The Lived Experiences of African American Males in an Urban University Setting

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Abstract: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore lived experiences of African American males who have advanced into higher education. The goal of the study was to identify reasons African American males attend college so higher education institutions can work toward increasing the number of African American males in higher education.

With the economic shift downwards, voluminous numbers of institutions of higher education have sustained unfortunate trends of declining enrollment. Amongst the degeneracy in student population, African American (AA) males attending colleges and universities have disproportionately low numbers (Frierson, Pearson & Wyche, 2009; Stoops, 2004). An aggregate of AA males attending and completing college is lagging behind males in other ethnic and cultural groups (Roach, 2001). According to Jackson (2003), total enrollment of AA males was 4.0% and 31.0% for white males. Because of the minute integers of AA males in higher education, it is critical to explore their experiences and rationalizations for attending colleges and universities.

African American males have an array of perceptions on higher education due to their lived experiences (Pouncil, 2009). Although some AA males have positive attitudes about attending colleges, other AA males experiencing mitigating circumstances that hinder progression (Laing & Robinson, 2003). Understanding their experiences and the notions of valuing higher education is vital in assisting colleges and universities in increasing the number of African American males matriculating in colleges and universities (Ballard & Cintrón, 2010; Frierson et al., 2009). By recognizing and discovering justifications for attending universities, educators have captious information to champion AA males' academic and professional endeavors in higher education. Colleges and universities will inevitably become supporting agents and attract an augmented number of AA males to their universities. Most importantly, AA males pursuing higher education have a discourse platform for sharing analogous and/or disparate experiences.

Research about African American males in higher education is a sparse topic (Jackson, 2003). Although there has been some research on AA college students in general, there is minimal information that perorates specifically about experiences of AA males at colleges and universities (Green, 2010). African American males' experiences in colleges and universities are not explicitly represented in literature reviews and studies in academia (Ballard & Cintrón, 2010). Because past studies have examined AA males' experiences in higher education through lenses of multifarious topics (i.e., sports, gender relations, racial comparisons and Historically Black Colleges and Universities), it is eminent to conspicuously concentrate on the experiences of AA males in higher education to identify some cardinal factors they enroll in colleges and universities. Two facets, the experiences of AA males in high school and AA males in higher education, presented in this literature review converges the connections that exist between the effects a high school preparation has on AA males' experiences in higher education.

African American Males in High Schools

Tucker, Dixon and Griddine (2010) disclosed family support was contributory to AA high school males' drive for success academically and professionally. Essentially, AA high school males needed the reinforcement from their families and the feeling of mattering that helped build a solid groundwork for self-efficacy and assurance. These AA high school males had intrinsic motivation that lucidly directed their drive for success. It is pertinent to establish an environment with mentors, educators and administrators to cultivate a didactic atmosphere that has aggrandized representation AA high males in gifted and talented academic programs. Unfortunately, many AA males remain overrepresented in special education classes (Irving & Hudley, 2008; Tucker et al., 2010). In many special education environments, AA males exhibit a positive relationship between oppositional cultural attitudes and cultural mistrust. There also appeared to be evidence of an inverse relationship with outcome expectations, outcome value, and academic achievement. Factors such as school failure, high dropout rates, low standardized test scores and low university enrollment were related directly to educational underachievement among African Americans.

As AA males' mistrust increases, their academic outcome expectations decrease. Doubt and oppositional cultural attitudes have direct correlations (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Students with oppositional cultural attitudes, high cultural mistrust, and depreciation for the value of educational outcomes have lower expectations for the benefits of their educational outcome (Irving & Hudley, 2008). Consequently, more and more AA males have lower achievement and are recommended for interventions.

Duckett (2009) explicated students were not exposed to academic information about their cultures. Essentially, there should be lessons to develop AA boys into men through responsibility. The exploration of culturally responsive activities for AA boys cultivates knowledgeable AA males who are ready to enroll in colleges and contend with the pressures of balancing their personal lives. Academic achievement appears to improve the opportunity to pursue higher education (Harper, 2009). Students who begin to prepare for higher-level courses in high school will become students who have better high school and university experiences. Comeaux (2010) examined strategies that help AA males prepare to enter colleges and universities. Ballard & Cintrón (2010) researched strategies AA males deemed effective and/or enhanced academic achievement in college.

African American Males and Higher Education

Dancy II (2010) revealed commonalities in AA males' spiritual beliefs that influenced pursuit of education and their inner drive toward to complete higher education. Findings also delineated a fervent foundation and dependency on God. AA males' religious beliefs increased their persistence toward completing higher education. Partnerships between churches and colleges could have a positive effect on the engagement and completion of higher education.

Campbell (2009) concluded parental influence, positive high school culture, college access, perceived returns on college investment, and peers influenced enrollment of AA males in higher education. Ballard & Cintrón (2010) highlighted AA doctoral students who attended majority White institutions had negative perceptions of the campus environment. Many AA males attributed their success in university to family, mentors, friends, faith, mentors and other AA students (Johnson, 2004; as cited by Ballard & Cintrón (2010). These researchers highlighted that AAs need to share their stories with society to help institutions create policies that increase the success of AA students.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding how AA males feel about their academic and personal experiences furnishes pertinent information needed to help educators develop an awareness of issues existing in the lives of these underrepresented population. It is essential for educators to implement ameliorated programs at the university level to attract students and to retain AA males at their schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions revealed the importance of understanding the lived experiences of African American males in higher education: (a) What are the most common reasons African American males identify for attending university? (b) What experiences impacted the decisions of African American males to enroll in a university setting? (c) What major influences (family, role models) contributed to their enrollment in university?

A phenomenological qualitative research was chosen for this study. According to Creswell (2008), phenomenological qualitative research allows for systemic exploration of some portion of human experience. This study is designed to discover common, emergent themes presented by those interviewed (Donalek & Soldwisch, 2004).

Population and Sample

The university on the south side of Chicago, Illinois was chosen to conduct the study. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2010), 85% of the enrollment listed for this campus was AA. The university is a fully accredited, public, commuter and residential institution committed to meeting the needs of urban community. This university offers programs of study designed to meet an array of academic and professional needs for undergraduate and graduate candidates. Although this university is not recognized as a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), the majority of the student population is AA. Although the university is considered a Predominately Black University (PBU), only 29% of the AA student population is male.

A sample of 18 AA men enrolled at this university participated in the study. This study was conducted at a university. Interviews were administered on campus in the university library. AA males interviewed were full-time undergraduates and at least 19 years old within the first two years of college. In addition, participants were identified from the database in the aforementioned AAMRC at the university. The data was collected from responses to questions on the open-ended survey.

Interview Questions

The interview questions were developed as the researcher explored and examined reasons, factors, themes and/or individuals that encouraged and impacted participants to continue in higher education (Davis, 2008). Acknowledgment of this information gave insight into changes and/or innovations needed in the educational system to encourage more AA males to enroll in college. The list outlines questions asked to each participant.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were recorded by audio to ensure all responses were documented. Interview transcriptions were analyzed utilizing NVivo 9. The researcher highlighted key points to ensure quick recall or further data analysis. The data allowed the researcher to see all information on a theme summarized together. The researcher tracked ideas and steps, allowed annotations to jot down thoughts, created memos and captured detailed observations and similar themes.

Once data was collected and placed in the Nvivo 9 software program, the researcher searched for similarities and themes revealed by the participants. The researcher clarified and

charted themes in order of most common to least common experiences. Correlations around common themes were made and outliers were identified.

To minimize any limitations, the information gathered from participants was received as true and valid. Having participants sign the consent form further validated data disclosed was true and for study purposes only.

Discussion of the Major Themes

There were seven themes based on the responses provided by the participants in the study. Each participant identified the person or persons who they hold responsible for their educational standing. Responses were explored for commonalities and to give insight on AA males' lives and perspectives on education.

Reasons for Attending College and Degree Choice

Out of 18 participants, 16 responded that attending university was essential to their lives. Participants were attending university for several reasons, including better job prospects, better quality of life, and economic gain. These results are similar to those of Schultz and Higbee (2007), who indicated career preparation and acquiring knowledge are the most significant motivation for attending college. Other reasons participants noted included monetary and personal fulfillment. Phinney, Dennis, and Osario (2006) found ethnic minority students often reported they attended university to be of assistance to their family and reaffirm self-worth. This study confirmed AA males had self-determination and personal goals to enroll in higher education. Data revealed the majority felt college is an important factor to have a better life.

Reasons for Choosing Specific Degree Programs

The second interview question was degree choice and the reasons for choosing the preferred degree. Business was chosen as a degree for 6 of 18 participants. Four participants mentioned family members owned businesses and they, too, wanted to run a successful business. Physical Education and recreation was chosen by 3 participants. Biology and Criminal Justice were chosen by four participants (two chose each); two participants chose general studies. There was only one of each of the following degrees: engineering, communication, education, and political science. One commonality for seeking a particular degree was a desire to become a role model and/or activist in the community.

Role Models

Mothers and pastors were the most common. Eight participants out of 18 mentioned their fathers as role models. Other participants mentioned President Obama, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, and coaches (i.e., football or basketball). Findings may hold significant implications for a student's educational goals and aspirations. Being rejected by a father could trigger an array of feelings in AA men (Hunter et al., 2006). President Obama's exposition in his autobiography about his own father can help young AA men move toward closure with this area of their lives. Stereotypical imagery distracts young AA men who desire to see exemplary males (Aymer, 2010). As a result, positive representations of AA men such as teachers, professors, mentors, doctors and lawyers can be overlooked or not highlighted in the public eye. Role models relate to the reduction in violent behavior and the person's attitudes toward violence (Hurd, Zimmerman, & Reischl, 2011). Most parents provide unconditional love and support. Parents were viewed as role models of individuals who pushed students because of their lack of success in their own lives.

Hardships

AA males shared some challenges encountered as youth, including poverty stricken living conditions, violence and drug affected environments. Financial limitations were also

mentioned as an ongoing barrier to success in higher education. The majority referenced problematic difficulties served as motivation until graduation. Participants considered themselves fortunate to have survived arduous conditions.

African Americans proportionally identified atrocious hardships, including distress and culture-related barriers, than did Caucasians (Douglas, 2003). Using coping and survival skills learned from mentors such as perseverance, long-suffering, patience, endurance and internal drive has alleviate other grueling hardships. In fact, some hardships were stimuli for seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

Elementary School and High School Experiences

Elementary experiences did not appear to be as meaningful for AA males to desire higher education. The relationships built outside of school in their neighborhoods with friends and family was deemed inspirational for learning and individual achievement. Elementary school students who appeared to be self motivated experienced a "point of passion," and "anchor" relationships which facilitated intrinsic inspiration for pursuing an education (Crow, 2011).

Support Systems

Participants were asked to who or what they attribute their current educational standing. The information shared demonstrated the roles people, religion, mentors, families and personal motivation play in the lives of AA males. Family members were mentioned as influential in the study participant's desire to attend college. This is similar to findings of Whitaker et al. (2012) in that neighborhood and family characteristics are significant determinants of inner-city schoolchildren's inspiration for learning. Relationships inspire learning. Understanding the connection with family further reiterates the impact family has on individual achievement.

Perspectives on the Value of Education

Participants suggested their own intrinsic motivation for success was a principal reason for pursuing higher education. Intrinsic motivation plays a decidedly intricate part in the completion of educational pursuits (Charlton, Barrow, & Hornby-Atkinson, 2006). They have an individual purpose that impels them to continue their education. Extrinsic motivation is also instrumental in the initial decision to enroll in higher education (Charlton et al., 2006). The environment surrounding a person can cause him to change or be changed. Poverty-stricken areas, gangs and violence, drugs and unemployment become impetus for some participants to break the poverty cycle.

Implications

Results suggest AA males are more successful in higher education when provided with better information and guidance throughout high school experiences. This academic management should include: test-taking skills, preparation for standardized/ college entrance exams like the ACT, application processes for university entrance and financial aid and college/university tours. High schools might also work to increase the ratio of AA male teachers in the high school setting to allow for visible role models for AA male students. High schools must create environments to promote preparation for life after high school.

Educators should be conscious of their role with AA males in order to ensure all students, including AA males, have equitable opportunities to excel academically. Holding high expectations for all students and encouraging students to seek the resources and interventions necessary for their success may be crucial in encouraging more underrepresented groups to seek higher education opportunities. Educators need to deliberately target AA males during high school to present key requirements for college enrollment and guidelines for mentoring programs. Educators should share academic expectations through assemblies, university prep

courses, and seminars to allow AA males to have access to materials on college readiness and programs that abet AA males successfully enroll into college. It is imperative for college administrators to monitor attrition, academic progress and transition issues. Faculty, chairs, deans, especially AA males, must be the catalysts in launching mentoring programs.

African American males who have graduated from college should serve as mentors. Mentorship is a key responsibility to encourage other AA males to seek educational advancement, lead moral lives, and give back to their communities. It is imperative for AA males to have accessibility to mentors, specifically AA male mentors. AA males must mentor those seeking higher education. Milner (2007) rationalized the importance of empowering AA males regardless of their educational background. The experiences shared by AA male mentors about dealing with life barriers serve as stories for future generations. In short, mentoring programs could create a stronger community for AA males and initiate a new trend to portray positive images for AA males as leaders.

Conclusion

There is an impetus need to understand reasons some AA males appear more motivated and resolute in their desire to seek higher education opportunities (Green, 2010). By identifying key factors, pertinent rationale and significant lived experiences of AA males have for attending institutions in higher education have critical information that can lead to better programs for AA males entering college. By providing an awareness and acknowledgement of the lived experiences of AA males who have entered college, those AA males undecided about higher education have valuable information of overcoming obstacles. The shared experiences of AA males offer optimism for enhanced opportunities academically and socially. In the end, there will be cultural responsiveness in the AA community leading to increased statistics in higher education. Consequently, this study is one of the few catalysts in the movement to increase visibility of research, specifically, focused on the experiences of AA males in higher education.

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Table 1.

Themes Identified Based on the Responses to Interview Questions

Theme	Elaboration of Themes
Reasons for attending college	Better job prospects
	Better quality of life
	Economic gain
Reasons for choosing specific degree programs	Family connection
	Community activists
Role models	Fathers and parents
	Political leaders
	Coaches
Hardships	Poverty
	Gang and violence
	Unemployment
Elementary and high school educational experiences	Outside relationships (i.e. family and friends)
Support systems	Other AA males
	Family
Perspectives on the value of education	Intrinsic motivation
	Extrinsic motivation