perception he believes his white peers has about him:
"The common disadvantage is you always get that person that will look at you a certain way and have these expectations that aren’t even included in your character. That’s probably it. Because I know I usually wear this hat and hoodie in my classes and I sit next to the white people and they probably think I don’t know nothing but I get As on the test and stuff. They judge based on looks at stuff."

For some students the outsider experience extended beyond the classroom setting. Denzel recalled several situations involving some of his white peers where he was left out or disadvantaged.

"In class where the majority of students are white, it’s pretty difficult. You know they don’t really want to talk to you. Not everyone is like that...but there are a lot of them that look at you and there is no association at all."

One of the six primary dialectical tensions of college student identity negation, similar – different, recognizes how humans are simultaneously similar and different (Orbe, 2008). Stemming from that dialectical tension is a secondary tension, ordinary – special, which explains how relationships at home are defined in terms of similarity and familiarity. According to Orbe (2008), first-generation college students use their home to escape the stress from school. It represents a space to feel comfortable around people like them. The students often seek their family and communities as a retreat from college life. I recall many times where I felt the need to go home over a weekend to get away from stress and negative tension on campus. Denzel shared a similar feeling after he attended his first all-white class. He explained how that experience made him want to leave campus and go back home to his family.
“Being in my first all-white class. After that, I had to tell my mom about that. I went in and I was the only black student and I thought “why am I here?” Definitely not ok. I wanted to leave. These people are pretty rude.”

Despite having a lot of confidence, the transition to college can trigger a lot of doubt for students (Orbe, 2008). Although I gained a lot of academic confidence from high school achievements, I still experienced some doubt after entering college. First-generation college students may also question whether or not they will fit in with other students and handle college and outside stressors. Denzel talked about one of his experiences of not fitting in with his peers in his residence hall: “I’m gay and I live on an all-boys’ floor. I actually live on an all-white-boys’ floor. There are three other black people. And it’s so awkward for us.”

Underprivileged students may understand the privilege to attend college but in many ways they experience disadvantages on campus including feeling misplaced or left out. Some scholars have labeled these experiences as similar to entering an “alien culture” (Orbe, 2004). Denzel’s experience of alienation extended outside of the classroom.

“My very first day here. It was a series of parties leading up to the quote on quote black party on the block. There were a group of us and we tried to walk into one of the white parties and, it happened three times so it was an eye opener for me, they stopped us at the door and they were like “what are you doing” and they said “we don’t have any cups.” That’s a trick I learned that means they don’t was us there.”

As depicted in the above excerpt from Denzel, students can feel disconnected and excluded by the dominant groups even in social aspects. As supported by the literature, a negative racial climate can lead to poor academic performance and high dropout rates among black students (Solorzano, 2001). On separate occasions, participants admitted to wanting to
leave their university. Denzel concluded his interview by saying, "Coming here made me realize that a PWI is not meant for me so I will be transferring next semester to an HBCU. I would feel more comfortable being around black people." Black students on predominantly white campuses often desire safe space to retreat to which sometimes means leaving their PWI altogether (Tatum, 2017). Kayla also admitted that she would feel more comfortable at an HBCU. "I wanted to go to an HBCU. I wanted to be around my own people. I've been going to a majority white school my whole life. I've been wanting one since pre-school." Evidence shows that "students, like most human beings, develop best in environments where they feel valued, protected, accepted, and socially connected" (Tatum, 2017, p. 170). In a separate interview, Derrick also discussed doubt he felt about his decision to attend his university.

"If we were at an HBCU, it would be completely different. The vibe we feel from people around us would be different. Here, I just feel like people look at me different. Like, they just analyze us completely different and that changed the experience. In the back of your head, I just think I should've went to an HBCU. Or something about this school makes me feel like I wish I wasn't here."

Jamila agreed, "Yeah, like he said, if we went to an HBCU, it would have been completely different ball game. Everything here just influenced my college experience."

Minority students must combat microaggressions and stereotypes against their group. If the racial climate is negative, they may be forced to deal with issues of race on their own. With that, they may feel a sense of solidarity with other black students and decide to build an alliance.

**Relationship with Black Peers**

Growing up in a predominantly black neighborhood and attending predominantly black schools, made me feel more comfortable interacting with black students. There was also this
sense of understanding because we shared an aspect of our identity. I knew that not all of my black peers in college grew up in the south side of Chicago and I knew not all of my black peers came from a poor household. Some of my black peers even had parents that attended college. In fact, the only thing that some of my black peers and I had in common was our race. Yet, I still felt connected to my black peers and assumed they knew exactly what I was going through. Although rare, I always felt a sense of relief when I walked into a classroom and saw another black student. Building alliances involves a sense of understanding of another's experience. More specifically, the nature of alliance may also involve understanding differences amongst each other because of experiencing difference of their own (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003). “To build alliances means accepting pain and conflict as part of making connections with others” (p. 233). Johnson and Bhatt posit that an alliance occurs with encompassing differences instead of disregarding them (Johnson & Bhatt, 2003). There is an assumption that if a person shares the same marginalization as you, they automatically understood you. Some of the participants shared similar feelings. Raven believed “We all come from the same background pretty much. We all went through the same struggles.” During the focus group, I asked participants if they felt a sense of solidarity with other minority students. Alexis said “I grew up around a lot of minorities so it is easier to connect with them.” Jamila agreed with Alexis’ comment, “Yeah. I connect with other minority students more than I do nonminority students...because they’re like me...if you haven’t been through at least open thing like me, you’ve been privileged your whole life then I probably wouldn’t be able to connect with you.” Other participants commented on perceived campus diversity:
“It's diverse and all to a certain extent but the black people really are going to be with the black people more than you would see a black person with a white person. Or white people are going to be with white people because they kind of click better because they're the same race.” – Jada

“If it's a class full of white people, then the black people will get together. We definitely sit together. All of my study groups are full of black people. We are all we got. It's like being the new kid all over again. So it's like a white pool and all the black people stick together.” – Denzel

“When you're in the cafeteria, because my friends schedule doesn't fit with mine, I eat by myself and you will see the white people with the white people and the black people with the black people. And sometimes I'm the only black person in there.” – Alexis

Multiple layers of marginalization add to this consciousness. Therefore, alliances may be more difficult to build for the students that are further oppressed due to other aspects of their identity (i.e., sex and gender).

“Since I am gay, they try to treat me different. Which I don’t understand because white people treat black people differently and black people treat gay black people different. So it's like, wow, I got it pretty hard.” – Denzel

Ballard et al. (2008) believes accepting identity is a large part of individual and academic success. This participant identified multiple aspects of his identity. He also understood that his oppression extended past his race but also to his sexuality. He believed that he had to combat a negative racial climate and mistreatment from others based on his sexuality.

**Minority Experiences**
It is no surprise that minority students have more obstacles to overcome than their white counterparts. Being black not only shaped my interactions but my college experience altogether. Ballard et al. (2008) posit that having an understanding of your racial identity is not only a large part of individual success but also academic success. The core of CTI reveals the idea that communication shapes identity while identity shapes communication (Orbe, 2004). Everything around me, from the weird looks I received from my white peers to the lack of black faces, was a constant reminder that I was a black student on a white campus. The biggest struggle for college students is often identified as balancing academics and social life. I asked participants what was the most challenging experience they had in college.

"Managing school and personal time. That was hard. When you first get here, you have the freedom to do whatever you want and that can get to your head a little bit. You forget you came here to really go to school." – Derrick

"Being on my own a lot. And having to get a job. Because I can’t always ask my daddy for money so I had to get a job. Job, class, studying and personal life, it gets kind of hard to manage." – Alexis

"Same. Being a full time student and having a full time job, that’s hard. And when you get to college, there’s nobody here to wake you up and tell you to go to college. And for freshman, that’s something new...And also like time management, procrastination, holding off to the last minute to study." – Jamila

As a minority student, balancing academics, social life, and having a job is even more imperative because performing poorly meant proving that all black students continued to perform poorly. The disadvantage I faced that many of my white counterparts did not understand was being judged as a racial group rather than an individual. With that, the daily performance I had to
put on to defy stereotypes. Solorzano (2000) addresses how minority students have to combat unconscious attitudes from dominant groups. During the focus groups, participants were asked to reflect on disadvantages they faced as minority college students and the ways in which their identity shaped their college experience:

"Everything. All odds against us. The resources. Everything. Everything is built on a scale for us to fail." – Derrick

"Yeah, I think that since we are looked at to fail or not do as good as others, our work would be looked over more strongly and harshly than other people work. So they hold us to a higher scale than everybody else." – Jada

"I agree with them on the failing part. It’s a lot of people that come to college and there’s a lot of people that leave. Because I had a lot of people that left college because they didn’t have enough money from financial aid... the money thing is a big issue.” – Alexis

During the respondent interviews, participants also talked about how their identity as a minority created disadvantages and shaped their college experience. Serena believed “Based on me being a minority student, people that aren’t minority have a better chance of succeeding and having that extra step.” Kayla shared similar beliefs. I asked her if it was negative to be seen as a minority and she said “Yes and no. Because they expect less from you.” Other participants reflected on their minority status and the way it influenced their college experience:

“The struggle and this obstacle that I am overcoming with being a minority, its making me push harder, its making me stronger person. Because I feel like if everything got handed to me as if I were white, I wouldn’t be the person that I am today. It’s harder for me. Even with professors, and my peers. I rely on my peers for
information. It would be easier for me to get information from my peers than my professors because they say things a certain way, if I don't understand it and I need a different point of view, I would rather go to peers. In class where the majority of students are white, it's pretty difficult. You know they don't really want to talk to you. Not everyone is like that...but there are a lot of them that look at you and there is no association at all.” – Denzel

“I’m not going to say favoritism but I sort of kind of feel like it is a disadvantage. I feel like in a sense, the way my professors talk to me, or some of my classmates would talk to me, it’s kind of like they feel sorry for me. At the same time, I want to go off but I say “I’m not going to do that. I’m a civilized black man” So I don't go off on my teachers because I want a good reputation.” – Aaron

With all of the disadvantages in mind, it is difficult to examine advantages. Two students acknowledged there were scholarships specific to helping minorities. However, the majority of the students interviewed believed there were no advantages for minority college students.
Chapter Four:

Conclusion

There is a gap in academic achievement between African American students and their white peers. First-generation college students and students with a low socioeconomic status also have less academic success than their counterparts. Minority students, especially those attending predominantly white institutions, are more likely to face obstacles like stereotype threats and discrimination that can impact their learning. This project is a critical framework that examined the sociocultural factors that contribute to the academic achievement of marginalized students. The research question that guided the project is: How do underserved students experience higher education and how do they communicate about their identities and experiences? This chapter summarizes the findings that answered my research questions, discusses the implications and limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for future research.

The literature review revealed correlations between race, socioeconomic status and performance. Marginalized groups have less academic success and graduate at a significantly lower rate than their white counterparts. This is correlated with family influence, campus support, and communicative practices of dominant groups. After studying internal and external communication practices (i.e., imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, labeling and microaggressions), I have a better understanding of the ways in which language reinforces dominant ideologies and practices in the educational system. Language and other communication practices that perpetuate marginalization should be addressed and changed within the educational institutions in order to provide a more supportive climate.

The qualitative study was conducted to explore the ways marginalized groups communicate about their identity and the way it influences their college experience. I included
my personal experiences and narratives to support the data I collected and highlight the shared experiences of marginalized groups. The six themes that were revealed from respondent interviews and focus groups were 1) Family influence and involvement; 2) Relationship with professors and staff; 3) Feeling like an outsider; 4) Relationship with white peers; 5) Relationship with black peers; and 6) Overall minority experience. The analysis captured narratives from the participants and additional research on identity that showed correlations with the racial climate on campus and the overall college experience for minorities. Although our experiences are unique to us, there were similarities in the ways minorities experienced college. Majority of the participants had family members that were in some way influential to their overall college experience. This ranged from pressure to perform well in their courses to motivation for completing college. Their relationship with professors and staff were overall negative due to their belief of being treated differently than white students. These descriptions of their relationship with professors and staff revealed that participants were aware of the stereotypes associated with their race and could sense mistreatment. Similar to the experiences with their professors, majority, if not all of the participants acknowledged to some extent feeling excluded or treated different by their white peers. The outsider experience extended beyond the classroom to the residential halls, dining halls and campus parties. On the other hand, and in contrast to feeling like an outsider, participants admitted to having a sense of solidarity with other minority students. When they have the opportunity, they would connect with other black students because they believed they understood one another from having a shared aspect of their identity. All in all, participants were able to communicate about their minority status and how it influenced their overall college experience.
The literature also supports the importance of intersectionality as a factor for academic achievement. Although I did not exclusively ask the participants to detail other aspects of their identities, during the respondent interviews and focus groups, many participants acknowledged being a first-generation college student, some shared they grew up in an inner city and low-economic household, and one participant identified as gay. Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) explains how students' status as a first-generation college student is more salient when it is intersected with other co-cultural identities (Orbe, 2004). Therefore, intersectionality must be acknowledged. Research supports the claim that having multiple layers of marginalization presents more awareness of obstacles that interfere with their success. Intersectionality, then, must be examined and instructors should incorporate issues of race, gender, and class in the classroom in order to foster effective student/teacher relationships and a positive climate. Minority students who are not first-generation college students, however, also experience obstacles that may interfere with their academic success because of cultural differences. Instructors and staff can effectively coordinate relationships by demonstrating an openness to differences and ensuring those cultural difference will be acknowledged and valued, as the cocreated cultural contract indicates. The observations from my study can serve as a channel to bring awareness to the achievement gap between minority students and their white counterparts as well as practices by dominant group members that further disadvantage and marginalize these students.

Implications

My study contributes to the field of Communication by affirming existing research on the academic achievement gap. I have also contributed to the field by providing a better understanding of how identity is communicated by marginalized groups at a predominantly white
institution. The study is valuable because it addressed communication practices that promote dominant ideologies which is a commitment of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy can also deal with other staff members and spaces outside the classroom which contributes to the overall racial climate. Understanding how underserved populations experience higher education can allow educators and policy makers to discover strategies that can be implemented in order to better serve marginalized groups that in turn will shorten the achievement gap.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Although I was able to obtain rich data from two focus groups and seven respondent interviews, it would be beneficial to gather more data from a larger number of participants. While I successfully recruited nearly an equal number of male and female students, my participants were limited to first and second year students. The participants provided adequate data for my analysis, however, my research may further benefit from having perspectives from a diverse age range. For future research, I recommend intentionally seeking participants from each grade level and examining patterns across different age groups. Gathering information from a larger group that is also diverse in terms of age will allow a better understanding of the group as a whole.

Future research may also replicate this study at institutions with different types of campus (selective, public, community college, or university) in various regions. My participants attended the same university so the study was limited to experiences of black students in the Midwest. All students manage dialectical tensions in similar yet different ways often related to other cultural identity markers (Orbe, 2008). Therefore, other institutions can offer students with a different perspective that may have different experiences. These institutions may also provide students
with similar experiences which will further highlight the intersubjectivity that exist in our common experiences.

Communication practices (i.e., stereotype threat, labeling, and microaggressions) have a large impact on other students of color. Therefore, the research can be expanded to Latino students as they are also underrepresented and may face barriers that can impact their academic achievement. Obtaining data from other marginalized groups can reduce the separation between academics and everyday experiences of minority students. This will also ensure the voice of marginalized groups are not silenced.

Finally, future research should also examine the practices and resources in place by educational institutions intended to support minority students inside and outside of the classroom. Professors and staff must be intentional about the communication practices to facilitate a welcoming climate for marginalized students. Studying the factors that contribute to minority student success will allow institutions to provide opportunities that better promote and support minority student academic achievement.
References


Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies, 8(5), 85-106


Appendix A: Recruiting Email

Research Study on Identity and Minority College Students

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring identity and minority college students being conducted by Raya D. Petty from the Communication Department at Eastern Illinois University. This study was approved by Eastern Illinois University’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research on

You will be asked questions about your experiences as a minority student and asked to share stories about those experiences. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face. Meeting times and places are flexible and will be arranged to fit your schedule. By sharing your stories, you will be adding to a growing field of knowledge about identities and experiences of minority college students.

Review of the criteria for participation:

Participants should...

1) Identify as an African-American/black student
2) Be 18 or over

If you have questions about these criteria, please email Raya Petty at rdpetty@eiu.edu.

If you would like to participate in the project, please email Raya Petty at rdpetty@eiu.edu.
Appendix B: Consent to Participants

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Intersecting Identities and the Minority College Student Experience

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Raya D. Petty from the Communication Studies department at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between academic performance and achievement and sociocultural factors including race and socioeconomic status.

• PROCEDURES
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview regarding the topic. You will be asked approximately 20 questions in an interview that lasts from 30-90 minutes. The conversation will be recorded and transcribed, if the participant allows.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
There should be no real risks or discomforts that arise from participating in this study. The only potential risks or discomforts could include possible emotional feelings when asked questions during the interview. These risks are not more pronounced than one might experience in everyday life.

• POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY
Participants may benefit from developing self-awareness about their identities after recounting their experience as minority college students. The study may benefit society by helping institutions better understand the needs and experiences of minority college students (a growing population at many colleges and universities).

• CONFIDENTIALITY
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of identifying speakers using pseudonyms to transcribe the notes, and in written reports as well. Any materials (notes from interviews or audio recordings of interviews) will be secured by the researcher.

• PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer, and you may request that the audio recorder be turned off if you become uncomfortable with a conversation. All such requests will be honored. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study.
IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS
If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact Raya D. Petty, Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Communication Studies Department at Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL, rdpetty@eiu.edu, 217-581-6950, or Dr. Richard G. Jones, Jr., Associate Professor of Communication Studies at EIU, rgjones@eiu.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS
If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, call or write:
Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant Date

In addition, I agree to be audio-recorded with the understanding that these audio-recordings will be used for the purposes of this research study and transcribed using pseudonyms to protect my confidentiality.

___ I agree to be audio-recorded.

___ I do not agree to be audio-recorded

Signature of Participant Date

Signature of Investigator Date