

THE VOICE OF THE SPIRIT

The Voice of the Spirit:
African American Males' Perception of Black Church Membership
on Their Academic Persistence
by
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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
(Educational Leadership)
at the University of Michigan-Dearborn
2022

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Dedication

It is with genuine gratitude and warm regard that I dedicate this work to my mother (L. Jordan) and sister (N. Clayton) who continued to support and encourage me towards completion. At the same time, my thanks also go to my extended family, friends, and colleagues whose kind words served as a source of motivation. I also dedicate this dissertation to my pastor and church family who have supported me throughout the process. I'm forever grateful for all they have done, especially Dr. Quintin Wingate for being my mentor and helping develop me into a moral leader and scholar. Finally, I would like to thank my dissertation committee for their guidance and encouragement.

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List of Definitions

Achievement gap- the persistent disparity in academic performance or achievement among different student groups

African American- a minoritized Black American commonly associated with African decent

Black church- a Christian church whose congregants are predominantly African Americans

Church attendance- regular presence in Christian service at a church building

Church membership- the state or status of being a participant in the collective congregation

Christian- a person who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ and adherent to the Bible

Congregant- a member of a group of people assembled for religious worship

Coping- the process or methods used to contend with difficulty or adversity

Counter-narrative- stories or experiences shared by those historically marginalized that often dispute commonly held truth

Critical race theory- a framework to examine the impact of race and racism on one's social identity

Dominant Culture- The beliefs, practices, and behaviors expressed by the majority of the population

Male- the composition of a man or a boy

Marginalized- a person historically or commonly treated unfairly

Meditation- technique for calming down the mind by focusing attention and awareness on inner peace

Mentoring- a collaborative relationship between two people to support or enhance the development of an individual

Persistence- continuous progress towards a goal in spite of adversity

Prayer- the manner of communication between the human and the divine

Race- a group of humans identified and divided by physical features

Safe space- A place or environment free of bias ideas or harmful actions

Scripture- sacred writings, passages, or stories from the Bible commonly used for direction or inspiration

Social constructs- A concept or idea that has been created and accepted by many people

Spirituality- the quality of being deeply concerned and sensitive to the spirit and supernatural realm

Spiritual identity- the distinguishing characteristics, qualities, or values of sacred matters

Abstract

African American male students enrolled in U.S. schools continue to persist in their education at lower rates in comparison to their counterparts. This trend limits their quality of life by limiting their college enrollment, employment, and financial stability. This study examines the lived experiences of African American male students who are enrolled in college and attend the Black church. Examining through the lens of critical race theory, this study seeks to explore how African American males' faith membership in the Black church influences their academic persistence. Employing critical race theory elevates the voices of these young men while also critically examining the systems that marginalize their existence. African American males' perceptions were collected through preliminary surveys and interviews. These perceptions were gathered to explore solutions to how these young men persist in their education despite the common belief that they can only underachieve. This study seeks to explore faith membership of African American males as a tool to close the achievement gap and social disparities of this population. Additionally, this study will help schools and religious stakeholders consider collective opportunities to enhance the academic outcomes of African American males.

Key terms: African American male, critical race theory, spirituality, achievement gap, the Black church, counter stories, counter-narratives, social constructs, safe space

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

African American males, like White males, are born with the ability to learn and achieve. However, African American men face racialized barriers that hinder their academic growth. This chapter will introduce the concept of the achievement gap and elaborate its relevance in this context before discussing the institutional problems African American males encounter and that contribute to the so-called achievement gap. Historically, African Americans were not the intended demographic for the first public American schools (Allen, 2008). Formal schooling was restricted to White males; therefore, boys who were not White were excluded from formal schooling. A legacy of exclusion continues to be revealed in education policy and practices that fuel some of the challenges African Americans face today. Empirical research has provided insight into the disproportionality of Black male achievement compared with other groups and shown that this problem is entrenched. Additionally, scholars such as Beachum and Dentith (2008), Jeynes (2010), and Harper (2012) have previously researched and provided strategies to help close the achievement gap for African American men but recognize the best approach hasn't been discovered.

The primary reason African American males are now the focus of considerable research is that in most local and national measures of academic achievement, African American boys are underachieving significantly (Garibaldi, 2007). This achievement gap is typically recognized across multiple academic subject areas in education and is typically influenced by limited funding in urban school districts (Munro, 2008). The U.S. Constitution delegates primary

responsibility for public K-12 education to the state governments (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). In 2016, state and local governments provided \$622.4 billion, or 91.7 percent of all revenues, to public education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Indeed, schools receive a subsidy from state and local governments, but funds are not disbursed equally across states or within districts. Allocation of educational resources is closely tied to funding inequity across school districts (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). During the 2016-17 school year, 22 states received more than half of all revenues from state governments, while in 16 states and the District of Columbia, more than half of all revenue came from local governments, and in the remaining 12 states, no single revenue source comprised more than half of all revenues (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Additionally, a study conducted by the Department of Education found that 45 percent of high-poverty schools received less state and local funding than was typical for other schools in their district (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). School funding is vital because it determines a school's ability to cover expenditures, such as employee salaries, school supplies, and building repairs.

One of the dilemmas that surrounds this poor and uneven performance is the variation of money spent per-pupil. In 2016, the per-pupil dollar amount spent on students was \$7,006 in Utah, \$11,051 in Michigan, and \$21,135 in the District of Columbia (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Imbalanced funding may cause fluctuating levels of student support and achievement. In 2016, the median expenditures per pupil were \$10,143 in cities, \$10,056 in towns, \$11,129 in rural areas, and \$12,091 in the suburbs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Since schools often derive the bulk of their funding from their community's tax base, the issue of school funding is often presumed to be a colorblind process (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). On a national basis, there is a negative 3.5 percent

difference between total revenues per pupil (combining federal, state, and local revenues) in high-poverty districts and low poverty districts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25 percent or less of the student population is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL); mid-low poverty schools are those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; mid-high poverty schools are those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; and high-poverty schools are those where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In 2016, the percentage of students who attended high-poverty schools was highest for Hispanic students (45 percent), followed by Black students (44 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). States frequently chose to fund schools based primarily on property taxes, and thus areas having property with greater value typically have better funded schools (Ladson-Billings, 2009). African American students attending large urban districts located in impoverished cities, therefore often do not have equal access to higher-quality schools and instruction (Wood & Harper, 2016) due to the prevailing models for funding elementary and secondary public schools (Hamrick and Stage, 2004 and Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The Definition of the Problem

The following discussion explores racism and institutional practices that marginalize African American males and emphasizes the resulting need to explore research embracing the critical race theory framework. Implementing a social justice methodology within metropolitan education requires awareness and examination of the differentiated performance specific to African American males. Educators, such as teachers and administrators, have acknowledged the limited performance and the complex issues African American men experience. Allen (2008) examines the history, racial influence, and policy concerning the achievement gap, providing a

historical account of the performance difference and recommendations for reform efforts that specifically focus on closing the educational inequalities between socioeconomic and racial classes. Critical race theory in education posits that race and racism permeate U.S. education, producing disparate educational outcomes (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). The academic disparity is often assumed as beginning during the establishment of American slavery. But the difference in the achievement between Blacks and Whites has a history even before the Civil War when very few slaves were taught to read (Howell & Peterson, 2005). Because of the residual effects of slavery--Black Codes, Jim Crow, racism, discrimination, social inequities, political and economic disenfranchisement, and many disparate events--African Americans have continued to face institutionalized racist views of Black intellectualism in education systems that have become institutionalized in the form of inequitable opportunities for Blacks to succeed in school (Allen, 2008). Institutional racism defines the institutionalized societal structures, patterns, policies, practices, and norms that differentially oppress and stratify individuals' access to various societal goods, services, and opportunities based on race (Hartfield, Griffith, & Bruce, 2018). Institutional racism is recognized in organizational systems that allow, permit, or encourage racist behavior between one or more individuals (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

Many challenges stem from the remnants of racial oppression, such as racial profiling and microaggressions, which cause difficulties in the lives of African American students. Racial profiling is a commonly established form of institutional racism (Hartfield, Griffith, & Bruce, 2018). Racial microaggressions are encounters with racism that, while stunning to minority persons involved, usually go unnoticed by members of the majority racial group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). These can, for instance, take the form of insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously (Solorzano, Ceja,

& Yosso, 2000). The history of lynching African Americans in southern U.S. states was a way to instill fear, implement social control, and position African Americans as social problems, thereby helping to firmly establish racial profiling practices (Gilbert, Ray, Byrd, Richards, & Johnson, 2019). Racial profiling is premised on the erroneous assumption that any particular individual of one race or ethnicity is more likely to engage in misconduct than any particular individual of another race or ethnicity (U.S. Department of Justice, 2003). Solorzano and colleagues (2000) examined how racial microaggressions affect African American college students and their cumulative negative influence on collegiate racial climate. Their study used the critical race theory framework and focus groups to investigate the experiences of 34 African American students. The participants in the study described a very tense racial climate both inside and outside their classrooms resulting in African American students' feelings of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Racism thus constitutes as an additional barrier to African American male persistence, which critical race theory helps illuminate.

Solorzano and colleagues (2000) suggested that the collegiate racial climate fosters both more covert or subtle racism within academic spaces and more overt racism within social spaces on campus (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In response to the racial microaggressions, participants in the study developed endurance strategies by creating counter spaces that provided encouragement and support. These counter spaces are often referenced as safe spaces. Safe spaces are those social and academic spaces where minority groups can be communities of shared understanding, which are important to the emotional and mental wellbeing of minority students (Ballard & Cintron, 2010). Critics of counter spaces may claim these spaces isolate minority students from the majority population, subsequently limiting the opportunity for

minority students to learn from discourse, debates, and unpleasant experiences. On the other hand, it seems unfair to expect minority students to subject themselves to adversity within threatening environments for the supposed common good of learning. If the critics of safe spaces prevail, then the interests of minorities—that is, their interest in being free from potentially harmful speech—must give in to the majoritarian interests of speaking (Ward, 2017). Counter spaces aid in validating the voice and experience of color, which can help African American men develop resilience towards their goals—including goals regarding educational persistence.

The discussion that follows will explore systemic barriers that aid the academic performance gap, such as poverty, unemployment, and low-income wages that systemically marginalize African Americans. Many factors in U.S. history have affected minority achievements, such as social, psychological, and cultural forms of oppression in addition to poverty and low social class (Beachum & Dentith, 2008 & McCray, Grant, & Beachum, 2010). In 2018, African Americans had a 20.8% poverty rate in comparison to Whites at 10.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Sometimes a single arrest or a few bad grades for African Americans can disrupt potential opportunities, making subsequent success and economic status less secure (Billings & Tate, 1995). In 2018, Blacks (6.5 percent) had the highest unemployment rates in comparison to (3.5 percent) jobless rate for Whites (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). White poverty usually lasts for only a generation or two (even for White immigrant families); not so, for Black or Brown people—for whom it is apt to last much longer (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Wilson (2017) added to these findings, exploring whether the relative occupational attainment of Blacks of the baby-boom generation and Generation X improved over that of their great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents. Neither Black men of the baby-boom generation nor Generation X improved their occupational attainment relative to White men of the same age

and born in the same decade (Wilson, 2017). African American men need liberation from systemic challenges such as poverty that tends to restrict their economic potential.

Perhaps, the most tangible long-term benefit that Whites have accrued from a history of racial exploitation is their wealth, and subsequently their advantaged position, in accessing educational resources (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). African slaves cut down trees, planted fields, and made possible the tobacco, sugar, rice, and cotton production that helped create the early wealth of America (Whelcher, 2002). For example, historically, many Blacks were not allowed to participate in the free market due to discriminatory practices such as Jim Crow Laws that restricted where Black people could travel, live, and work, and how much they could be compensated. Racism in the form of policies and practices that limited lending and homeownership among non-whites, discriminatory hiring practices of employers, and the lingering influence of past race-driven differentials negatively influence wealth accumulation among Black families (Thompson & Suarez, 2015). Understanding the historical challenges such as these and the ways they affect African American men today will help identify solutions to end their marginalization.

To determine the cause of the racial disparity gap, Thompson and Suarez (2015) conducted a study on behalf of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank and using the survey of consumer finances (SCF) data from 1989 to 2013. According to Thompson and Suarez (2015), White families compared to Black and Hispanic families, have higher incomes, receive considerably larger inheritances, and tend to report more tolerance of financial risks. An additional relevant finding was that 23% of White families (heads aged 30 to 59) receive an inheritance, compared to nearly 11% of Black families, and Whites had a conditional mean inheritance of \$236,000, compared to \$83,000 for black families (Thompson & Suarez, 2015). Conditional inheritances

were adjusted for inflation and based on the year the inheritance was received. Thus, wealth passed down through the generations (from slavery to the present day) may grant White families financial opportunities that are not afforded to Black families.

In 2018, among teenagers (16 to 19 years old), Blacks had the highest unemployment rate at 21.9 percent, compared with 14.5 percent for Hispanics and 11.3 percent for Whites (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). The share of the youngest labor force group of Blacks (16 to 24 years old) has steadily declined from 24.9 percent in 1976 to 15.2 percent in 2006, and it is projected to continue falling, to 12.4 percent, in 2026 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). This economic disparity seems to continue into their adulthood. The Black workers who can participate in the workforce seem to occupy lower-income occupations. Black workers are employed in various occupations, but office and administrative support occupations (14%) have the largest concentration of Black workers than any other occupational group (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The median annual wage for office and administrative support occupations was \$37,580 in May 2019, which is below the median for all occupations at \$39,810 (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2020). Subsequently, African American workers in these fields are more vulnerable to poverty. Wilson (2017) desired to change the exploration of the focus from occupational segregation to analyses of occupational returns to education and earnings returns to occupation. This transition may enhance understanding the additional challenges and racial barriers African American men must learn to navigate. Additionally, exploring their persistence may help identify solutions and strategies to help them navigate these barriers.

Need for Study

The discussion that follows will explore the need, importance, and significance of this

study to the research body to confirm the value of the research topic. Researchers (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018; Harper & Wood, 2016; Harper, 2015; and Jett, 2010) have approached academic performance by exploring student characteristics and institutional characteristics that influence African American male achievement. Commonly, much of the research on African American male achievement examines deficit-informed models instead of resilience models (Harper, 2015; Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Deficit-modeled research explores factors and explanations as to why African American males underachieve, which continues to portray them as a liability or risk to academic achievement and professional success. Resilience models explore factors and explanations to why and how they achieve and overcome adversity. Nevertheless, across all schooling contexts, most of what has been written about young men of color continually reinforces deficit narratives about their educational possibilities (Harper, 2015).

While a focus on deficit may not be unique in itself, empirical studies often amplify minority student failure and deficits instead of achievement (Harper, 2010; Harper & Davis, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2012; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Wood & Harper, 2016). To counter deficit narratives, researchers should explore resilience models that study students who successfully navigate their challenges. Resilience models encompass the process of how a person navigates both risk and positive adaption despite the obstacles encountered (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Understanding how African American males navigate unfair interactions could be instructive to those who endeavor to increase resilience and persistence (Harper, 2015). Researchers who endeavor to improve student success would learn much by inviting students who have been successful to offer explanatory insights into their success (Harper, 2010). Examining success factors that enhance academic outcomes for African American males promises the validation of Black men as scholars and assets to education and the greater society. More specifically,

exploring the element of church membership may produce scalable solutions due to the historical significance spirituality holds for African Americans and the physical positioning of the Black church in urban communities. This study explores the faith identity of participants who identified themselves as religious persons. But to stress, the inquiry undertaken here is not a religious study. Its focus is instead upon the ways the research participants' faith experiences constitute a distinct cultural asset in the lives of African American males, illuminating in turn ways in which this asset can influence the participants' academic persistence.

Barriers to college access and graduation African American students encounter now warrant discussion in the following section. According to recent statistics, the 4-year graduation rate for African American students is 21% percent, compared to 50 percent for Asian students, 45 percent for White students, and 32 percent for Hispanic students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Low college enrollment and completion rates create a barrier for African American men to enter the workforce. This trend results in reduced numbers of African American male leaders in fields such as business, law, education, and other collegiate professions requiring college completion (Smith & Fleming, 2006). In 2011, African-American men represented 9.7% of business occupations in comparison to 17.4% of White men and 16.9% of Asian men; and 13.8% of professional occupations in comparison to 17.6% of White men and 32.3% of Asian men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). Additionally, in 2011, African American men only represented 11% of the students enrolled in law school and pursuing to take the bar exam to practice law (American Bar Association, 2011). For example, in 2011, African Americans represented only 6.8% of public and private elementary and secondary school teachers, which has steadily declined since 2003 at 7.0% (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Exploring African American male resilience may help enhance their representation in these

career fields.

Individuals who complete more years of education usually have greater access to higher-paying jobs such as management, professional, and related occupations than those with fewer years of education (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). For example, according to the U.S. Occupational Handbook, medical professionals such as anesthesiologists, orthodontists, and surgeons require doctoral degrees to enter the field and are among the highest-paid professionals (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Nevertheless, if African American men are not able to persist through education, they will not be able to take advantage of higher-paying careers.

A college education is argued to have become more essential in order to compete in the 21st-century job market (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). At a time when tasks formerly undertaken in specific localities or settings can now be performed practically anywhere in the world, skills and education will determine success for individuals and nations (Jackson & Moore, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Additionally, college graduates with a bachelor's degree typically earn 66 percent more than those with only a high school diploma; they are far less likely to face unemployment (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The future workforce requires specialized knowledge and skills compatible with evolving industries. About 3.1 million new jobs created from 2012 to 2022 are projected to be in occupations requiring at minimum a bachelor's degree for entry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Due to global competition, many world leaders have recognized the value of an educated workforce. For example, in 2015, about 1.5 billion students were enrolled in schools worldwide--723 million were in elementary programs, 582 million were in secondary programs, and 214 million were in postsecondary programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Global competition and the importance of education have increased, but academic

disparity persists between African Americans and White Americans. A globalizing economy has often tended to remove manufacturing jobs from inner cities (moving them commonly to other countries), creating technology and information industry jobs for which many minorities have little training to take advantage of the opportunities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In 2014, African Americans only represented seven percent of employees who worked in the information technology industry compared to 70% of White employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The absence of African Americans in information technology limits their ability to participate in the future growth and expected income in this sector. Employment in computer and information technology occupations is projected to grow 12 percent from 2018 to 2028 (much faster than the average for all occupations) and the median annual wage was \$86,320 in 2018 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Closing the gap is widely seen as important not just for the U.S.' education system but ultimately for the country's economy, its social stability, and its moral health as a nation (Evans, 2005). If the U.S. desires to compete in the global market, identifying strategies to close the achievement gap is necessary and requires immediate attention, with significant focus going first toward the populations that are most marginalized by the gap: the African American male (Harper & Harris, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

Researchers are alarmed by the academic outcomes of men and boys of color (Garibaldi, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008; Tekleselassie, Mallery, & Choi, 2013; Wood & Harper, 2016). More importantly, African American males indeed aspire to achieve in life (English, 2016; Herndon, 2003; & Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Strayhorn, 2009), but still face despair (Harper & Harris, 2012; Harper & Nichols, 2008; Jones, 2002; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Nevertheless, their aspirations are not

the sole indicator of reaching this reality. Further insight on the success factors that influence African American males to achieve is necessary to advance understanding of the essential supports and strategies they employ throughout their journey to reach their goals. Enhanced understanding can help produce better policies, informed practices, and inclusive procedures that improve the overall success of African American males. Addressing this achievement inequity will help reposition African American men as assets to American society and contributors to success in the country and global competition.

One of the potential cultural assets African Americans possess concerns their spirituality—a common and important component of life and a strong element characterizing the Black community. Spirituality has, for instance, shaped aspects of African Americans lives including not just religious commitments, but socialization and moral understanding more generally. Additionally, Black churches have been long-standing pillars in urban communities and help influence the cultural and social aspects of the Black community. African American males' spiritual asset warrants examination undertaken here in pursuit of understandings regarding its impact in countering the deficit narrative that often prevails regarding this population.

The purpose of this study is to document and investigate how the faith membership of African American males influences their academic achievement. Faith is examined as the variable to achievement because religious support is commonly believed to positively influence all people, even more so for African Americans. Given that, religion and spirituality are long-standing sectors of power within Black communities (Brewer & Williams, 2020)—informing individual beliefs, daily practices, and social interactions—it is important to better support those Black students whose racial and religious identities are salient (Everett-Haynes, 2014). A

fundamental teaching of faith as unity and humane responsibility creates cultural adhesions, which acts to provide communal response in the presence of racial difference (Lincoln, 2011). Religion fosters social group unity and strengthens religious sentiment due to enhanced feelings of social belonging and integration into a community of like-minded thinkers (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). The faith identity and community provide access to extended brotherhood/relationships for African American men (Dancy, 2010) and help these men manage obstacles and adversity while validating their positioning in society (Herndon, 2003). The African American church unapologetically affirms the sanctity of Black people's humanity amid a society that would transgress that humanity (Douglas & Hopson, 2001).

Religion remains a common function of the American way of life for many people, which provides a foundation to explore solutions to social problems. Adherents of all faiths are protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees free exercise of religion and prohibits the government from establishing a state religion or granting preference to any faith group (U.S. Department of State, 2015). Americans are more involved in religious groups than in any other type of voluntary organization (National and Community Service, 2018), and the breadth of this involvement continues to exert a strong influence on contemporary social and political issues (Steensland, et al., 2000). Most of the country's congregations (83%) participate in or support social service, community development, or neighborhood organizing projects (Corporation for National and Community Service , 2009). These congregations may provide social or community support to address poverty, education, or housing.

This collective involvement provides a breadth of supporters who could assist in the success of African American males. As a minority ethnic group mainly living in racially segregated communities, Black communities will have to forge coalitions with other racial/ethnic

groups to enhance support for their concerns (Brown, 2009). The centrality of faith brings people together and requires them to dialogue about its meaning in society (Cone & Wilmore, 2004). Faith organizations have performed roles and functions beyond the religious boundaries in education, economics, politics, and culture (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). If independent public or private organizations are encouraged to serve their communities, religious organizations with social service initiatives should as well (NCASI, 2020). For example, some Black churches may provide various social programs like food assistance, recreation, tutoring programs, and daycare (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). Religious leaders like Tony Evans, the founder, and president of The National Church Adopt-a-School Initiative, have already begun aligning church outreach with the needs of local school districts. Dr. Evans teaches that the church, not the government, is the best social service delivery system since it offers the largest potential volunteer force and provides a moral and spiritual reference for making the right choices (NCASI, 2020). Almost half (47.1%) of Black/African American volunteers serve primarily through faith-based organizations, the largest proportion of any race or ethnicity (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2009). To influence lives, the church addresses the moral and spiritual foundations upon which those lives are built, while simultaneously meeting felt needs (NCASI, 2020). Churches have already expanded their engagement to the public in alternative methods and can provide a new perspective and institutional support that the secular world has commonly overlooked.

The Social Construction of Race and the Significance of the Study

This study is needed because it will provide a vehicle within which African American men are able to speak to their own realities instead of living under “realities” about their experiences that they had no meaningful role in constructing. Social constructs are processes of

endowing a group or concept with a delineation, name, or reality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). These constructed realities tend to be created by the dominant society and culture. From arrival in America, Blacks were dehumanized and treated as material goods, merchandise, and property in the form of units of labor (Whelcher, 2002). From slavery to the present day, African Americans have been persecuted by narratives that are not their own. People of African descent have been described as inferior, savage, profane, and invisible (Evans, 1992). Moreover, in an effort to dehumanize Black people, racist culture has attributed exaggerated sexuality to Blacks (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). The Black man had never been known as anything but a slave and a species without an authentic national identity (Cone & Wilmore, 2004). Such dehumanizing characterizations have served to rationalize rapacious and brutal attacks on Black image and perception (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). Race as a socially constructed category carries historically derived meanings that continue to influence our present race-based ideas and interpretations (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). These interpretations tend to be associated with physical features. Physical traits constitute only an extremely small portion of genetic endowments and have little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order characteristics, such as personality, intelligence, and moral behavior (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Additionally, civil rights activist, Martin Luther King Jr. implored, “Judge a man not by the color of his skin, but by the content of his character” (King, 1963a). Narratives of people of color however do not reveal character traits that encourage academic performance, rather, leaving them further marginalized. Most empirical studies, in sum, amplify minority failure and deficits instead of achievement, resulting in limited understanding about those students who still manage to successfully navigate their way to college (Harper, 2010).

The spiral of exclusion for African American men underachievement results in the

compounding loss of educational and economic ground compared to all other racial and gender groups (Garibaldi, 2007; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Black men carry the burden of two negative social identities as they move through society: one as a member of the African American race (i.e., anti-Black racism and stereotypes) and the other as a Black male (i.e., Black male ideologies, stereotypes, and oppression (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). To address the underachievement of African Americans, a better understanding of the circumstances confronting African American males, in particular, is essential (McMillian, 2003). Each delayed day in developing quality strategies to help African American males persist in education results to additional loss of economic footing. The cause of African American poverty in conjunction with the condition of schools and schooling is institutional and structural racism, which is endemic and deeply rooted in American life (Billings & Tate, 1995). African American males may experience racism throughout their entire lives in this supposedly post-racial period in the U.S. Presenting a counter-narrative to the premature societal settlement that marches under the banner of post-racialism is right now (Crenshaw, 2011).

Critical race theory examines and challenges the way race and racism implicitly and explicitly shape social structures and discourses (Yosso, 2006). Race is not objective, inherent, or fixed. It corresponds to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). African American males can academically achieve because race is a social construct created by the dominant society but not genetically interconnected with academic ability. Therefore, exploring African American males' viewpoint on their church memberships' effect on persistence is valuable in determining real insights into their capabilities.

In an effort to understand the historical effects of social construction, reconstruction of

America's social systems warrants consideration. For example, organizations like the Schott Foundation are reconstructing the narrative on Black boys by advocating that data should be collected, analyzed, and narrated truthfully and ethically. In this way, the Schott Foundation seeks to draw public attention to the serious reality of the opportunity gap that does not instantly end young Black males' lives but one that creates a practically insurmountable chasm of denied educational opportunities that consigns them to poverty and limited chances to succeed in life (The Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015). The organization criticizes the inflated and inaccurate count of Black males in school districts and the national high school graduation requirements. Each of these concerns creates limitations in accurate graduation rates and data about African American males, which continues to perpetuate them as failing. Critical race theory seeks to break prevailing myths about success of merit, equality, the market, and objectivity that are so deeply entrenched in U.S. society and that relegate people of color to marginalization and inequitable circumstances (Parker & Lynn, 2009). A more constructionist outlook toward society affirms understanding that arises from social systems rather than from individual members of society (May & Mumby, 2005), with a consequent vision of reconstruction demanding exploration and promulgation of genuine narratives of African American males.

The marginalized perspectives and narratives are commonly fed and sustained by social constructs—constructs that critical race theory compellingly counters, providing a framework not only to understand social circumstance but also suggesting means for change. The theory, that is, sets out not only to explicate ways in which society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but also to identify avenues for positive transformation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Reconstruction is not limited to a specific action, but various strategies and initiatives

collectively united for social action. Race is socially constructed, therefore it can be unmade and deprived of much of the sting of negative ascriptions by changing the system of images, words, attitudes, unconscious feelings, scripts, and social teachings by which people convey to one another that certain people are less intelligent, reliable, hardworking, virtuous, and significant than others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). As such, critical race theory is an important intellectual and social tool for deconstructing oppressive structures and discourse, reconstructing the human agency, and constructing equitable and socially just relations of power (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Social reconstruction is a crucial component to consider because it provides a foundation to understand the challenges that threaten the future of disadvantaged groups. The voice component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to fairness (Billings & Tate, 1995).

The following section turns to discussion of the significance of examining African American males' church membership and academic performance. Coupling spirituality and religious practice with academic performance is a relatively unexplored terrain (Jett, 2010). This limited exploration reduces the possibilities of identifying alternatives to helping African American men persist in their education. Exploring the influence faith community membership has on African American male academic persistence is significant because it enhances the knowledge of the literature on potential innovative strategies to help African American males succeed. This study seeks to offer insights into how African American men perceive their faith memberships' affect on their academic persistence. Institutional leaders and practitioners cannot improve Black student success until leadership actions are grounded in more complete qualitative research (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018). This study is also beneficial to faith leaders and educators who practice spiritually by providing more profound understanding into strategies

for increasing the persistence of African American men through education and beyond.

This study may also benefit non-profit organizations, advocacy organizations, and churches looking for strategies to enhance their level of support specifically to African American men. A fundamental reason the achievement gap has been so persistent is the rather insular approach that many educators have taken toward the problem, which had not incorporated sufficiently the strength that factors beyond the school confines can provide (Jeynes, 2010). A collaborative approach between Black churches and organizations focused on societal problems is valuable to solving challenges experienced by Black students (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Rarely do educators ask students and families to bring their assets to the school setting (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Yet, African American males' faith may offer hope and knowledge that may be valuable to their achievement in school. Understanding the intersectionality of faith and academic persistence could help build the necessary supportive environment and resources African American men need to succeed. It could also spark new interest, outlooks, and solutions by appealing to the moral grounding of teachers and educators who work with African American males.

If African American males are granted a more equitable playing field—and earlier on—diagnoses of special education, incidence of school suspension, and rates of incarceration may be reduced in their futures. Identifying supports and resources for preventative measures in students could help curb the disenfranchisement in their teen and adulthood years. Subsequently, African American males could benefit from remaining on their educational journey, making them more employable to the workforce and chartering the course back into the fields of education, business, and science, which they tend to be underrepresented. Establishing eligibility into the workforce creates income, property, and sales tax revenue to sustain communities and confirms

that African American men can succeed in the education system.

Realists and economic determinists hold attitudes that racial hierarchies determine who gets tangible benefits, including the best schools and the best jobs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Therefore, examining strategies that could equip African American men with the tools to navigate racial tension and marginalized experiences is necessary. Additionally, qualitative research provides for the sharing and recoding of African American males, offering insights regarding their challenges, coping mechanisms, and needs. In sum, because schools alone do not often have the capacity to solve and unravel the diverse social problems without the aid of other institutions and resources (Thomas, Rowe, & Harris, 2010), attention to interactions within the Black church and in support of African American men is warranted and is undertaken here.

Research Question

This study seeks to explore the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of African American males. This qualitative study will be guided by the question: How does membership in the Black Christian church influence the academic persistence of African-American males?

Organization of Study

The remainder of this study will provide, first, a literature review on African American males' experience with spirituality, next discussion of methodology employed to identify and investigate the research participants, then the results of the research findings, and finally additional analysis and commentary on the implications of this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

An analysis of the current body of literature points to the challenges African American men experience in the school environments, the need to study their resilience, and the positive benefits their spirituality and church membership offer. Examining the practice of adapting and overcoming adversity may yield insight into how African American males could develop their academic skills.

Examining the Barriers African-American Males' Encounter in School

This section will examine the literature and data on school-level characteristics that negatively affect African American males' persistence towards graduation. These marginalized realities call attention to the drastic need of colleges, educators, and school leaders, as well as community organizations to critically review and intervene in these issues to eliminate the deprived conditions many African American students are facing in the educational system (McCray, Grant, & Beachum, 2010). Even with various strategies and research targeting this group, many African American males remain disenfranchised from education opportunities.

Frederick Douglass, famed African American abolitionist, and social reformer stated in 1855, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men" (Harvard Law, 2020). Exploring the success factors of African American men may present opportunities to build more stable support earlier in the adolescent stages of life, where disproportionate education outcomes are believed to begin. Before formal schooling begins, due to socioeconomic status, children

from disadvantaged households typically have less access in their homes to resources associated with learning, such as books and educational toys in their homes and quality preschool settings, than do students from more socioeconomically advantaged households (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). For example, the percentage of 2-year-olds from families with high socioeconomic status (SES) who demonstrated expressive vocabulary (75 percent) was higher than the percentage of children from low-SES families who did so (52 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Additionally, in 2016, only 75 percent of Black children lived in a household with a computer or smartphone compared to 95 percent of Asian and 90 percent of White children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These challenges are often unaddressed but carried along with students as they enroll in formal education.

This section will explore punitive disciplinary practices that African American males encounter in schools. Often, the most assertive approaches to discipline are used with students of color, while the most permissive approaches to discipline are used with White students (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). For instance, Black male students represented eight percent of enrolled students but accounted for 25 percent of students who received an out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). African American males usually have the highest rates of suspensions, expulsions, non-promotions, dropouts, special education placements (McCray, Grant, & Beachum, 2010), and the lowest rates of secondary school graduation and gifted and talented assignments across the country (Garibaldi, 2007). In 2012, the percentage of Black male students who had been suspended from school (48.3 percent) was more than twice the percentage of Hispanic (22.6 percent), White (21.4 percent), and Asian/ Pacific Islander (11.2 percent) male students who had ever been suspended (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). These higher rates of suspension result in missed instructional time,

which can negatively affect their academic development. During the 2011-12 school year, twelve percent of Black students were retained in ninth grade, which is double the rate of all students retained (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This retention rate limits the number of African American males who transition to the next grade and graduate on time.

Critical race theorists view education as an institution that historically and contemporarily reproduces unequal academic outcomes (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). During the 2015-16 academic school year, African American students were 18.5% likely to be chronically absent in elementary, 16.5% likely to be chronically absent in middle school, and 26.4% chronically absent in high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Students who are absent 15 or more school days during the school year are defined as chronically absent (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). African American elementary school students are 1.4 times as likely to be chronically absent as White elementary school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Black children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 48% of preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension; in comparison, White students represent 43% of preschool enrollment but 26% of preschool children receiving more than one out of school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Out-of-school suspension is an instance in which a child is temporarily removed from his/ her regular school for at least half a day for disciplinary purposes, but less than the remainder of the school years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). African American students who continuously miss school due to absence or suspension are again missing classroom instruction, which causes them to lag further behind. Black students are 1.9 times more likely to be expelled from school without educational services than White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Expulsion without educational services refers to the removal of a student from school for disciplinary purposes with the

concurrent removal of any educational services to the student for the remainder of the school year or longer in accordance with pertinent local educational agency policy (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Black male students represented 8 percent of enrolled students and accounted for 23 percent of students expelled (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This pattern of enforced absence contributes to diminished opportunities to learn, devaluation of their cultural assets within educational environments (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

Children chronically absent in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade are much less likely to read at grade level by the third grade (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). From 1992 through 2017, the average reading scores for Black fourth and eighth-graders were much lower than their White peers each year (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2018). Part of the challenge with academic achievement is how all students are accessed to prove they are learning. Scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009) challenge assessments' meaning that supposedly proves what students do not know, but fail to validate what students know and can do. Students may be challenged in displaying evidence of learning when using such restrictive measurement tools. Assessments are then used to decide other opportunities from class placement to school graduation, thereby providing a so-called "objective" measure to justify continued discriminatory practice within the school system (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). These circumstances confirm the urgency and need to identify strategies to reduce academic disparity and equip students with the necessary skills to navigate their education journeys.

African American men who voluntarily leave or are pushed out of school are challenged with additional obstacles. Many of these boys and young men leave school before graduating, thus propelling them into a cycle of poverty and economic challenges (Howard-Hamilton, 2002).

In 2017, African American males between the ages of 16- to 24-years old had an 8% dropout rate in comparison to White males (4.9%) and Asian males (2.3%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These disparities reduce the number of African American students enrolling in college and the college completion rates.

In the discussion that follows, access to academic rigor and quality curriculum will be explored. Another barrier to academic persistence African-American males encounter is admittance to advance placement classes since access to these, and doing well, can raise a student's GPA (beyond a 4.0) and therefore increase student's access to the more elite colleges and universities (Jackson & Moore, 2006, Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Among the fall 2009 ninth-graders who earned a high school diploma by the fall of 2013, only 26.9% of African American males earned any type of credit in advanced placement, international baccalaureate, and dual-enrollment courses in comparison to Asian males (73.3%), White males (44.6%), and Hispanic males (36.4%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). African American students also seem left out of other advanced and rigorous educational experiences as well. For example, in 2012, Black students represented nine percent of the students enrolled in gifted and talented education programs, compared to Black students' 15% enrollment in schools offering gifted and talented programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Gifted and talented education (GATE) programs are programs during regular school hours that provide accelerated promotion through grades and classes and an enriched curriculum for students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Lower percentages of Black students enrolled in gifted and talented programs result in fewer scholars challenged by the rigor of the standard curriculum. Limited access and/or late exposure to rigor may result in academic struggles later in African American males' education journey. Harper, Smith, and Davis (2018) conducted research to determine the

undercurrent of African American students' stagnant enrollment patterns, academic underperformance, and high attrition rates at an urban commuter institution. The study employed the critical race theory framework to analyze the feedback provided by African American students and other university stakeholders. One of the themes African American students who thrived shared in the Harper, Smith, and Davis (2018) research was that their peers who failed were not sufficiently prepared for the academic rigor of college. Limited access and enrollment to rigor through gifted and talented programs may be one of the causes of low enrollment and retention rates in college for African American students. Additionally, while colleges and universities can use supposedly "objective" measures like GPA for admission purposes, the fact is some students have opportunities to increase their GPA in ways that other students do not and in ways that sometimes reinforce social inequality (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

Students of color living in conditions that are segregated and attending urban schools do not receive the same rights of access and enjoyment of curriculum and quality teaching afforded to White students, who more often live and attend schools in mostly suburban, more affluent settings (Beachum & Dentith, 2008). For example, only 33% of high schools with high Black and Latino student enrollment offer calculus, compared to 56% of high schools with low Black and Latino student enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In addition, African American students seem to be punished for attending high minority enrolled schools. In 2013, African American students earned fewer high school credits in social studies, foreign language, and fine arts than students of any other race, and fewer credits than White students in math, science, and engineering subjects (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). African American students tend to earn fewer credits due to restricted school budgets and limited enrollment to

rigorous courses.

School staff disproportionately tracks Black men into low academic-ability classrooms, whereas many of their White counterparts are placed in advanced courses that prepare them for college placement in competitive institutions (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). These racist acts translate into the form of high-stakes testing, restricted curriculum, and limited access to advanced placement courses (Gillborn, 2009). For example, in 2015, of the 252,566 African American students who took the SAT (high-stake test), 61% were considered non-proficient in English, reading, math, and science-based on their test results (ACT Inc., 2016). Standardized test scores demonstrate that in college admissions, very few African American students will score high enough on standardized admissions tests to qualify for places at the nation's highest-ranked public universities (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2009). These disparities persist across racial and socioeconomic lines, with considerably lower percentages of African Americans and low-income students continuing their education to post-secondary institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Limited access to education opportunities subsequently reduces the eligibility of African American men to participate freely in society.

In many school systems, special education seems to be the preferred educational intervention for African American male students (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). African American males nor their parents may not request diagnoses as special needs, but the school district can recommend this process. Critical race theory is useful in exploring ways in which education laws (e.g., No Child Left Behind), policies (e.g., zero tolerance), practices (e.g., higher diagnoses as special education), and environments (e.g., microaggressions) work to maintain a racial hierarchy (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). For instance, it helps to draw attention to the disproportion that can occur because school districts are granted autonomy to establish their

standards and procedures for the evaluation and eligibility process for having a disability. For instance, districts can select the initial and re-evaluation tests; select evaluation materials tailored to evaluate the specific areas of educational need; and have the authority to administer the test (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This level of autonomy could result in schools intentionally or unintentionally participating in this marginalizing trend that affects African American students the greatest. Educators and policymakers should continue to expand their understanding of the factors—school, psychological, social, and cultural—that make African American males susceptible to being diagnosed, classified and placed in special education (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008).

During the 2017-18 school year, African American students ages three to twenty-one were served at higher rates (16%) under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in comparison to their peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted in 1975, mandates that students ages 3–21 with disabilities are provided a free and appropriate public school education. Black boys (25%) with disabilities served by IDEA received one or more out-of-school suspensions, compared to one out of ten White (10%) boys with disabilities served by IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This inequality results in African American males not being able to benefit from the general education curriculum.

Because African American students are disproportionately diagnosed with special needs at higher rates than their peers are, they tend to be subjected to a greater risk of unemployment later in life. The motivational system of the school, involving grades and the threat of failure rather than the intrinsic social benefits of the process of education (learning) or its tangible outcome (knowledge), mirrors closely the role of wages and the threat of unemployment in the motivation

of workers (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Individuals 25 to 34 years old with diagnosed disabilities have a 35% employment rate in comparison to a 78% employment rate of people without disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These statistics point to the disenfranchisement of African American men from a quality education experience. In addition, each justifies the need for a more critical examination of how they might overcome these obstacles.

In the discussion that follows, an examination of African American males' interactions with school staff will be explored. Moore, Henfield, and Owens (2008) researched perceptions of African American males enrolled in special education regarding their school counselors. Moore and colleagues (2008) determined that the African American male participants illustrated comfort-level issues with their counselors, perceiving biased treatment unlike general education students. Limited interactions due to the perception of inequitable treatment create a further dilemma because access to support staff may already be diminished due to the absenteeism rate of teachers. Across the nation, 17% of students with disabilities (served by IDEA) – about one million students – attended schools where over 50% of teachers are absent for more than ten days, compared to 15.6% of students without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, 21% of high schools and about 850,000 high school students nationwide do not have access to any school counselor (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). These challenges may negatively affect African American men in need of academic support.

Tempting as it is for counselors to focus on negative narratives they deem warrant most attention focusing on the positive and acknowledging student progress could serve as a corrective experience for many African Americans as it so readily does for other populations (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). Because of the salience of spirituality and religion in the African-

American community (Hendricks, Bore, & Waller, 2012), counselors should increase their knowledge of the African-American religious experience (Avent & Cashwell, 2015).

This section will further explore the interactions and barriers African American males encounter with school counselors. Avent and Cashwell (2015) examined the critical role counselors should play in the lives of African American students and provided recommendations to enhance successful outcomes. Avent and Cashwell (2015) recommend that counselors understand the faith identity and church membership of African American students to better serve this population. School teachers and administrators charged with educating African American students and other students of color must not neglect their obligation to understand alternative social and cultural capital that African American students bring to the school from their communities (McCray, Grant, & Beachum, 2010). And in light of the prominence of faith in the African American experience this must include a specific understanding of church characteristics such as the average age of the congregants, socioeconomic status, and clergy orientation concerning community activism (Adksion-Bradley, Johnson, Sanders, Duncan, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2005), should offer crucial insights useful for counseling and assisting their African American students. This examination could help school administrators better understand how churches support their communities.

Furthermore, it is incumbent upon counseling professionals to probe deeper into the intersections of Black Church theology and counseling models (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). This understanding yields opportunities for understanding how church membership may influence student motivation or persistence towards their career goals even when facing adversity. It is also important to understand the current programs, resources, and services offered at each church and the church's existing connection with the African American community (Adksion-Bradley,

Johnson, Sanders, Duncan, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). This examination may yield additional support partners that can assist African American male students. Because of the centrality of relationships people access, counselors should consider social supports, such as church members, who could serve as great resources for African American students (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). This could be done in various ways, including meeting with church ministry groups (e.g., the usher board, trustees, deacons, choirs, and the nurses' guild) (Adksion-Bradley, Johnson, Sanders, Duncan, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). Identifying additional support and building their social capital has the potential to garner the necessary support for these young men.

The African American male participants in Moore, Henfield, and Owens's (2008) study expressed skepticism toward the claim of meritocracy in their education experience. Meritocracy is the belief in a system that rewards are based on supposedly fair measures of merit (Warikoo, 2016). Their research study is relevant because many students who are diagnosed with a disability depend on school staff and receive support inside the school building. In fall 2015, 95 percent of 6- to 21-year-old students with disabilities were served in regular schools; 3 percent were served in a separate school for students with disabilities; 1 percent was placed in regular private schools by their parents, and; less than 1 percent each were served in one of the following environments: in a separate residential facility, homebound or a hospital, or a correctional facility (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Limited quality interactions with school staff may result in African American males not being adequately serviced in special education programs, thus failing to address their perceived academic challenges.

Racial disparities are particularly acute in schools where uncertified and unlicensed teachers are concentrated; nearly 7% of the nation's Black students – totaling over half a million students – attend schools where 80% or fewer of teachers meet these requirements; Black

students are more than four times as likely, as White students to attend these schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, not all states require the same level of competencies for initial teaching certification, resulting in a discrepancy in teacher effectiveness. As members of an educational community in which urban school failure has become an accepted norm, teacher education programs cannot continue business as usual, graduating students who are at best ill-equipped and at worst damaging for children of color (Picower, 2009).

African American males have limited exposure to trained teachers who understand their economic challenges. Nationally, only 62.4% of current teachers took graduate or undergraduate courses focused on serving students from diverse economic backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This limited training may weaken teacher effectiveness and engagement with African American male students. Schools represent one of the major modes for disseminating the master narratives of the dominant group and in doing so often silence alternative truths and narratives (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Critical race theory sees the official school curriculum as an artifact designed to maintain the White supremacist master narrative. This curriculum serves to prepare students for hegemonic or subordinate positions in society (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). The African American research participants in the Harper, Smith, and Davis (2018) study reported seeing very little of themselves in course readings and classroom discussions and a significant shortage where Black culture was acknowledged, celebrated, and affirmed, which all caused a racialized classroom experience.

Certified teachers are defined as teachers who have met all applicable state teacher certification requirements for a standard certificate and have a standard certificate/license/endorsement issued by the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Nearly half a million students nationwide attend schools where 60% or fewer teachers meet all state certification and licensure requirements (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Requirements for certification typically require passing a general teaching certification test, as well as a test that demonstrates their knowledge in the subject they will teach (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Uncertified teachers may not have the necessary skills and competencies to teach students effectively, which may disservice African American students. Therefore, those who have been disadvantaged by schools, colleges, and policies could be empowered to help fix them- many Black men care enough about education and the collective uplift of their communities to make such career commitments (Harper & Davis, 2012). Priority must be made to increase the number of teachers and educators of color. An effort must also be made to recruit more preservice teachers of color, including but not exclusive to beginning in high schools in the communities that have been labeled hard to staff (Picower, 2009). Elevating the voice of those who have been marginalized by schooling may increase their support in solving school-related inequities.

The stories people hear and cling to affect their lives, how they interact with others, and how they interact with their community (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

Picower's (2009) research found that White teachers expressed a sense of anxiety in situations with people of color, largely based on stereotypes from their earlier experiences and influences from their family and the media. Perceptions of fear caused White teachers to segregate themselves away from students and adults of color. Because of their fears of people of color, the White teachers in the study avoided the communities in which people of color lived (Picower, 2009). White Americans tend to have limited social interactions with African Americans, often as the result of living in highly segregated neighborhoods (Gilbert & Ray, 2016). Negative

opinions of Black men in American society have advanced from slavery to modern times, which continue to influence negative perceptions of these men as being violent, dangerous, and thugs (Milner, George, & Allison, 2016). Avoiding interactions with people based on their color continues separation and segregation. Additionally, the White teachers in the research study had a deficit construction of urban schools, students, and families, which explained why White teachers should not or could not teach in urban schools (Picower, 2009). In 2015-16, the percentage of White teacher employment was higher in rural schools (89 percent) than in suburban schools (82 percent) or city schools (69 percent) at public elementary and secondary school teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Exploring the influence of faith membership on African American males may provide insight on how they overcome racial bias interactions and segregated experiences.

If the Black male experience is not recognized, the existing marginalized stories will continue to limit interaction among African Americans and their communities. Denying the effects of segregation results disregarding the historical and political understanding, which makes the academic disparity appear to be a new problem, rather than the logical outcomes of intentional policies and practices, thus hindering new strategies to solve it (Taylor, 2009). Regardless, intent nor purpose is a prerequisite of institutional racism; the differential impact of policies and programs along racial lines is sufficient for racism to be a useful way to frame a pattern of outcomes (Hartfield, Griffith, & Bruce, 2018). The institutional nature of racism is what enables it to persist across time and place (Ford & Airhihenbuwab, 2010). Exploring the systems that affect African Americans males will deepen the understanding of how best to help them.

Examining Critical Race Theory as a Framework

This section will examine scholars, commentary, and research that embrace the critical race theory. Critical race theory is a component of critical theory that focuses on analyzing and exposing domination and oppression versus identifying explicit solutions to address the problem. Generally, critical theory is a methodology of analyzing power relations within society. This examination tends to create a so-called true democracy by balancing power among all people. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) have identified five primary tenets to critical race theory, as follows: counter-storytelling; the permanence of racism; Whiteness as property; interest conversion; and the critique of liberalism. The goal of the tenets is to provide a framework for critical race theory education scholars to consistently engage in research that embodies the essence of the theory and produces research that delivers a robust understanding of racism and contributes to its dismantling at the same time (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017).

Investigating history and race may be an uncomfortable topic for some people, and many might desire to leave racism in the past. However, this amnesia may not be deliberate but reflects the narcissism of each generation or the worry that dwelling on the past may inhibit our ability to move beyond it (Taylor, 2009). The fundamental purpose of critical race theory is to unearth what is taken for granted when analyzing race and privilege, as well as the profound patterns of exclusion that exist in U.S. society (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). The critical race theory is a valuable framework because it considers the historical wrongs that have played into the marginalization of African American male students.

Critical race theory challenges institutions' traditional claims toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). By focusing on an individual's efforts and talents, attention is commonly diverted away from

analyzing the decisions schools make that help some students succeed and push others toward failure (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011) stress that race no longer matters is part of an ideology that justifies and legitimates racial inequality in society. Taylor (2009) asserted that merit and colorblindness claims have an insidious effect that has been difficult to counter with traditional forms of research, statistics, and legal procedures. Schools and colleges do indeed help to justify inequality, but they also have become arenas in which a highly politicized egalitarian consciousness has developed among some parents, teachers, and students (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Insisting on rhetoric that disallows reference to race, those affected by racism cannot name their reality or point out racism without invoking denial and offense (Taylor, 2009). Additionally, race-neutral perspectives signify academic deficiency as an individual phenomenon because when instructional strategies fail to achieve desired results, the students, not the techniques, are found to be lacking (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Critical race theory is important because the framework elevates and validates the experiences of people of color regardless of the dominant culture positioning. This theory is also important to establish some form of accountability and expectation of support for African American males. Critical race theorists consider many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but place them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, a group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious (Ballard & Cintron, 2010, Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory is a framework interested in examining and transforming the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Critique of Critical Race Theory

The discussion that will follow will include a discussion of the criticisms of critical race

theory. Because racism is deeply ingrained in American society, creating a platform for overcoming it seems like an impractical objective, even more so when the primary function of the theory is to critique instead of solve. Moreover, analyzing the existing order and the mainstream culture does not necessarily produce agreed-upon use or results of the framework, which puts into question the dependability of the theory.

Critical race theory can also be misunderstood or viewed as perplexing concerning race. For instance, critical race theory adopts the assumption that racism is a normalized, frequent, and common way of American life but is a status quo that should be changed. The dominant culture's systems, beliefs, and artifacts tend to be critiqued, but a precise solution to ending racism tends to be unclear. Some critics view this complex dynamic of accepting racism as normal but attempting to abolish it as contradicting. Due to racism being engrained throughout American life, it is easily learned and replicated by future generations. Scholars such as Taylor (2009) argue that it is paradoxical, but the act of resistance itself becomes the triumph. Additionally, Harper (2015) confirms the success of critical race theory is to disrupt the master narrative concerning African American men. While powerful structures of oppression are difficult to overcome, critical race practitioners assert that this struggle is nevertheless transformative for both society and the social groups that have taken on this struggle (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Most critical race scholars are committed to a program of scholarly resistance under the assumption it will lay the groundwork for wide-scale resistance (Bell, 2009). Though resistance is important, scholars could provide clear recommendations or solutions to address the challenges to strengthen the use of critical race theory.

Some challengers of the critical race theory (Farber & Sherry 2009; Kennedy 1989; Posner 1997) question the validity of the stories told by marginalized voices. This is a rational

dilemma because shared experiences are told from the individual's viewpoint who is experiencing the situation. It is reasonable to question the honesty behind the shared experiences or portrayed understandings of those experiences. Naturally, the counterargument for that belief would be to question the validity of research published by a dominant voice, especially if the research investigated an oppressed population. Both the dominant narrative and minority narrative may provide natural checks and balances because counter stories can address the perceived falsehood or harm done by either storyteller. Counter stories contradict the beliefs, norms, and standards that perpetuate racism (Ballard & Cintron, 2010). Critical race theorists believe that, while White scholars should not be excluded from writing about the racial experiences of the oppressed, minorities often address them better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

A blind spot in the critical race theory is that no group of people is a homogenous group. Critical race theory seems to fall victim to balkanization, a splintering effect in which each racial, ethnic, or gender category becomes a unitary focus, to the neglect of the fragile overlapping consensus, which binds groups together (Litowitz, 2009). For example, education institutions may identify and combine international African students with African American (U.S.-born) students. These two student populations are not homogeneous groups. Students of immigrant parents may or may not have comparable socialization as do Black students whose families have long lived in the United States (Everett-Haynes, 2014). Intersectionality of identities may cause marginalization for one person and perceived privilege to another person of the exact same race. Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Consequently, some people believe the findings informed by the critical race theory could be misleading or misinterpreted.

Being conscious of this blind spot could yield customized methodologies and

understandings about subpopulations. Critical race theory expands itself to include other critical epistemologies and seeks intersections and conjunctions with other areas of difference to push a social justice agenda into the legal and public discourse (Parker & Lynn, 2009). This expansion can offer researchers the opportunity to explore the intersectionality of different identities and their understanding of race and racism.

Kim and Hargrove's (2013) and Dancy's (2010) studies provided a potential solution for this by understanding the intersectionality of identities, which explores how a person's different internal and external identities interact with one another. Examining the intersectionality theory requires researchers to study the context in determining what identities and intersections actually privilege or oppress African American males (Dancy, 2010). Examining identity variation is a good approach because the critical race theory calls for the exploration of marginalized variables, and other scholars support it as well. No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Black men are not a monolithic group, and not all Black college men experience their environment in the same way (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). Recognizing Black men are not a homogenous group, and the need for investigating intersectionality supports the value of exploring the faith identity of African American men. Christian African American men may experience the world differently and employ an alternate set of skills and tools to navigate their education journey. Critical race theory may provide a counter space for these men to share their journey and stories.

Additionally, Everett-Haynes's (2014) qualitative study explored how African American and U.S.-born and/or raised African students attending a Predominantly White Institution self-identify with a religious or spiritual identity through the intersection of race in an environment perceived to be occasionally, regularly, or frequently hostile. One of the findings of Everett-

Haynes's (2014) study was Black students recognize that injustices exist in the world and, therefore, there exists a spiritually motivated obligation to work toward positive and progressive change, whether that be at the very local level through ministry with peers, or through the active study of and devotion to social justice-oriented work. This finding is important because the participants' spiritual involvement influenced them to pursue social justice-oriented work, which critical race theory supports this type of advocacy.

Another finding was that the research participants recognized other marginalized student populations like Hispanic students and lower socioeconomic status. This theme revealed in-group/out-group identification, indicating that students at times identified with other oppressed people, viewing others as members of a separate social group specifically informed by shared experiences of oppression at their PWI (Everett-Haynes, 2014). This finding is important because Black students may be able to garner support and allies to help combat oppressive systems, such as microaggressions. When students internalize prior negative experiences with religious practices, they seem more apt to identify more closely with spirituality (Everett-Haynes, 2014). Research participants who felt frustrated about the racial hostility did not let it overwhelm them but grounded themselves in their spiritual belief that they can and will be successful. This finding is important because Black students may be able to find hope within spiritual dependency to persist towards their academic goals.

One of the findings that expressed similarity between African students and African American students was while each group of students mentions both race and gender-based issues, it appears the intersection between religion and spirituality is most prevalent for African American students (Everett-Haynes, 2014). This endorses the importance spirituality has to African American students. Additionally, one difference between the two groups was African

American students were more likely to feel embarrassed or ashamed for leaving the church and their religious teachings than African students. This finding is important because African American students may be encouraged and reminded to stay committed to their religious vows, which subsequently may grant them continuous support from their church.

Overall, critical race theory will serve as a useful framework due to its focus on race, advocacy, and the voice of color. Criticisms towards critical race theory are ultimately helpful because they foster maturity and growth, and provide the necessary circumspections, and point toward new avenues of exploration (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). For the purpose of this research topic, exploration of social constructs and counter storytelling tenets of critical race theory will be explored to understand the African American male experience. The social constructionism tenet will provide an understanding of the existing marginalized narratives on people of color, especially encountered by African American men. Counter storytelling was selected as the primary data collection for this research to present an opportunity for spiritual African American males to provide an alternate narrative to the existing constructs about them.

Anti-Deficit Models

In the discussion that follows, research approached through deficit narratives will be challenged as an effort to engage African American men as assets. Shaun Harper recognizes the need to provide counter-narratives against social constructs that marginalize African American men. Harper (2010) examined 219 undergraduate African American males at 42 universities in 22 states across the United States. The purpose of the study was to determine which interventions enhanced African American men's educational experiences and enabled their achievement. Instead of relying on existing theories and conceptual models to repeatedly examine deficits,

research should deliberately attempt to discover how students of color have managed to succeed (Harper, 2010). This framework challenges researchers to purposely adopt interview questions to determine the cause of success instead of the cause of failure.

An anti-deficit inquiry pursues insights into strategies students employ to resist the internationalization of discouraging misconceptions about members of their racial group and how they manage to respond productively to the stereotypes they encounter (Harper, 2010). Anti-deficit approaches are valuable because they grant African American males who overcome adversity with a counter-narrative to share how they did so, inspiring their peers to do the same. Instead of relying on deficit-laden reinforcements of minority student underachievement from the education and social science literature, an anti-deficit inquiry recognizes students of color as experts on their experiential realities and empowers them to offer counter-narratives concerning their success (Harper, 2010). Elevating African American male voices as the experts of their own reality provides a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative, which is supported by the critical race theory.

The Need for Resiliency Models

History recognizes some exceptional people were able to break through racial barriers; however, this implies little about the lifting of barriers for others (Crenshaw, 2011). For example, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Thurgood Marshall, Jackie Robinson, and Ray Charles are commonly recognized as African American male leaders who have made positive contributions to U.S. history in the face of racial adversity. Nevertheless, African American men still face racial disparity today, which justifies the need to explore how they excel in education. African American men have excelled in education by participating in student organizations (Harper, 2010), creating counter spaces (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009),

and participating in religious activities (Jett, 2010). In 2017, 83.5% of African American males had earned a high school diploma or higher, and 17.9% held a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Certainly, gains in race relations have been made, but these gains should be understood in the context of the massive problems of racial inequity and measured along a path that shows how far we still need to go (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). Gains in academic degree completion do provide African American men with opportunities to excel; however, strategies to scale these efforts and create more access for others to achieve are also necessary. There have been numerous gains regarding racial inclusion, such as desegregating schools, affirmative action, and the election of America's first African American president, Barack Obama. The general view of Blacks' having greater access to most institutional and organizational arenas, increased educational attainment, and expanded occupational opportunities are suggested as evidence of Black progress (Wilson, 2017). Nevertheless, the critical race theory is still relevant because no one event will end racial discrimination towards African Americans.

There are people who believe that because African American males have beat the odds, racism and discrimination no longer exist. Yet, African American men continue to be victimized in a so-called post-racial society. In 2018, law enforcement agencies reported that 4,954 single-bias hate crime offenses were motivated by race/ethnicity/ancestry, which 46.9% were motivated by anti-Black or African American bias (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). A single-bias incident is defined as an incident in which one or more offenses are motivated by the same bias (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). Critical race theory embraces the subjectivity of perspective and openly acknowledges that perceptions of truth, fairness, and justice reflect the mindset of the knower, African American men (Taylor, 2009). Post-racialism is the modern frame that

establishes both a new arena of contestation and well as new possibilities for the emergence of a more broadly configured critical race theory (Crenshaw, 2011). The expansion of critical race theory has produced spin-off movements that share similar assumptions cohered around particular group experiences such as Latino, Tribal, and Asian critical race theory (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). A broader configuration of critical race theory could include the intersectionality of race, gender, and spirituality to examine how African American males enable their achievement through these identities.

Theory advancement demands fuller considerations of the historical and current racialization of policies, practices, and institutional cultures (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018). In the future, critical race theorists will need to make further efforts to erase barriers to upward mobility for minority populations, old-fashioned tests, and standards for merit, such as the SAT, that currently stand in the way of progress (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory provides a means for analyzing new forms of resistance, such as the belief that racism no longer exists. Critical race theorists must continuously deconstruct race so that biological theories of inferiority and hierarchy can never rise again (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Biological theories of inferiority such as Darwinism and Eugenics have historically created a foundation supposedly justifying American racism. Social Darwinism underwrote the rise of segregation as both a natural consequence of racial difference and naturalized economic inequality as effectively as it did white supremacy (Lindquist, 2012). This critique and deconstruction are necessary to ensure all marginalized voices are acknowledged and heard. Elevating the voice of color tenet provides African American men the opportunity to yield valuable contention about their current understandings and experiences with racism today.

Additionally, examining African American males' participating in faith communities may

assist the body of literature by providing a broader configured critical theory. A primary objective of critical theory is to critique and advocate for justice and fairness in society (Ford & Airhihenbuwab, 2010). In the discussion that follows, the criminal justice system and policing of African Americans will be critiqued for racialized structures that marginalized minority populations. Racism is not as blatant as it was during American slavery, but some institutions still exercise practices that marginalize African American men, such as referrals to law enforcement. A broader theory with an intentional focus on African American men could explain various institutional practices that restrict their success. For example, while Black students represent 16% of public school enrollment, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement and 31% of students subjected to a school-related arrest (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, 51% of high schools with high Black and Latino student enrollment have sworn law enforcement officers (SLEOs) (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). SLEOs are career law enforcement officers with arrest authority whose duties tend to include security enforcement and patrol; maintaining school discipline; recording or reporting discipline problems to school authorities; and/or coordinating with local police and emergency teams (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). During the 2017-18 academic year schools with a population above 1000 students that had a sworn law enforcement officer (including SROs), 97.6% of officers routinely carried a firearm, 97.1% carried physical restraints, and 78.1% carried chemical aerosol spray (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These statistics seem to indicate that African American students are more likely to interact with police officers in a punitive manner, which can amplify the odds of their academic removal.

Interactions with sworn officers may result in more devastating outcomes for African American males, which may compromise their wellbeing. Because African American males

seemingly have more interactions with law enforcement, scholars such as Hartfield, Griffith, and Bruce (2018) have begun exploring these interactions. Framing police-involved shootings through the lens of racism provide insight into the racialized structures that help to explain why the victims share such similar demographic characteristics despite the variability in the contexts, circumstances, and geographic settings where the police-involved shootings occurred (Hartfield, Griffith, & Bruce, 2018). Police officers are humans and are not immune to having and revealing their own personal beliefs and biases. The fatal encounters Black males have with law enforcement officers highlight how the combination of being Black and male renders Black males hyper-visible in institutions like the criminal justice system (Gilbert, Ray, Byrd, Richards, & Johnson, 2019). Police officers who have racialized ideologies about Black men are more likely to incorporate their personal beliefs, experiences, and opinions in the way that they police Black men (Hartfield, Griffith, & Bruce, 2018).

In the United States, racial/ethnic inequities in health remain substantial, pervasive, and persistent over time (Brewer & Williams, 2020). Hartfield, Griffith, and Bruce (2018) examined the ways racism operates through cultural forces and mechanisms in public safety and public health institutions, which may exacerbate the problem of police-involved shootings of unarmed Black men. Hartfield, Griffith, and Bruce (2018) concluded that decreasing racialized police brutality necessitates a vision of social justice backed by an active organization to change marginalized social and economic patterns, conditions, policies, and norms. Critical race theory embraces a social justice component by striving to bring awareness on how racism functions in order to inspire a more just society (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). Hartfield, Griffith, and Bruce (2018) also concluded dismantling racialized police brutality would require dismantling gendered and institutional racism. This conclusion is important because it endorses the need to employ critical

race theory to explore the African American male experience. Exploring their voice may provide insight that could keep them persisting through adversity as well as keeping them alive.

Understanding that gendered racism is the root cause of police-involved shootings of unarmed Black men is essential to informing a public health strategy that would mitigate unnecessary and premature deaths (Hartfield, Griffith, & Bruce, 2018). If scholars fail to acknowledge and act upon differentials based on both race and gender, the gaps in morbidity and life expectancy for Black males will continue to lag behind other groups (Gilbert & Ray, 2016).

Nationally, racial and ethnic minorities face disproportionately high arrest and incarceration rates (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). These practices create legal entrapments, which systematically ensnares Black males into the criminal justice system (Gilbert & Ray, 2016). Therefore, it is important to examine and address any social issue, such as incarceration, that could interrupt the economic mobility of African American males, especially when the social phenomenon is disproportional (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). Black males ages 18 to 19 were about 12 times more likely to be imprisoned than White males of the same age (this age group had the highest Black-to-White racial disparity in 2017) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019). In 2018, African Americans were 27.4% of the total population arrested (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). Thus, it is evident that the young Black male plight continues to be at stake and is in urgent need of intervention (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015).

Even though African American men have access to public education, they tend to be punitively disciplined at much higher rates than their counterparts are. The men who survive may still harbor emotional scars from fighting institutional racism and seeing their African American brothers fall victim to the system (Howard-Hamilton, 1997). In the discussion that

follows, health disparities and its effect on African American males will be examined. This exploration will provide insight into the need to explore coping mechanisms for African American men to overcome and navigate obstacles. A lack of coping skills or mismanagement of emotional scars may result in African American males committing suicide. In 2018, suicide was the second leading cause of death for African American males between the ages of 10 and 14 years old and the third leading cause of death for ages 15 through 34 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence or blame themselves for their predicaments (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). A common belief is the rose that grows through the cracks confirms that concrete is fertile after all; the slave who manages to escape proves that those who remain in captivity do so out of choice (Crenshaw, 2011).

Furthermore, Crosby and Jack (2019) examined the burden of suicidal behavior among African American males ages 10 through 34 years. Data was examined from the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) and was characterized based on demographics, method and location of injury, toxicology results, and potential circumstances that precipitated their death. Suicide is defined as death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2020). Crosby and Jack (2019) determined interpersonal problems and life stressors, especially experiencing some type of recent crisis and mental health issues, were the most common precipitants among every age group. For example, among decedents reported to have a current mental health problem, depression/dysthymia was the most common mental health diagnosis among 15 -19 (60.2%) and 20 - 34 (50.9%) year old decedents whereas Attention Deficit/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder was the most common diagnosis for 10-14-year-old decedents (57.1%) and almost twice more common than depression/dysthymia (28.6%) in this age group (Crosby & Jack, 2019).

It is important to recognize the impact of mental health diagnoses on African American males because ADHD and its symptoms can negatively impact their education goals. The lifetime prevalence of ADHD is highest for African Americans (9.3%) in comparison to White (8.9%) and (Hispanic 8.5%) and affects three times as many males (13.0%) as females (4.2%) (National Institute of Mental Health, 2017). ADHD is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders of childhood, commonly revealed by having trouble paying attention, controlling impulsive behaviors (may act without thinking about what the result will be), or being overly active (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Problems at school (41%) and non-intimate/non-family relationships (31.0%) were the most commonly identified precipitating circumstance among 10-14-year-old suicide deaths (Crosby & Jack, 2019). Exploring faith membership as a resilience factor may help African American men persevere through school-related stresses and grant them access to a congregant support system. Additionally, the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2020) recommends promoting connectedness; teaching coping, and strengthening household economic support as measures to prevent and reduce suicide rates. At a time when significant challenges in health disparities of racial and ethnic minorities persist, today's church can play an increasingly active role in promoting healthy lifestyles, healthy behaviors, and health awareness in eliminating the barriers to health disparities (Rowland & Isaac-Savage, 2004).

Indeed, some African American men survive and persist through education, but many may face challenges transitioning from college to employment. Transitional barriers such as college funding, unemployment rates, pay rates will be explored as adversity obstacles African American men will need to navigate to persist and survive. For example, African American students fund their education with loans at the highest rate in comparison to all other races. 86%

of African American college students use student loans to fund their education, which the total dollar amount borrowed was \$36,900 at the time of graduation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Once a student graduates, drop below half-time enrollment, or leave school, federal student loans go into repayment, which students typically have a six-month grace period before required monthly payments are due (Federal Student Aid, 2020). The African American students who do graduate will be challenged to pay off larger amounts of student loan debt. In 2017, African Americans were more likely to be among the working poor than were Whites and Asians with the same educational attainment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The other side of blaming those at the bottom for their position in society is praising those at the top for achieving their position (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). African American men with similar education and work experiences as Whites are commonly compensated less, which may be a result of institutional racism.

The number of Blacks in the labor force is projected to increase from 19.6 million in 2016 (12.3 percent of the 159.2 million total) to 21.6 million in 2026 (12.7 percent of 169.7 million total) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Nevertheless, this expected growth does not mean they will be paid fairly or equally with others of similar qualifications. Despite the important contribution of education to an individual's economic chances, the substantial equalization of educational attainments has not led measurably to equalization in income among individuals (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Income differences, regardless of their origin, will, in turn, generate wealth differences and could account for an important part of the wealth gaps observed (Thompson & Suarez, 2015). In 2019, the median weekly earnings for Black men were \$768 or 74.9 percent of the median for White men at \$1,025 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). African American men both who are formally educated or not, may experience racial oppression

in their wage, which their faith may grant them some level of coping with this reality. Because spirituality can be practiced anywhere, it may provide African American men with skills to overcome academic performance and wage differences.

The discussion that follow, explores and analyzes the challenges African American students experience by being negatively labeled and classified. This exploration will confirm the need to examine how African American men persist when schooling presents obstacles that otherwise would remove them from their academic journey. Kim and Hargrove (2013) challenged historical research that negatively portrays African American men incapable of achieving academically. African Americans have been misrepresented for decades due to racial exclusion across multiple sectors, including academia. Under the conditions of colonialism, all students educated by Europeans were exposed to textbooks, teachers, and counselors who espoused degrading views of Blacks (Paris, 1995). The dilemma with some traditional research is African American men are studied based on underachieving instead of discerning success factors. Kim and Hargrove (2013) deem this type of literature inadequate and harmful. Because perception creates reality, the misinformation and misrepresentation conveyed about African American's is troublesome (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Such literature feeds stereotypes that negatively influence the academic performance and self-efficacy of African American males, as well as institutional programming and policy strategies.

If researchers do not embrace and examine resilience and success-based approaches as Kim and Hargrove (2013) recommend, deficit-modeled research will continue to grow, and the gap in success-based research will continue. Powerfully written counter stories and narratives may begin a process in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Kim and Hargrove (2013) recognize a pattern of new

literature abandoning the deficit-model and transitioning to an asset-model. Recognizing this shift is valuable because other scholars such as Ballard and Cintron (2010), Billings and Tate (1995), and Flinders and Thorton (2013) have supported this trend. Identifying and exploring success-based approaches can provide effective solutions that support African American male achievement. Scholars and researchers who attempt to explore and describe the contributions of Blacks have believed and strongly advocated that such cumulative data would be sufficient to negate negative doctrine and restore the dignity of Black people (Paris, 1995). Critical race theory scholars believe that racial analysis can deepen the understanding of educational barriers for people of color and explore how these barriers are resisted and overcome (Taylor, 2009).

The American Psychological Association (APA) (2010) manual supports this paradigm shift by specifically directing research writers to identify racial and ethnic groups through the guidelines of specificity and sensitivity. Writings that might imply bias against persons based on gender, racial, or ethnic group are unacceptable (American Psychological Association, 2010). These guidelines are important because APA publications acknowledge the ways biases can become embedded in language and direct users on writing to avoid perpetuating demeaning attitudes and assumptions about people. Long-standing cultural practice can exert a powerful influence over even the most conscientious author (American Psychological Association, 2010). Example; determining if participants prefer to be identified as Black or African American due to the perceptions that certain words are long-standing cultural practice but could be biased to specific populations. Additionally, APA recommends being cautious of labeling groups with broad clinical terms such as at-risk due to the vagueness and potential bias of meaning and individuals losing their sense of individuality.

Investigators of African American male achievement, such as Shaun Harper, add needed

value to the research community because he is an African American male scholar and researcher. An emic perspective is a viewpoint based on the insider's perspective, which requires the researcher to be aware of the challenges, vocabulary, and experiences of the research participant based on the participant's experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Acknowledging the critical analyses and valuable findings that can emerge from insider knowledge is valuable to the research (Barnes, 2014). Harper's (2012) research provided a more accurate perspective and interpretation on the challenges of African American men because he may have personally experienced similar challenges as his research participants. One cannot expect useful results from an education action initiative that fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people living the experience (Flinders & Thorton, 2013). Such inquiry warrants a culturally sensitive approach that considers the possible intrinsic role of religion in everyday life (Barnes, 2014). Therefore, many educational plans fail because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality (Freire, 2013). Shaun Harper offered valuable insight into the African American male experience, which could lead to successful academic initiatives.

An analysis of the challenges African American students experience within the school setting, such as enrollment trends, curriculum, and racial profiling will be examined in the sections that follow. This examination will provide insight into the racial climate of schooling, which calls for African American men to develop the skills to persist to achieve. According to Garibaldi (2007), Howard-Hamilton (1997), and the National Center for Educational Statistics (2007), because African American males have lower college enrollment rates they are typically not represented well in the student population on college campuses. In 2016, Black male students represented 12% of college-enrolled students compared to 57.5% White male students (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This lack of representation has the potential to classify African

American males as minority-status by sheer numbers, race, and gender. Nationally, during the 2015-16 school year, African American men were only awarded 33% of the associate degrees and 36% of the bachelor degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Because so many Black boys are denied access to the types of experiences that lead to good schools, accredited colleges and universities, and high-skill, high-wage employment opportunities, it should come as no surprise that Black boys are underrepresented in these spaces (Wood & Harper, 2016). Critical race theory provides a framework to explore the factors that continue to the enrollment trends of African American men.

While it is important to question what appears in textbooks, it is also imperative to question what is missing, what is not included (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). The master scripting means stories of African Americans are muted and erased when they challenge dominant culture, authority, and power (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Three hundred years of humiliation, abuse, and deprivation cannot be expected to find voice in a whisper (King, 1963). An example is a common absence or restricted contributions of individuals like Nat Turner, Malcolm X, and Fred Hampton, who more aggressively challenged the dominant culture's norms. From the perspective of critical race theory, marginalized voices have historically been oppressed, distorted, ignored, silenced, destroyed, appropriated, commodified, and marginalized- and all of this, not accidentally (Bell, 2009). Oppressors indoctrinate people and adjust them to a reality that must remain untouched (Freire, 2013). Education, for Freire, is not neutral and involves educating for either domestication or liberation (Mayo, 2007). If African American males do not receive the opportunity to provide a counter-narrative of how they achieve and overcome obstacles, marginalization will continue. Granting them a voice may help them share the missing stories about African American men who succeed. When the full story is

told and the contributions of all are included, minorities move from being marginalized outsiders with no place to active participants not only in American history but also in their own histories (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

A possible solution to assuring voice is not silenced but elevated is to help African American men develop a critical consciousness of their world. Critical consciousness will allow them to think judiciously about oppressive ideological orientations, a vision of possibility rooted in historical and contemporary examples of resistance, an understanding of how this oppression and resistance is part of their own lived experiences, and a skill set to help them pursue actions that foster social justice (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). In addition, African American men may be able to use their faith and personal conviction to garner the strength to practice resistance to adversity and develop skills to achieve.

Racial profiling and stereotypes result in narrowing school and life opportunities becoming seriously limited and sometimes leading to cases of emotional problems and school dropout (James & Saul, 2007). Students may experience racial profiling in school but could also be subjected to profiling when driving to and from school. In 2015, when police initiated the contact, Blacks (5.2%) and Hispanics (5.1%) were more likely to experience the threat or use of physical force than Whites (2.4%) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018). Being Black, but more distinctively, being a Black male in America seems to dramatically increase the chances that someone is likely to have an encounter with the police where the civilian ends up dead (Hartfield, Griffith, & Bruce, 2018). From 2003-09, 42% of reported arrest-related deaths were White citizens, while 32% were Black, and 20% were Hispanic (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). Regardless of the reason for the traffic stop, Black (67%) and Hispanic (74%) drivers were less likely than White drivers (84%) to believe the reason for the stop was legitimate (U.S.

Department of Justice, 2013). If members of the community believe racial profiling is a primary police tactic, the community tends to question the legitimacy of the police department (Vito, Grossi, & Higgins, 2018). The use of force and belief of unfair treatment could cause tension between African American males and police officers, which may limit positive interactions between each group.

Vito, Grossi, and Higgins (2018) examined racial profiling between comparable racial groups and then comparable male and female racial groups. The findings of Vito and colleagues' (2018) study determined African-American drivers are 1.55 times more likely to be searched than White drivers, and African-American and African-American male drivers were more likely to be searched. Nationally, Black male offenders receive longer sentences than White male offenders of the same crime do. In 2012-2016, Black male offenders received sentences on average 19.1 percent longer than White male offenders of the same crime (United States Sentencing Commission, 2017). Vito and colleagues (2018) believe their study could also prove beneficial to explain to the greater community that while the race or gender of the driver was still an issue, it's more influential when it comes to whether or not a search takes place. This study confirms the challenges African American males experience that could negatively impact their wellbeing.

Conceptualizing the Black Church Experience

Analyzing the social practices of the Black church is necessary to understand the spiritual experience African American men encounter in the Christian Black Church. In the discussion that follows, an investigation of the social and spiritual values of the Black church will be explored. This analysis will provide conceptions on what African American males gain through their membership with the Black church. The task of the social analyst is to examine the social

conditions of any particular Black church, including the situation of its leadership and membership, in order to determine what its major orientation is to any pair of dialectical polarities (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). It is hermeneutic in that it is concerned with unearthing assumptions and particular interpretations and presenting subjects and understandings regarding youth (Cone & Wilmore, 2004). Presenting interpretation is shaped by a spectrum of practices that may be adjusted or customized based on the traditions of the local church. These dialectical shifts may also change within a given time and based on specific inter-and intra-church issues (Barnes, 2004).

There are numerous social scientific models, such as assimilation models, isolation models, and compensatory models, that have been employed to provide the meaning of the Black church, but they are limited. The study of the church will enable researchers to continue to illumine facets of the human condition and systemic forces that continue to influence persons' lives (Barnes, 2014). The problem of single, nondialectical typological views of Black churches is they tend to categorize and stereotype Black churches into rigid categories and miss the historical dynamism of institutions moving back and forth in response to particular issues or social conditions (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Limited research on the African American church has resulted in the development of profiles that describe some general characteristics and attributes of African American clergy (Langley & Kahnweiler, 2003). Nevertheless, some studies provide models, such as Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) that enable a deeper understanding of the Black church.

This research will embrace a dialectic model provided by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) to understand African American males' Black church experience. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) present six dialectical pairs that offer a holistic view of Black churches in America (a) priestly

and prophetic functions; (b) otherworldly and this-worldly orientation; (c) universalism and particularism; (d) communal and privatistic; (e) charismatic and bureaucratic; (f) resistance versus accommodation. Notwithstanding the various tensions that have been recognized within the Black church, Douglas and Hopson (2001) suggested that the Black church possesses a fundamentally dichotomous character, which produces any number of tensions that can be described as dynamic and conserving. These characteristics are important because they provide a holistic view and intimate knowledge about the Black church experience.

The Dialectic Between Priestly and Prophetic Functions.

Spiritual growth is a significant aspect of learning in the church, especially for African Americans (Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001). Priestly functions are primarily focused on the members worshipping God and living a spiritual and holy lifestyle. Spirituality references the intrinsic (beliefs) and extrinsic (practices) of religion (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). Holy living tends to reference good moral habits and behaviors within the unity of relationship with God, community, family, and people (Paris, 1995). Holiness requires Christians to practice moral discernment and make moral judgments, which results in moral acts and lifestyles (Evans, 1992). The priestly function also tends to focus on the use of scriptures, songs, and church gatherings to strengthen the religious character of congregants' lives that are set apart from the secular society rather than challenging social problems in society (Barnes, 2004). The songs, prayers, and testimonies of the Black church often bear witness to its core values of love, inclusiveness, and equality (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). Religious families are more likely to produce individuals with a sense of religious commitment and sentiment (Al-Fadhli & Kersen, 2010). This spiritual lifestyle and commitment may reduce the high expulsion rates and so-called conduct issues of Black males, subsequently keeping them on the educational trajectory. In addition, keeping

African American men on the education course may enhance their overall livelihood through earning potential. In 2019, full-time workers ages 25 and over without a high school diploma had median weekly earnings of \$606, compared with \$749 for high school graduates (no college) and \$1,383 for those holding at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

The prophetic outlook may help faith communities become conscious of the challenges of Black male achievement but also provide solutions to counter their disenfranchisement. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is a commitment to the cause of liberation (Freire, 2013). Spirituality in African American culture is historically grounded in the quest for liberation from injustice (Frame & Williams, 1996). For example, similar to the ancient Hebrews, who expressed joy and excitement over their deliverance from Egypt, African Americans interpret the end of slavery as answered prayers and deliverance by God from the house of bondage (Gilpin & Brekus, 2011). While priestly churches are fortresses of survival, prophetic churches are networks of liberation (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The prophetic Black church is most concerned with Christianity as a mechanism for freedom of oppressed and disenfranchised people (Barnes, 2004). With this liberation, African American males who are members of spiritual communities may be able to overcome the impact of oppression.

Barnes (2004) examined Lincoln & Mamiya's (1990) priestly and prophetic dialectic influence on the social services provided by the Black church. Barnes (2004) studied 1,863 churches that embraced African American denominations. Barnes (2004) concludes while variables associated with the prophetic function have a greater influence on social services, variables that reflect a more priestly function, specifically whether churches sponsor religious programs (Bible study, prayer, spiritual retreats) are also important in motivating churches to provide such services. This research confirms the positive impact church dialectics can offer to

the community at either end of the dialectics. These findings also show that, as advised by Lincoln & Mamiya (1990), the influence of the Black liberation theology and other activist-oriented tenets has moved beyond the intellectual elite to directly influencing support of social services (Barnes, 2004). Black church theology is the fundamental goal of creating positive social change to address issues of marginalization, injustice, and, to a larger degree, any issue that individuals or the community perceive as problematic (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). This type of response and support may be revealed by biblical sentiments that faith without action yields nothing. Cone and Wilmore (2004) stated believers are one in Christ, and the oneness of faith and action could be seen as the struggle together to create societal structures that bear witness to the vision of humanity.

The Dialectic Between Other-worldly Versus This-worldly.

Theological views on this dialectic shape the individual's behaviors and actions on Earth and in the secular world. These dialectics are distinguished by the believer's priority spiritual focus. "Other-worldly" assumes the primary religious focus is only concerned with heaven and eternal life or the world beyond, which neglects political and social concerns (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Other-worldly churches are those whose members believe in deferring freedom and reward until after death and are more accepting of present suffering since they believe they will experience relief posthumously in Heaven (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). This dialectic may manifest in African American males deeply rooted in their faith, which may result or be reflected in greater consistency in religious practice, such as prayer and scripture reading which are coping mechanisms that may keep them persisting towards graduation.

Through the leadership of African American clergy, the church's role as the catalyst for generating social and political changes to improve the lives of African Americans is

unequivocally accepted by these congregants (Langley & Kahnweiler, 2003). “This-world” refers to involvement in the affairs of this world, especially politics and social life, in the here and now (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). This-worldly churches typically advocate explicitly for Blacks to experience earthly freedom and happiness and pursue opportunities to minimize suffering (Avent & Cashwell, 2015). This involvement requires the aggressive pursuit of solutions to the issues like oppression and poverty. This focused pursuit may help African American male churchgoers develop a personal conviction to use their education as a tool to seek liberation from oppression and poverty. True freedom never consists of fleeing from the world and its problems by acting as if the only concern of the Christians was “heaven” i.e. the other-worldly (Cone & Wilmore, 2004). Instead, this-worldly embrace the church’s responsibility for the wellbeing of humanity, especially those who are oppressed. Since its inception, the Black church has been a place of refuge and healing for the oppressed and marginalized and remains a gateway to reach and mobilize African Americans for meaningful change and reform (Brewer & Williams, 2020). Additionally, this dialectical tension is relevant because churches may view themselves as a necessary constituent to addressing African American male achievement.

This-world congregants are aware and active in social issues of this life on Earth. In this regard, the Black church needs to present a social gospel in such a manner that it not only speaks to the human condition and social problems that are the reality of many American young Black males but also provides answers to their plight as well (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). This viewpoint is essential because answers to their plight may be found in African American men with spiritual and biblical support to embrace a social reconstructionist mindset to change the world around them. The Black church has spearheaded advocacy efforts for political and social justice movements for the disadvantaged communities it serves (Brewer & Williams,

2020). Social movements have been powerful forces in the U.S. and have made strides in improving the plights of victims of many forms of oppression, including racism (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). Additionally, African American male leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Nat Turner encompassed spirituality while addressing social problems. Although current circumstances of African Americans are not as limited and restrictive as they were in the past, the church continues to play an important educational role within the African American community (Isaac, Guy, & Valentine, 2001). Exposing African American students to spiritually grounded scholars from the past and present seems plausible to help African American students view themselves as spiritual and intellectually charged individuals (Jett, 2010).

The Dialectic Between Universalism and Particularism.

As ethnic institutions, the historic Black church reflects the dialectical tension between the universalism of the Christian message and the particularism of their past racial history as institutions emerging out of the racism of White Christianity and the larger society (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Universalism holds the belief that religion is a universal human quality. This theological position, principally within Christianity, that everyone shall be “saved” or correspondingly, that no one shall be eternally “damned” (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2016). The truly free realize every curtailment of freedom is a rebellion against God; therefore, they champion the cause of the oppressed and freedom (Cone & Wilmore, 2004). This aspect is important because it allows for spiritual goodwill across racial divides, enabling other racial identities to serve as allies and supporters to African American males who are members of the faith community.

The concept of religious particularism suggests a belief in the exclusive authenticity of

one's religious tradition, which implies the confinement of salvation to rather narrowly defined groups of believers (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2016). There is not a monolithic Black expression of spirituality, the performance of Black religious participation, or belief in the teachings derived from the Black church; however, spirituality as a core identity does suggest a shared and powerful cultural value system that influences the Black experience (Hilton & Wood, 2012). This pair of dialectics is important because whether a congregant believes spirituality is for all people or a specific subgroup, it does not exclude anyone from practicing religious activities or expressing their faith. This affords African American males the opportunity to learn and practice religious activities regardless of their belief system or denomination, which may positively influence on their academic achievement. For example, African American males, irrespective of their denominational view, can practice meditation and/or consecration. Meditation is a mind and body practice used to increase calmness and physical relaxation, improve psychological balance, cope with challenges, and enhance overall health and well-being (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2020). These grounding strategies may yield similar results as those who practice them with spiritual understanding. This aspect creates space for individual expression of spirituality, which is part of the complexity of narrowly defining the meaning of religion and spirituality.

The Dialectic Between Communal and Privatistic.

Limited wealth among African Americans and the fact that many Black churches are located in impoverished urban communities means that organizational resources are often focused on economic outreach programs (Barnes, 2004). Black churches situated in communities where the plight of African American students is in drastic need of change should be cognizant of the need to increase Black students' sense of academic awareness while attempting to rectify

the racist and classist structural academic impediments (McCray, Grant, & Beachum, 2010). While in many White churches, civil and social concerns reflect a Samaritan impulse, for the Black church, such concerns are integral to what it means to be the church (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). The communal orientation stems from the historical tradition of Black churches being involved in all aspects of the lives of their members, including educational, economic, political, and social concerns (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Isaac, Guy, & Valentine (2001), found that African Americans were motivated to participate in church support service due to the need of assistance with personal challenges such as planning for retirement, job change, and ethical decision making. Paradoxically, a gospel received as unchanging is deepened by embracing new human realities and experiences (Cone & Wilmore, 2004). The Black church as an entity conceptualizes its affairs to include the total world of the community (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). African American male churchgoers may also embrace the church's historic tradition of supporting their community. One of the findings in the Donahoo and Caffey (2010) study was African American students determined church participation persuades and inspires them to develop and act on a desire to help others and uplift their communities. Isaac, Guy, and Valentine (2001) also found that a motivator for African Americans to participate in church services was they wanted to help address a community or social problem or be involved in the service mission of the church. This dynamic is important because it has the potential to teach African American males the importance of addressing community issues such as social justice and participation in reconstruction efforts.

In 2018, Black families maintained by women (no opposite-sex spouse present) accounted for 42 percent of Black households (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Additionally, only two percent of U.S. teachers are Black men (United Negro College Fund,

2020). African American boys may be challenged due to not having a father figure in the household resulting in limited communal relationships and social capital. The impersonality of urban life stimulates the individuals' need for communal relationships, broader than the family yet narrower than the entire society (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2016). The desire to be a part of a community is easily accessible through churches due to the pre-establish meeting of church congregants for worship or other spiritual activities. Religion fosters social group unity and strengthens religious sentiment due to enhanced feelings of social belonging and integration into a community of like-minded thinkers (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). Being involved in social communities increases one's awareness of information and opportunities that could positively affect the social well-being of a community of people (Brown & Brown, 2003). If African American men have access to communal relations from churches, they may enhance their social capital while gaining access to additional support services to help them persist. Students who attend church and believe religion is important in their lives may be more likely to interact with more adults who can help them with their schoolwork and even provide guidance about their future goals and plans (Al-Fadhli & Kersen, 2010). Increased access to guidance and support may position African American males to academically persist.

The privatistic orientation refers to a withdrawal from the concerns of the larger community to focus on meeting only the religious needs of its adherents (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). This spiritual polarity recognizes the most vital personal interest of the individual without abandoning or avoiding the interest of the collectivity to which the individual is attached by bonds that include faith but may also transcend it (Billingsley, 1999). If a church recognizes the absence of Black men in their congregation, they may be inclined to address this as an immediate problem worth solving if they view the African American men as assets. This potential adherent

need could initiate church outreach strategies to witness and share with African American males the benefits of Christian spirituality.

The Dialectic Between Charismatic Versus Bureaucratic.

Regardless of the size, the Black church is one of the only institutions outside of the family where people of African descent have full autonomy (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). Specifically, as a social and religious center, it conserves those institutional structures, hierarchies, networks of power, and values (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). The origins of charismatic emphasis stem from the oral traditions of African cultures and religions, where people with the best speaking abilities were perceived as divinely gifted (Mazrui, 1986). The development of these communication skills within formal church networks has always had the potential to equip Blacks to participate in religious and non-religious functions (Brown & Brown, 2003). Followers idealize charismatic leaders, who are role models with a vision and purpose and consider the moral and ethical implications of their decisions (Antonakis, 2012). Charismatic leaders are natural leaders who emerge during times of distress and do not engage in their mission for economic gain, and often reject rational but undignified economic conduct (Koorts, 2012). A strong sense of kinship and social connectedness is evident among the Black church's parishioners and has epitomized resilience, as it has engaged in capacity building and survived in the face of adversity, scarcity of resources, and historical threats (Brewer & Williams, 2020). Charismatic leadership may provide African American males with role models and strategies to overcome adversity.

Northhouse (2011) has provided supportive evidence regarding the benefit of transformational leadership, which embraces characteristics revealed in the faith community. Transformational leaders set out to empower followers and nurture them in change (Northhouse,

2011). Transformative pastoral leaders tend to their congregation while building the congregation's capacity to address the broader community's concerns (Tribble, 2005). These pastors are visionary with a worldview of their ministry that moves beyond just meeting the spiritual needs of their followers (Langley & Kahnweiler, 2003). Supporting African American male persistence may classify as a need that goes beyond the spiritual needs of the congregants, which could positively transform the circumstances of Black men. Factors of transformational leadership are identified as (a) idealized influence (positive role-modeling), (b) inspirational motivation (inspiration through motivation), (c) intellectual stimulation (problem solving challenges), and (d) individualized consideration (supportive climate) (Northouse, 2011). The faith community seems to provide an environment of encouragement and coping strategies to help African American men overcome adversity. The charismatic environment may provide African American men with positive relationships and community that empowers them to develop the necessary in-school and out-of-school relationships.

From the beginnings in the "invisible institution" of slave religion, African Americans have invested far more authority in the charismatic personality of the preacher than any organizational form of bureaucratic hierarchy (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Nevertheless, bureaucracy may also sharpen African American males' skills concerning discipline and accountability, which may benefit them in the education environment. Power in schools is organized along vertical lines of authority from administration to faculty to student body; students have a degree of control over their curriculum comparable to that of the worker over the content of his job (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). Bureaucracy is characterized as an organizational structure having a hierarchy of authority. Max Weber, a German sociologist, cited as the founding scholar regarding the study and implications of bureaucratic systems believed that

bureaucratic management provided efficiencies and precision for a radically transforming industrialized society (Gerth & Mills, 2009). Weber defined bureaucracy as having the following set of competencies underpinned by rules, laws, or administrative regulations:

1. A rigid division of labor is in place to perform regular daily tasks as official duties in the functioning of the bureaucratically governed system.
2. To fulfill these duties, the necessary chains of command are firmly established and divided up and their capacity to coerce (physical, sacred, or other) is firmly restricted by regulation.
3. Regular and continuous fulfillment of these assigned duties and executing respective rights are systematically secured by hiring people with certified qualifications (Waters & Waters, 2015).

Environments possessing these characteristics arguably have an enhanced potential to create discipline and structure among African American male congregants. A strictly bureaucratic administration run by a trained leader produces an efficiency for precision, speed, clarity, command of case knowledge, continuity, confidentiality, uniformity, and tight subordination (Waters & Waters, 2015)—skills that would be beneficial to develop because of their potential to help African American men enhance their technical and professional skills.

Learning to navigate a bureaucratic environment has the potential to prepare African American males for similar structures they may encounter on college campuses or employment agencies. The relationships of authority and control between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, and students and students, replicate the hierarchical division of labor, which dominates the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). For example, schools typically have bureaucratic environments with established hierarchies. If schoolteachers discriminate against

African American males, there is an employee hierarchy of accountability. Students can solicit support from the department leader, the school principal, the superintendent, or the school board. Understanding bureaucratic structures may help African American men better navigate due process systems when they experience adversity or want to appeal a punitive decision made by school staff.

The Dialectic Between Resistance Versus Accommodation.

Many Black people and many Black institutions have made compromises between these two dialects (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). For instance, when the country is more accommodating toward the Black community, Black people tend to be more assimilating, but when the country is more hostile toward the Black community, they tend to be more separatist (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). The resistance versus accommodation model provides a cogent explanation for the political pluralism and ambiguity such congregations can exhibit and for many Black Christians to prioritize issues of racial justice and economic empowerment above more conservative religious views they may adopt (Barnes & Nwosu, 2014). Many Black people have been persistent in their resistance to oppression and resilience in their endurance of it (Paris, 1995). From slave revolts to wars for independence, revolutionary movements to civil rights, many people of color have fought back (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). The disjuncture between the tangible benefits of the rights movements and African Americans' persistent economic inequality raise both expectations and frustrations as their aspirations continue to outpace racial, economic, social, and political change (Lindquist, 2012). Some believe resistance consists of the refusal to remain silent, in and of itself, that gives strength and empowerment in a society determined to cling to established habits of repression (Taylor, 2009). Public resistance on racial and economic issues affecting African American males could help apply pressure on

the systems that create and sustain marginalized outcomes. For example, the Underground Railroad, The Great Migration, Montgomery Bus Boycotts, and the Million Man March were all forms of African American resistance to inequitable treatment, which helped initiate a revolution. Some social movements of the past and present have employed civil disobedience strategies, media campaigns, voting campaigns, litigation, and political lobbying (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). Many Black churches continue to be the primary location of Black political activity and the vehicle through which Blacks can address the dominant social order and relate to their God through their cultural heritage (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). If Black churches can help establish accountability towards the oppressive systems that marginalize African American men, this aspect could yield positive results.

The goal of resistance activities is to effect some measure of systemic reform in the public practice of racism, while accommodationist activities aim at helping African Americans adapt to those public practices (Paris, 1995). Since the civil rights movements and the attempts to desegregate American society, the accommodative pressures on Black people and Black institutions have grown considerably (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Accommodation entails avoiding further conflict; however tacitly, with the existing order of things- to compromise, oblige, and be pliable (New Dictionary of the History of Ideas, 2016). Accommodation is a form of assimilation and integration into the existing structures of America. Shelton and Emerson (2010) examined African American perspectives. They found their study participants with higher incomes, a non-Democratic political party affiliation, and those who demonstrate greater awareness of the U.S. political system are more likely to endorse inter-racial integration and embrace an assimilation trajectory. Racial discrimination limits some privileged African Americans from fully assimilating into mainstream but causes many of them to practice strategic

assimilation, a deliberate effort to moderate and select when to assimilate when there are favorable associations (Shelton & Emerson , 2010).

Accommodation replaces conflict and discrimination when the majority and the minority group reach a tacit accord to ignore their cultural differences and emphasize their shared interests (Cutright, 1996). This form of forbearance of immediate change tends to teach some congregants how to survive the oppression that they are expected to encounter. Doing what is necessary to preserve life under caustic conditions need not be viewed as either mindless submission or cowardice but, instead, as intelligent action (Paris, 1995). This aspect may be complex to embrace, but it may sharpen African American men's survival skills to navigate adverse experiences in the school system and the community.

The Black Church is not fully responsible for the achievement gap and other social dilemmas of African American males, but time is too precious to wait on other entities to respond to the problem. The Black church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the Black community (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The church and other faith-based institutions may yield positive influences due to their positioning and historical value in the Black community. Black churches are challenged to institute creative, proactive methods to address new and chronic challenges in their communities (Barnes, 2004). Community challenges may be related to poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, and health disparities (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). This proactive engagement has positioned many Black churches as a potential partner in equipping African American males with the necessary supports and skills to overcome life challenges. Providing services aimed at assisting these young men also increases the likelihood that they will develop into responsible men who can become role models, pillars within the community, and who will themselves be in a position to help the Black church carry

on its unquestionable significance within its community and the at-large society (Moore, Adedoyin, Robinson, & Boamah, 2015). Each of the aforementioned theoretical dialectics is valuable because it illuminates ways the Black church provides customized support to their congregations, based on the preferred level of engagement and action towards social issues.

The strength of the dialectical model of the Black church is that it leads to a more dynamic view of Black churches along a continuum of dialectical tensions, struggles, and chance (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). What is thus endemic to the Black church is not a fixed set of tensions or polarities but its dynamic nature (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). The desire to reveal distortions leads to the adoption of a sociological knowledge-approach that stresses how particular viewpoints endorse and encourage ulterior aims (Cone & Wilmore, 2004). Since the Black community has given birth to the Black church and because the church is the social and religious center of the Black community, it does sometimes mirror a growing consciousness (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). These tensions and viewpoints continue to shape the Black church experience, but more specifically, the spirituality of African American male churchgoers.

African American Male Spirituality

Examining the influence of spirituality on African American males provides a source of alternate reference to deficit-modeled research that explores their perceived failure. Alternative reference points provide a unique conceptual understanding that gives voice to an experience dissimilar from the dominant culture and deserves to be heard (Delgado, 1995). Learning the stories of African American Christian males will better inform the main culture of their challenges. The faith of African American males could provide an avenue to alternative counter stories that could result to enhanced outcomes for their population.

Elevating African American male's voices is necessary to explore immediate supports to

help them achieve in school. According to Herndon (2003) and the existing research body, studies on the influence spirituality has on African American males focuses primarily on four major themes (a) retention and resilience, (b) a sense of purpose (c) social capital and support, (d) spirituality as core identity.

Herndon (2003) published research titled *Expressions of Spirituality among African American College Males*. The researcher examined 13 African American males between the ages of 19 to 25 years old who mostly identified with the traditions of Christianity. The purpose of the study was to explore the role spirituality has in the lives of African American college males as a factor of retention. The research employed grounded theory to seek qualitative data about the research participants. Three themes emerged from Herndon's (2003) study regarding the influence of spirituality on African American males (a) spirituality bolsters resilience, (b) spirituality provides a sense of purpose, and (c) African American religious institutions provide spiritual support to African American males. Herndon's (2003) findings conclude that if African American males embrace and maximize their spirituality, they will persist through college.

Spirituality Bolsters Retention and Resilience

Herndon (2013) confirmed spirituality provides beneficial support for African American males to help them become resilient and continue to pursue their education even when faced with adversity. These acts of spirituality include prayer, church attendance, and reading scriptures, which were identified as coping mechanisms (Herndon, 2003). Prayer was an active agent to bring physical, mental, emotional, spiritual relief and revitalization that is liberally used in the worship services of most Black churches (Adksion-Bradley, Johnson, Sanders, Duncan, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). The findings of Herndon's (2003) research in regards to African American males using prayer and spiritual activities to cope is also confirmed by other scholars,

such as Dancy (2012), Kim and Hargrove (2012), and Watson (2006).

Hilton and Wood (2012) confirm the findings of African American males using spirituality to help practice resiliency even when faced with challenges. The most significant theme was African American male participants stated when they encountered barriers, they prayed, believing that God hears their prayers and will help them through whatever barriers they face (Hilton & Wood, 2012). Based on the numerous societal barriers African American males experience, their spirituality may grant them the necessary competencies to persist. Additionally, African American male participants noted that they prayed to God before taking tests and coursework, which they viewed as challenges to their success (Hilton & Wood, 2012). This sense of spiritual dependency to guide them through standard functions of education may help them persist throughout all of their educational goals.

At Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)'s, Black male collegians used prayer to navigate racist environments and the academic life of college (Kim & Hargrove, 2013), but at Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU)'s prayer was employed for guidance (Watson, 2006). Prayer seems to be employed as a coping mechanism to overcome external and internal challenges that could otherwise cause African American males to discontinue their education. African Americans commonly offer prayers in the form of petitions for basic conditions of life: health, food, shelter, and protection from all forms of evil, including social abuse, political oppression, and economic deprivation (Paris, 1995). Spiritual acts, such as prayer, assisted African American male participants in bearing the stresses and strains of life and helped these men excel in the face of academic and social adversities (Herndon, 2003). Hilton and Wood (2012) also confirmed similar findings that African American males described their spiritual relationship as an interaction, one in which they could both talk to and dialogue with

God on challenges they faced and successes they celebrated. This dialogue with God seems to be similar to the aforementioned use of prayer as a coping mechanism, which helped their resilience. African American males will encounter problems throughout their lives, but spirituality and prayer seem viable to address their difficulties. Given the role of spirituality and religion in the Black community, the collegiate success of many African American males is inevitably connected to religious support (Kim & Hargrove, 2013).

Dancy (2010) examined 24 African American males enrolled at twelve colleges in nineteen southern states in America. This qualitative study examined the role of spirituality and religion manifested in African American males enrolled in college. Dancy (2010) employs a grounded theory framework to explore the spiritual identity constructions and intersections among 24 African American male undergraduate students. Grounded theory was used to identify participants and initial coding in this study. The grounded theory uses a series of cumulative coding cycles and reflective analytic memoing to develop major categories for theory generation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This type of coding assures the researcher provides accurate information and notes on the experiences of the African American males. Dancy's (2010) research is attempted to answer two specific questions: (a) how selected African American men in college make meaning of their spiritual identities. In addition, (b), how these realized identities cross with other identities? Dancy (2010) concluded that the African American male participants credited spirituality as essential to their persistence, retention, completion, and post-undergraduate goals. This conclusion supports the positive influence spirituality has on academic goals, which can assist in African American male success.

One of the common themes that emerged from Dancy's (2010) research was that spirituality and religious participation are sources of support and dependency. African American

males developed a dependency on God's direction and support throughout their academic journey. In Dancy's (2010) study, all the African American men rendered perspectives consistent with thanking God for the present and anticipated role they believed God fulfills in their lives. This dependency is identified through the Old Testament notion of God as an avenging, conquering, and liberating paladin remains a formidable anchor of the faith in most Black churches (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Believing that God will provide in the time of need provides hope to African American men that God will provide provision. The Black church may be able to provide some of these needs based on church membership. Cash assistance, food banks, and youth programs are among the top four most commonly sponsored supports offered by the Black church (Barnes, 2004). These support services are beneficial because students can depend on the church for their spiritual and natural needs.

The African American men in the study see their spiritual and religious beliefs as powerful coping mechanisms when faced with stress on-and-off campus (Dancy, 2010). Identifying a practice that relieves stress is valuable because many people deal with stress and anxiety. Stress disorders affect about 40 million American adults age 18 years in a given year, causing them to be filled with fearfulness and uncertainty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). During the 2015-16 school year, 20.7% of public elementary and secondary school teachers believed student apathy was a severe problem in their schools, and 6.7% thought poor student health was a serious problem in their school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Apathy and student health could be a result of stress or feelings of being overwhelmed. Spirituality may be able to provide African American men with the necessary skills to cope with these conditions. Donahoo and Caffey's (2010), Hood, Hill, and Spilka's (2009), and Watson's (2006) research also supported the finding that African Americans use

their spirituality for coping and a source of inspiration to achieve. Practicing positive coping mechanisms may help African American men persist through their education by providing positive alternatives to address stress and life challenges.

African American males using spirituality as inspiration to achieve excellence is also cited by Hilton and Wood (2012). Their research examined academic success factors affecting African American male students enrolled in community college. African American males noted that they were raised to believe that the pursuit of excellence was an important Christian value and applicable to every aspect of their lives (e.g., in the workplace, in relationships with friends), including excellence in school/college (Hilton & Wood, 2012). This finding is valuable because this pursuit of excellence may keep African American males aggressively persisting and may help them strive for the highest outcomes in other academic indicators like grades, school attendance, and behavior. Thus, students who ascribed to excellence ethic believed that they must be more focused and concentrated on their academic pursuits (Hilton & Wood, 2012).

Ballard and Cintron's (2010) research further this discussion by examining graduate-level African American males. Ballard and Cintron (2010) studied African American males who recently completed a doctoral program at a Predominantly White Institution. The researchers used the critical race theory framework to elevate the narratives of how African American males successfully negotiated the hurdles of completing a doctoral program. Exploring this research topic was valuable and appropriate because African American men have low levels of doctoral completion rates in comparison to their counterparts. For example, during the 2015-16 school year African American men only represented 6.4% of doctoral degrees conferred in comparison to 12.1% for Asians and 7.2 % for Whites (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Ballard and Cintron (2010) found that African American males enrolled in doctoral

programs do not quit and persevere through their challenges. Failure was not an option for African American males accepted in the doctoral program (Ballard & Cintron, 2010). This finding is important because persistence is necessary for African American males to complete their education careers, including doctorate degrees.

Spirituality Provides a Sense of Purpose

Herndon's (2003) research also confirmed the African American male participants described spirituality as providing a sense of purpose, direction, and focus in life. This finding is also confirmed by the participants in English's (2016) study, who believed God guided their decisions for their college major choice, despite their thoughts, which gave them the comfort to know they could be successful (English, 2016). Additionally, the African American students in Donahoo and Caffey (2010) declared that church helped them stay focused, grounded and made them want to keep progressing towards their goals. This sense of direction and focus on God's purpose seems to keep African American men dedicated to what they perceive God wants them to accomplish.

English (2016) examined ten Black men who identified themselves as spiritual and/or religious and were enrolled as upperclassman in a selected university. English (2016) examined how spirituality and religion influence persistence towards degree completion for African American male college students. English concludes the African American male research participants' faith positively affects what they wanted to study and/or pursue as a career. The determination of what to pursue was based on what these male students felt their purpose was, mainly due to what they felt God had set out for them to accomplish in life (English, 2016). English's (2016) research confirms the significant influence spirituality has on African American men and their understanding of purpose, which degree attainment is one-step towards fulfilling

their God-given purpose. Their ability to understand their purpose and comprehend what their plan was for the future put them on the path to persisting in college (English, 2016).

Similarly, Harper and Davis's (2012) research recognized the African American males in their study had purposeful pursuits of Ph.D.'s despite the perceived or actual odds against them. The African American men in the Harper and Davis (2012) study believed attaining a Ph.D. would end the cycle of hopelessness and was often connected to larger social, communal, and familial purposes, such as inspiring others of similar backgrounds to achieve. African American men who find their purpose greater than themselves may cultivate the necessary momentum to overcome hardship and persist towards their life goals.

The work of Hilton and Wood (2012) supported the findings that African American men were able to find their purpose in their spirituality. The authors' research participants believed their spirituality helped them make their goals clearer. African American males thought that God has a desired outcome for each person and that this purpose, often equated with a career, is meant to serve, glorify, and benefit God (Hilton & Wood, 2012). This finding is important because if African American men can recognize God's purpose, they may persist and pursue additional education to assure they have the skills to excel in their career path.

Religious Institutions Provide Spiritual Support and Social Capital

Herndon's (2013) study suggested that African American religious institutions provide a formal venue to help African American males continue exploring their spirituality. This theme is also supported by the findings by Dancy (2010) and English (2016). Spiritual and religious understanding of purpose was a stimulant for persistence toward graduation (English, 2016). This stimulate was explored and developed through faith-based programs and institutions. This similar stimulant was also revealed by the African American students in Donahoo and Caffey

(2010) study. More than just sustaining; attending church while in college helps students further their religious and spiritual development while working to expand their education and career options (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). Additionally, Isaac, Guy, and Valentine (2001) found that one of the motivators for African American church participation was they could be around other Christians and, in particular, African Americans whose lifestyles (i.e., Christian), beliefs, and values were similar to theirs. Spirituality may serve as a complimentary function to students' academic goals by providing continuous opportunities to develop and practice their skills. This constant development may equip African American males with academic and ethical decision-making, which both serve as necessary competencies in education and employment.

Although some may question the importance of the Black church today, it does make a difference in the lives of Black males (Rowland & Isaac-Savage, 2016). A common theme from Dancy's (2010) study was the African American men envision church as a supportive community, which also helped students resist events and environments that potentially violate biblical or spiritual laws or expectations. The church promotes and rewards a range of spiritual qualities, including wisdom and morality, which promotes a sense of meaning in life (Krause, 2003). Many religious believers rely on their moral judgment as a form of reflection and validation concerning a divine command, but their lives and moral actions are nonetheless shaped directly by the force of their religious commitments (Kunzman, 2003). The need for African American males to explore their spirituality is important because understanding wisdom and morality may help them resist high-risk behaviors that may cause their expulsion from the education system. Examples of high-risk behaviors are substance misuse, sex, crime, or violent behavior among students, along with the related primary and secondary harms caused by those behaviors to students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community (National Center on Safe

Supportive Learning Environments, 2020).

Donahoo and Caffey (2010) employed a mixed methodology of both qualitative and quantitative insight on 25 Black college students. Their research aimed to determine what particular benefits African American college students gain from their religious and spiritual involvement. Donahoo and Caffey's (2010) research concluded that African American students who maintained church involvement while in college experienced a positive influence on their academic achievement. One of the themes that arose from the Donahoo and Caffey (2010) was the positive value the church provides to African American students. To all African American research participants the church functioned as family by not only offering religious support, but by also taking a genuine interest in their educations as evidence by the investment of time, resources, and effort to help ensure that these students succeed in college and beyond (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010). This finding is important because church involvement may position African American males to be supported holistically, which may better serve their needs. The Black church is an appropriate institution for holistic interventions to help improve the conditions many African Americans students regularly confront in their matriculation through the educational system (McCray, Grant, & Beachum, 2010). Similarly, the findings of the Harper and Davis (2012) study revealed that their African American male study participants' beliefs in education as the great equalizer were shaped by messages various family members conveyed to them. Family members socialized these young men to value school. Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman (2011) recognize the importance families have when they share stories of hardships and triumphs, enduring cultural values about the importance of being well educated, and wisdom for living. These findings are important because they reveal the positive influence of extensive social capital on African American male achievement.

Kim and Hargrove (2013) wrote a literature review that analyzes research into Black male resiliency. Academic resilience is examined at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI's) and Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU's) to identify timely strategies and research developments to counter the continuous challenges African American men face during their collegiate journey. The authors seek to counter the abundance of deficit-informed research by providing insight into Black male college students who achieve and identify the most influential factors to their achievement. The authors are attempting to fill the gap in the literature that explores contributing factors to Black male achievement through a success and resilience framework instead of adding to the literature that feeds stereotypes that Black males underachieve.

Trending research development for African American men cited by Kim and Hargrove (2013) is the influence of relationships as a stimulus to success, which tends to be observed as peer, family, school, and religious support. The significant power of relationships cannot be underestimated. In relationships, we are equipped to engage others' perspectives, positions, and predispositions, which have a monumental impact on our own (Beachum & Dentith, 2008). Kim and Hargrove (2013) determined African American males who were able to receive support through relationships, inclusive of the spiritual community, seemed to have experiences that are more positive on the college campus and increased self-efficacy. Surrounding African American males around like-minded individuals who share the same desire to embrace spirituality may provide them with deeper wisdom and understanding on connecting spiritual solutions to address secular challenges.

Spirituality as Core Identify

Herndon's (2013) recommendation that African American males explore their spirituality

more deeply may be a reasonable solution to a finding in Dancy's (2010) study. All the African American men in Dancy's (2010) study acknowledged or suggested their other identities must coincide with their spiritual identity. Study participants did not easily seek support services on campuses because they preferred spiritual and religious activities as appropriate options for seeking support (Dancy, 2010). The preferential desire of the African American males in Dancy's (2010) study to seek spiritual support over secular resources may create an opportunity for churches to help these men explore their spirituality further as a means of engagement and retention. Bridging the gap by creating access to spiritual support services for African American males is also a recommendation cited by Jett (2010). This points towards a potential collaborative opportunity for churches and academic institutions to support African American male achievement. Adults can play a significant role in establishing church-based programs that help not only Black men but also the Black community in general (Rowland & Isaac-Savage, 2016). Spiritual programs such as Bible study, gospel choirs, and similar activities should remain accessible for African American students to assist in exploring their religiosity (Jett, 2010). Additionally, involvement in church youth committees, choirs, missionary societies, and other church auxiliaries grants African Americans opportunities for civic skill development (Brown & Brown, 2003). Many Black churches help nurture Black musicians, actors, and artists by granting many of these performers their first opportunity to display their talents among congregants (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). The church may serve as a valuable stakeholder in engaging African American males due to limited offerings of extracurricular activities in urban schools. In 2008, 58.2% of enrolled ninth grade African American males participated in non-school-sponsored organized sports, 49% in external religious youth groups or instruction, and 31.1% in external academic instruction (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Developing opportunities for African American males to explore their spirituality may help them deepen their commitment to their futures and communities.

Jett (2010) employed a qualitative case study on four African American men who earned mathematic degrees in undergrad and currently pursuing graduate degrees in mathematics. Jett's (2010) research contributed to the body of literature because the number of African-American men pursuing graduate degrees in STEM fields has become stagnant. In 2008-09, African-American men were awarded 5.8% of STEM degrees, which have increased to 7.4% in 2017, but have been stationary at around 7% since 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The primary goal of Jett's (2010) research is to investigate the factors and/or experiences mathematically successful African American men attribute to their success in mathematic majors in college (Jett, 2010). Mathematics was selected as a control because it is a core subject that African American males are not adequately engaged in due to being perceived as not having the necessary skills to succeed. Jett's (2010) research concludes spiritual connection was one of the driving forces behind academic success in college and overall success in general. In Jett's (2010) study, all the African American men cited an internal connection with a higher power (i.e., God), which guided them to their academic and overall life plans.

African American males' church membership may help them understand and practice mathematics and numerical functions such as work shift schedule, counting offerings/donations, membership trends, and church attendance records. In addition, opportunities to engage in activities that reinforce their studies may enhance their familiarity with academic content and increase their overall confidence in school. Jett's research certifies the positive role spiritual identity has at the core of African American men in mathematics content and their overall success. This finding is promising because spirituality may help African American men through

their college major and into their aligned career choice.

Jett's (2010) study recognized a common internal characteristic among the African American male participants: their grounded spirituality and its positive contribution to fulfilling their academic goals (Jett, 2010). Regardless of whether or not African American males wanted to go through the process of college and course taking, the spiritual urge to move toward purpose, whether through internal or external means, was reason enough to encourage students to persist toward degree completion (English, 2016). In Jett's (2010) study, the African American men acknowledged an "internal" spirit man as key to their lived experiences. Dancy (2010) also recognizes African American males have identity tensions, but the faith identity remains the core identity of their understanding. The pervasiveness of religious consciousness among Black people constitutes their single most important common characteristic (Paris, 1995). These findings are significant because they suggest that among numerous internal identities, spirituality for African American men may be the most promising identity to keep them engaged and persisting in education.

Ignoring the challenge of intersectionality risks advancing interventions by half measures and leaving major sectors of the population dissatisfied (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Jett (2010) provides recommendations for future researchers and supporters of the African American male success agenda. In an inclusive effort to explore African American males across the education pipeline Jett (2010) endorses future researchers to investigate constructs of religion and spirituality across race and gender at different types of academic institutions to help fill the gaps in the literature. In addition, future researchers should draw on philosophical and theoretical frameworks, such as critical race theory (Jett, 2010). Finally, prospective research should examine spirituality among a variety of age groups to further determine if spirituality is more

salient for African American across development stages (Walker & Dixon, 2002). Each of these recommendations justifies the necessity to use the critical race theory to examine how faith membership in the Christian Black church influences the academic persistence of Black college males.

Chapter 3 Methodology and Method

One-sided insights stem from information collected and projected by the dominant culture about people of color but without engagement of voices of those people (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018). Critical race theory provides for sharing by African American males of their experiences, providing a counter narrative to the one-sided insights generated by the dominant culture. Specifically, critical race theorists often engage in part in retelling a story from a marginalized perspective to help expose the contradictions in what they argue is inherently one-sided in the storyline of the dominant culture (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011).

One-sided perspectives do not offer insights of adequate nuance and depth into how racist institutional norms, cultures, and policies cyclically reproduce racial inequalities reflected in data reports (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018). For this research, then, critical race theory provided a structure for elevating the experiences the study participants with racism and illuminating how they overcame these adversities. This study employs a qualitative methodology adopting this perspective from critical race theory.

Geographic Region

All research participants engaged were currently enrolled in accredited postsecondary institutions located in Wayne County, Michigan home to Michigan's largest concentration of African Americans—consisting of 38.7% of the state's Black population (U.S. Census, 2021). In Wayne County, moreover, 19.8% of the residents live in poverty (U.S. Census, 2021)—roughly two times the number of people below the national poverty line at 11.4% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2021). These characteristics enabled the best access to African American males of

most pronounced interest in this study. Wayne County has a college graduation rate of only 23.9% (U.S. Census, 2021), which confirms there are challenges to college completion, driving home the importance of exploring African American male persistence in college.

The county seat of Wayne County is located in Detroit, Michigan, which is the city in which the majority of the research participants lived and graduated from high school. The city's estimated population is 672,662, 78.6% of whom are African American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). The Metro Detroit area tends to be characterized in news media as having high crime activity and poor education outcomes. In 2017, over 12,000 violent crimes were reported, including homicide, rape, robbery, and assault (City of Detroit, 2017). In addition, 14.6 % of the city's population above the age of 25 hold a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Limited education attainment, in turn, tends to result in lower earned income among residents. High crime rates and low-income households are community-level factors that may cause despair among African American males but validate the necessity to explore their persistence.

As practiced by Danahoo and Caffey (2010) in their data collection process, the proposed study specifically targets urban areas, increasing the likelihood that participants have similar patterns of access to social and community opportunities. For example, the largest urban school district in Wayne County is Detroit Public Schools Community District. In fall 2016, about 40 percent of students who attended urban schools were in high-poverty schools, compared to 20 percent of students who attended town schools, 18 percent of students who attended suburban schools, and 15 percent of students who attended rural schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The school district currently serves approximately 51,000 students across 106 schools (Detroit Public Schools Community District, 2019). In 2018, African American males

represented 41.9% of the district and had a 70.6% graduation rate and a 12.8% dropout rate (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2018). In addition to providing rationale for the inclusion of this community in the study, these aspects of the district's demographic composition confirm the need to explore strategies to increase African American male persistence rates.

National attention has prominently emphasized that the Detroit school district has been ranked among the lowest-achieving in the nation for ten years (The Nation's Report Card, 2019). School challenges to success among the students are manifested in various ways. For instance, during the 2015-16 academic school year, the city had a 51.6% chronic absenteeism rate among school-aged youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). And, as reflected in the states 2018-19 standardized test scores, over 60% in each grade (third grade through seventh grade) were not proficient in English Language Arts and Mathematics (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2018). Additionally, Michigan's overall education performance lags relative to other states, ranking number 32 out of the 50 states for 8th-grade reading proficiency scores (The Nation's Report Card, 2019). During the 2018-19 academic school year, 89.7% of students did not reach the college-ready benchmark for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) standardized test (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2018). In sum, in light of these numerous data points, Detroit's graduating high school students have not been equipped with the same support and experiences afforded to students in most Michigan communities and to most high school graduates in different states.

Across the state of Michigan, 23.8% of African American males were retained in the 12th grade during the 2013-14 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). After high school, students may pursue a postsecondary credential or seek employment, among other opportunities.

However, of the 102,160 high school graduates in 2019, only 54.6% actually enrolled in a two-year or four-year college within six months of their graduation (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2021). These data points and statistics confirm that students face an achievement dilemma, which provides the necessary conditions for conducting this research.

Research Participants

Each participant meets the same set of eligibility requirements for inclusion as an informant, supporting consistency in the data collected. Criterion sampling, similar to that employed in Harper's (2015) study, provided rigor in the inclusion of participants, satisfying specific and predetermined qualifications aligned with the study's intent. Here, the minimum criteria were that each participant needed to: 1) racially identify as a Black/African American man, 2) be enrolled in a Michigan college/university, 3) have at least a 2.8-grade point average, 4) identify spirituality and/or religion as personally important, and 5) attend a predominantly African American church.

To pursue the essential narratives from those who can discuss their educational values, and experiences concerning their faith, ten African American male students currently enrolled in a Michigan college served as participants in this study. A participant group of this size is endorsed by English's (2016) and Herndon's (2003) studies, which examined the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of African American male college students. Harper and Davis (2012) also selected and studied the experiences of ten African American males while embracing the critical race theory and an anti-deficit framework. English (2016) endorsed in particular the in-depthness of interviews possible with a relatively low number of research participants.

Each student must have earned a grade point average of 2.8 or above, as noted. The 2.8-

grade point average established a reasonable level of academic success, generally equating to a performance level of 83%. Additionally, the 2.8-grade point average matches the admissions requirements standard in the area's postsecondary institutions. Thus, in addition to having demonstrated academic persistence, the participants have been academically successful in addition. School administrators and professors helped identify students reflecting a known religious lifestyle based on personal acknowledgment and/or expressed behaviors such as prayer and scripture reading. Harper (2015) also engaged academic personnel in the identification and recruitment of research participants. The relatively consistent place of religion, particularly Christianity, for most Blacks, and its contemporary manifestations for this same group, suggests the need for more nuanced approaches for studying this phenomenon (Barnes, 2014). All students must identify spirituality as an essential value to their identity and currently attend a predominantly African American Christian church (often identified in this study and within relevant literature as The Black Church).

Data Collection

An invitation to participate, distributed via paper flyer, signage, and digital communication- email, website, online forums with community leaders targeted African American college students, thus informing prospective participants of the research opportunity. A pool of potential participants identified in this fashion then responded to a questionnaire enabling the acquisition of additional information confirming suitability as participants with respect to selection criteria discussed above.

Academic performance data gathered through virtual interviews and captured in interviewer notes then enabled examination of the role of spirituality in the academic persistence of the participating African American males. Transcripts from interviews—structured to last

approximately one hour with time allocated upon the conclusion of the formal interview for the participants to provide additional details—were then reviewed for accuracy in line with Dancy's (2010) recommendation. These practices offer a richer, more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of interest, allowing convergence across individual interviewees' perspectives (Watts, 2017). The interviews were structured to pursue participants' deep personal understandings of their experiences. Interviews and questionnaires are common elements of school culture (Mills, 2003). As with Harper's (2010) study, the interviews' focus pursued understandings regarding how certain Black men excel instead of adding to cataloging of illustrations as to why they fail. These data collection tools allowed participants to share their narratives in a familiar but transparent and honest manner. In ways such as these, a sensitive researcher can refine pursuit of data enabling the development of a deepening understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Johnson & Christensen, 2012).

Conceptual Framework: Why Use the Critical Race Theory

The discussion that will follow will include a discussion of the conceptual power of critical race theory. Delgado and Stefaniec (2012) define race as a distinct biological type of human being, usually based on skin color or other physical characteristics. Critical race theorists call for the reexamination of the concept of race, recognizing that it is not a fixed-term, but fluid based on social meaning shaped by political pressures (Parker & Lynn, 2009). Race and skin color remain problematically intertwined across America. Problems in which all that race and skin color have signified (historically, socially, politically, and economically) continue to perpetuate social inequality, especially concerning education (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). A system of interrogation and analysis such as critical race theory is necessary to understand how African American men navigate marginalized systems. Education

in the United States is as contradictory and complex as the larger society; no simplistic theory can help substantially aid understanding of it (Bowles & Gintis, 1977). And the particular dearth of coherent theory regarding race in U.S. educational policy and practice arguably contributes to entrenched difficulty in overcoming racial inequities in academic achievement (Taylor, 2009). Critical race theory provides a framework for examining the intersectionality of race, racism, and power in schools. Critical race scholars re-define racism as not the acts of individuals but as consisting of the larger, systemic, structural conventions and customs that uphold and sustain oppressive group relationships, status, income, and educational attainment (Taylor, 2009). This framework is valuable to the research because it analyzes institutions that affect African American men, such as schools and churches. In these ways, taken together, critical race theory has provided an important analytical tool in the field of education, offering critical perspectives on causes, consequences, and manifestations of race, racism, associated inequities, and the dynamics of power and privilege in schooling (Taylor, 2009).

According to Friere (2013), those denied their right to speak must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression (Freire, 2013). Critical race theory is employed for the study because it contains an activist dimension that provides not only for attempts to understand our social situation but also offers tools to change it. It therefore sets out not solely to ascertain the lines and hierarchies but potentially to counter them for the better (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Thus, critical race theory in education focuses on a radical critique of the status quo and the purported reforms (Billings & Tate, 1995). Current educational inquiry tends to label African American males as underachieving or seemingly incapable of achieving (Harper, 2010), focusing almost entirely on their problems and underachievement (Harper, 2015) with additional emphasis commonly placed on what such students lack and on how these deficits

contribute to their troubled status (Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2018). In sum, the activist component of critical race theory is essential because it presses researchers to identify and execute strategies to change inequities through emphasis upon assets versus deficits.

Additionally, critical race theory offers a more expansive and critical interpretation of the African American male experience in education through their own testimonies. The growing use of critical race theory in education research has resulted in deeper, more sophisticated understandings of the issues associated with race and racism (Harper, Smith, & Davis 2018; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso 2000; Taylor, 2009; and Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman 2011). From birth, people of color generally have first-hand knowledge, as well as multigenerational experiences, without the political, social, historical, and persistence advantages offered to Whites (Taylor, 2009). Therefore, African American men are logically the best-qualified candidates to provide understanding about their spiritual and academic experiences. These testimonials may provide insight on services that have helped them excel. Critical race theory seeks to include traditionally excluded views, and the perspective sees this inclusiveness as providing for the emergence of collective wisdom (Bell, 2009), the reshaping of the field of education, and the reform of American society better enabling circumstances within which all people have equal opportunities to succeed.

While the body of literature does reference certain resiliency factors mostly for African American male adults (Donahoo & Caffey 2010; Harper 2010; Harper & Nichols 2008; Kim & Hargrove 2013), research on spirituality as the resiliency factor for high school African American males is insufficient, and efforts to elevate the voice of color tenet is absent. The voice of color tenet of the critical race theory served as the theoretical framework to investigate (a) how do African American males perceive their faith membership influences their academic

performance, and (b) what spiritual supports/activities do they believe help them persist towards college graduation.

Application of the Anti-Deficit Framework

As referenced in Chapter Two of this work, Harper (2010) provides an overview of the anti-deficit framework that embraces the critical race theory framework as proposing research questions that are not framed as a deficit inquiry but designing questions that can shape asset and resiliency research. For example, instead of inquiring a “deficient-oriented” question, such as “Why are Black males disengaged in school leadership positions?” This inquiry would be reframed to the following “anti-deficit” question, “What compelled Black males to pursue leadership and engagement opportunities in school.” Anti-deficit reframing is informed by the critical race theory and requires the deliberate attempt to discover how certain African American males have managed to succeed (Harper, 2010). This framework is adopted primarily through the way research questions are asked. Researchers interested in exploring student achievement can gain this understanding by researching and granting voice to students who have achieved (Harper, 2010). This reframing is valuable because it challenges the preexisting negative social constructs about Black men by giving them the opportunity to share a counter-narrative about how they negotiate and navigate towards academic persistence. Additionally, their counter-narratives support the activist ideology of critical race theory by granting spiritual African American men voice to challenge stereotypes, profiling, and microaggressions. In sum, for this study, instead of exploring why high school African American males fail and drop out of school, the inquiry focuses instead on how these young men manage to persist despite the adversity they may experience by making meaning of their faith membership.

Accordingly, the interview questions employed were framed through the anti-deficit

framework and used to understand the African American males' perceptions of their church memberships' influence on their academic persistence (see Appendix A). The interview protocol consisted of two primary components. The first part of the interview solicited demographic information, including academics and membership. The second part of the interview gathered information about their lived experiences and perceptions of spirituality.

After the interview, contact information verified with each participant enabled the pursuit of clarity or elaboration post-interview as needed. Herndon (2003) argues the importance of trustworthiness by summarizing of the key points before the end of each interview, and pursuing intersubjective verification thereafter. Thus, for this study, key point summaries presented enabled corrections at the conclusion of the interviews to assure the participants agreed with the data collected. And questions for clarity allowed for research participants' explanation or their confirmation that experiences were accurate as recorded.

Consistent with the data methods that Harper, Smith, and Davis (2018) describes, documentary materials (e.g., church websites, newsletters, pamphlets, official statements, and flyers from church events and activities) provided for additional insights into the culture and priorities of the institutions involved, and into how African American males were positioned among congregants.

Data Analysis

During analysis, critical race theory directs researchers to build interdisciplinary studies that recognize the role of race and racism in education, and its intersection with other forms of oppression; challenges ideologies that position students of color as deficit; recognizes the importance of experiential knowledge (e.g. storytelling, or personal narratives); and promotes social justice (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). In this analysis, critical race theory elevated the racialized

experiences encountered by the African American men. The analysis was completed by examining and highlighting phrases and expressions that spoke to the research participant's encounters with social constructs, microaggressions, and racism. This process assured and recognized the experiential perspectives of African American males as the central and focal of knowledge of interest, elevating these young men's perspectives regarding their use of their spirituality in order to overcome racialized deficit ideologies. As used in Dancy's (2010) study of African American male spirituality, grounded theory was used to determine themes and patterns among the research participants. Grounded theory is a general methodology for developing a theory grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The grounded approach involved collecting data from each participant to produce a substantive base for informing theory development (Watts, 2017). First, each participant was interviewed separately and recommended to be transparent and honest about their experiences to assure their interviews were recorded truthfully and accurately. Next, the students in depth interviews were transcribed, then the transcripts examined individually to explore the student's experiences. The transcripts were then examined against each other to determine similarities and differences between the individual participant experiences. Grounded theory provided a series of cumulative coding cycles and reflective analysis memoing to develop major categories for theory generation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

The data was then examined by using open coding, examining the transcripts to categorize and label discrete elements of the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). This analysis involved text substance and structure alike and assists in uncovering properties, repeating patterns, variations, and extraordinary situations (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010). Primarily the themes were constructed from the frequency of the similarities the participants answered the

research questions. Secondly, axial coding was used to group the themes according to conceptual categories that reflect commonalities among interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Axial coding required reexamining the original codes and their underlying statements from the transcripts to determine linkage and manners of grouping. During axial coding, it may be determined that the initial categories identified should be revised, leading to a reexamination of the raw data (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008). This process of linking similar and contrasting categories laid a foundation for derivation of interpretation, i.e., sets of statements that innovatively integrate previously disassembled text components (Rabinovich & Kacen, 2010). Finally, selective coding was employed based on Johnson and Christensen's (2012) recommendations allowed for the emergence of patterns and themes regarding academic performance and spiritual identity. The purpose of coding is to describe and, more importantly, to acquire a new understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Moore, Henfield, & Owens, 2008).

More specifically, this study embraced the grounded theory procedure as practiced by Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso, (2000), which studied the experiences of African American students using critical race theory:

1. identifying the types of reactions to, and effects of church membership;
2. determining where patterns could be found in the types of, responses to, and effects of church membership
3. deciding if certain types of responses to, and effects of church membership could be collapsed into similar categories; and
4. finding and examining examples of transcribed interview text that illustrate the different types of, reactions to, and effects of church membership on academic

persistence.

In addition to the goal of producing grounded theory, phenomenological analytical methods have added rigor to the interpretation of the data gained during the study's interviews (Dancy, 2020). The purpose of phenomenological research is to gain deeper understanding of a person's individual meaning and interpretation of their experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). This study will explore African American males' perception of their church membership and its influence on their persistence as a phenomenon. Phenomenological aspects of this research included specifically a) asking open-ended interview questions that explore the intersectionality of African American male spirituality and persistence, b) exploring racialized experiences and adverse encounters and how the young men overcome these challenges, and c) exploring how spirituality influences their academic achievement and persistence guided the processes of data exploration, description, and analysis yielding understandings of the lived experiences of the research participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

A brief elaboration of each of three methodological steps (a, b, and c, above) follows. Performing the questioning (method a) required purposely using open-ended questions to allow the study participants autonomy to share their own story and not be limited in their responses due to the structure of the question. Method b, which occurred simultaneously with the initial method (method a), called for intensive focus and dialogue on their experiences with racism and adversity. This focus highlighted the obstacles these young men encounter based on their gender and race, which marginalize them. Finally, exploration of spiritual influences (method c)—occurring simultaneously with [a] and [b]—required concentrated exploration of how and when spirituality was employed for persistence. Together, these steps were fruitful, yielding the transparent participation of the interviewees, expression and elaboration of their encounters with

racism, and insight into their persistence.

African American Males as the Voice of Color Tenet of Critical Race Theory

Harper (2015) has embraced critical race theory as a methodological approach to explore the counter-narratives of African American men. One contribution of critical race theory is its emphasis on narratives and counter-stories told from the vantage point of the oppressed (Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). This is of particular value because the African American male narrative serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant culture's deficit belief about their ability to achieve. The African American male study participants provide the narrative for the voice of color. This was achieved by granting these young men the opportunity to speak to their own realities instead of accepting what others may assume about their experiences. Their individual voices were examined and developed into themes, which created their collective voice. Narratives can begin a correction processing the system of beliefs by calling attention to neglected evidence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Instead of adding to the abundance of literature on African American male failure, examining these young men's experiences with 2.8-g.p.a's calls attention to neglected evidence about their persistence. Narrative responds to an insidious way that institutionalized racism subtly reinforces both the dominance of the majority group perspectives and the re-marginalization of minorities' perspectives (Ford & Airhihenbuwab, 2010). These narratives are called to the attention of institutions such as schools and college campuses that may consciously or unconsciously create racial environments that marginalize African American males. These acts of injustice create hostile environments for African American males that can hinder their success when academic spaces should be conducive for all students. Access to the experiences of African American males challenges institutions to make more knowledgeable decisions to close the achievement

gap. Qualitative research provides the methodology to explore the interactions between faith membership and academic persistence of African-American males. The research objectives pursued here explore social interactions as expressed in daily life and unpack the meaning that the participants themselves attribute to these interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This methodology thus allows for the needed investigation of deep experiences, meanings, and understandings African American men share.

Similar to the Dohahoo and Caffey (2010), this study draws on the counter-narratives of African American males to determine the spiritual and personal supports the Black church and their congregations provide. Critical race theory requires the dependency on experiential knowledge, which affirms that the experiences of people of color are fundamental to examining and understanding racial inequality. This component was practiced by selecting specifically African American Christian males. This selection assured the specific group this research is intended to target provided the narratives. This component is important because African American males are not a homogenous group, as referenced in Chapter Two. African American males have unique experiences and narratives therefore, it was essential only to target African American males who met all the research participant requirements.

Effective counter-narratives required African American males to be viewed as knowledge bearers stemming directly from their lived experiences. This was performed by accepting the research participants' feedback and perspectives as truth regardless of if it conflicts with the dominant cultures' existing stories, understandings, or perceived certainties. Personal stories are often the best data to rebut the dominant discourse, as they transform racism from a theory to a real force that people must negotiate every day (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2017). These counter-narratives serve to document and share how race and gender affect the educational experiences

of African American men and how their spirituality influences their persistence through these adverse experiences. Additionally, because deficit narratives about African American men are socially constructed, the new narratives from this research should be used to educate and challenge negative concepts about their success.

Counter-narratives were also used as a method to explore solutions to African American male racial marginalization. This component was practiced by explicitly creating and asking questions about their spirituality and Black church experiences. This practice was beneficial because it no longer generally identify the African American experience to high saliency of spirituality but explores deeper into how they make meaning of their spirituality and church activities and supports they deem valuable to their persistence.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

African American males continue to be marginalized by societal obstacles, that often limit their persistence in school. Scholars such as Shaun Harper (2012) have challenged researchers to examine African American male achievement instead of adding to the abundance of literature that explores their failure. Exploring, as here, how one set of African American males are persisting in their education serves to challenge the common assumption that claims these students cannot achieve.

Data captured using formal interviews of ten African American male college students were then analyzed and coded into themes. This chapter presents the findings from the data gathered from the student interviews. It is divided into categories that identify the primary themes from study participants' interviews. The themes presented cover various experiences and interactions the research participants encountered as they make meaning of how their Black Christian church membership influences their academic persistence. Church membership was established due to the deep-rooted history and saliency of spirituality in the lives of African Americans. The objectives of each section are to provide an overview of the results and a general interpretation of how church membership and spirituality influenced the academic achievement and persistence of these young men. This study used grounded theory to determine the themes and critical race theory to uplift the lived experiences of the African American male college students. The following themes categorize the findings:

1. Support and community
2. Coping and confidence
3. Spiritual activities and services

Support and Community

Of initial interest is understanding the experiences African American males have with the Black church. One of the key findings that the study revealed was that African American males received various supports from church members and fellow Christians who were a part of their community. During their interviews, African American males participating in this study generally communicated they 1) valued the influence of leadership and 2) received support and encouragement from fellow members and peers.

Influence of Leadership

Research participant Avery shared, “Church leadership shows us how to present ourselves and be professional outwardly and character-wise, and that makes me want to uphold myself to the same prestige in my academics.” Clarence seemed to align with Avery’s beliefs when asked what compels him to be a member of the Black church, and he responded, “I just really feel that something is actually being added to me spiritually and morally that relates to my everyday life.” When asked what value church leadership adds to his academic progress, James shared, “My pastor has the drive to do everything at 100% in the church, so I feel it’s my obligation and duty to give and be 100% in the classroom.” Doing everything at 100% referenced giving full effort to the task needing to be accomplished. David also pointed to this idea when he shared, “Whatever I’m tasked to do, I want to do it to the best of my ability so I can become better and better.” Charlie also echoed this idea when he shared, “Secular people say get rich or die trying, but I say go hard or go home. This means I can’t go back home to the church

without a degree. This is what keeps me going.” The referenced statements demonstrate these young men are positively influenced by their membership in the Black church to achieve. This idea of achievement seems to expand beyond the walls of the church but also in the classroom.

When asked, what value do church leadership add to his academic progress, Mark shared, “The leaders organize the church and get the right people in place and make everyone feel welcomed.” Joshua seemed to believe learning to model the leadership style of the church leaders prepared him for life as a minority by stating, “I’m often the only Black person in a lot of spaces, so I have to step up and lead. The phrase “step up” referenced his assuming the full capacity of the leadership role. Additionally, Clarence noted, “The church leaders provide me with a sense of if I can aspire to be like them or go beyond it may open up doors of opportunities that I thought I could never achieve.” Clarence didn’t limit leadership to what he observed but also was conscious based on his statement of “go beyond it” that there is additional opportunity to grow beyond the leadership he witnessed. This *going beyond* the leadership they encountered reflected a pattern among participants that they felt a growing ability to establish a more positive image of Black men in educational spaces.

In responding to a question about the impact of church on his desire to achieve James shared, “To see a leadership figure who is a Black male and has a strong bond with others, I just aspire to be like that.” This bond is important because African American males tend to be absent from various leadership roles. Seventy-nine percent of all public school teachers in the 2017-18 school year were White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), which African American male teachers are commonly represent only two percent of school teachers. In 2020, Black men were the most likely to be jobless with an unemployment rate of 11.6 percent (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Additionally, 46.3% of Black children live with their mother

(U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The notion of bonding aligned with a sense of community participants noted with some frequency. A sense of acceptance seemed to accompany this feeling of community. For instance, Clarence shared, “Church gives me the opportunity to fellowship where I have the freedom to just be myself.” Yet examples church leaders provided within this accepting atmosphere were important in spurring participants’ sense of confidence. Pierre shared, “Being a leader with a family, nice car, and not promiscuous gives me a sense of confidence that I can attain a life that is peaceful and fulfilling. The leaders provide an image of what it looks like to be at a point in life where you are not easily lured into wrongdoing.” Similarly, Joshua offered, “I believe they are demonstrating good leadership because I observe them, and they align with what I read about leadership.” Avery amplified this in stating, “The leaders show us how to present ourselves professionally.” These young men seemed to believe that if they could model the church leaders’ leadership and strive for excellence, they could excel holistically and academically, which is simply summarized by Mark’s statement, “I just try to be the best and display the best.” This theme recognizes that church leaders positively influence African American males by being a source of modeling what positive leadership looks like. Lincoln and Mamiya’s (1990) research identifies Black church pastors’ leadership style influences their congregants. These influential leadership styles typically operate between charismatic and bureaucratic styles, which provide a method and direction for navigating life experiences.

Furthermore, participants specifically referenced and valued the pastor’s ability to speak the truth during their sermons by addressing institutional racism in the world around them. Pierre shared, “Church leaders are valuable to me because they stay true to what the religion demands.” Joshua shared, “I believe at my church they are sharing the absolute truth instead of what people

may want to hear. Teaching truth helps me not waver when I face adversity or peer pressure from college classmates and friends.” Malcom also commented, “It’s about the truth and facts, not opinions.” The sermons delivered by the pastor tended to serve as a source of motivation and encouragement to many of the research participants, inspiring the African American males to continue to progress in school. The African American males in this study often referenced their pastors speaking on the actual issues Black people faced in America and appropriate responses to those adversities. Mark shared, “My pastor gives us spiritual advice and guidance on what to pray about regarding racism.” Civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King promoted education as a valuable tool to overcome oppression. Malcolm X mentioned, “Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs only to the people who prepare for it today.” Dr. King expressed, “The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically.” Each of these quotes clarified the objective and endorsed the value of education, which helped many African Americans survive through the racial struggles of the 1960’s era. Providing every child with a fair and substantive opportunity to learn is nothing less than the moral imperative (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2021), but racism tends to create barriers for African American males to take advantage of these learning opportunities. Nevertheless, the research participants’ spirituality seems to connect them with leaders that serve as sources of advice and guidance to overcome these barriers. Avery related to this finding when he referenced, “My pastor speaks on being wise about how I behave as a Black man, which will better prepare me for the real world.” Clarence cited, “My pastor speaks on how to deal with today’s experiences like racism by addressing it through racial reconciliation.”

Suppose African American males can understand the real issues they will encounter in life and the classroom. In that case, they may be more likely to begin identifying strategies to

achieve despite adversity. Malcolm shared, “The leaders come every week to push, preach, and study the word. This inspires me to stay on top of my goals and helps me want to be a greater leader because I see their influence. I can count on my pastor to speak a good word, so I can take it back to school and gain confidence, encouragement, and continue to push forward.” Here, Malcolm pointed to how he was influenced by his pastor’s persistence in the church and desired to replicate this same level of persistence. And Malcolm’s experiences were similar to other research participants, such as James, who shared, “My pastor speaks about being an honest man and how it’s not easy to be consistent and that we are all humans and are not perfect, but we should strive to be consistent.” Mark even shared, “If it was easy, anyone could do it.” The idea of striving to be consistent was referenced by practicing the right things even outside of church. James shared, “I feel it’s my duty to be consistent so I can use what I gain in the real world.” Avery added to this idea by commenting, “The leaders attend church every Sunday, so I should attend school every day and be consistent like them.” The research participants’ character traits and observations tended to reference more of the charismatic leader than the bureaucratic leader as identified by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) in their discussion of the dialectic of charismatic versus bureaucratic. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) reference this theme within the dialectics of charismatic versus bureaucratic. The character traits and observations the research participants made tended to reference more of the charismatic leader than the bureaucratic leader. These competencies in engaging with others and building positive relationships foster skills in connecting productively with leaders on the college campus, such as professors and administrators.

Meanwhile, none of the research participants spoke to characteristics or styles of bureaucratic leaders. Of the students who recognized the style of leadership at their church, they

all referenced aspects of charismatic leadership. When asked about the value church leadership adds to their academic progress, participant responses often revolved around the supportive and sympathetic ways in which support comes within their faith communities:

Mark: Not many people in the Black community will admit they have trouble reading or doing math, but the leaders make everyone feel that they can achieve and won't judge you because you struggle.

Charlie: I'm really close to the elders at my church, and they are always looking out for me. Even when my grandfather died, they were there for me...they help build my mental capacity to withstand challenges in life.

Malcolm: Anything I struggle with I can go to someone at my church and talk to them and trust they can speak a word to help me.

Joshua: The leaders are gentle but firm, and that helps me do the same.

Participants recognized and valued the supportive and gentle leadership style they experienced, seeing this as valuable to their personal and academic growth. Each of these traits reflects a prevailingly charismatic leadership approach.

All participants shared that connection with church leaders served as a positive support to their achievement. More specifically, participants valued their pastor/church leaders' expression of what good leadership looks like, and this demonstration encouraged the research participants to aspire to exemplify the same characteristics. This modeling commonly referenced as staying true to the religion, being nonjudgmental, and remaining family-oriented. The characteristics seemingly align with the tenets of the Christian faith found in Galatians 5:22-23 (But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). This positive modeling seems to create a nurturing space for African American males

to be cultivated. Having access to positive leadership may compel these young men to be positive leaders on the campus and in their classrooms, helping to elevate their voices and leadership potential in educational spaces.

Support and Encouragement from Members

Supporting testimonials explored in this section shows how the study participants gained support and encouragement from fellow members of the Black church. Mark stated, the best people to talk to when you have a challenge is your church family.” When asked how does church experience help shape his academic persistence, Malcolm shared, “Church allows me to talk to people when I need encouragement. I can go to the members with my problems, and they will keep it real with me and give me criticism in a loving way.” The statement “loving way” is a similar reference point to family-oriented, which often was cited when the research participants felt other members truly cared about their wellbeing by showing concern or hospitable. Malcolm said, “Church gives off a familiar [in a way that isn’t new] feeling where it’s a place of comfort and hospitality. Like being at home and surrounded by the people you grew up with.” When asked what ways has church members supported his academic progress, Mark answered, “Church is a great support system and family oriented. I can ask people for advice or their perspective and they can help point me in the right direction or help find a solution.” Malcolm also mentioned, “At church, I’m surrounded by intelligent people who are Bible and textbook smart, which pushes me to be more successful in multiple areas of my life.” David pointed directly to the growth in his sense of persistence when he shared, “Church members give me advice and guidance or connect me with new people, and I truly appreciate that. They tell me to get the work done and don’t push it off. Get it done now and not later.” In addition, having access to advice and feedback creates opportunities for African American males to make better

decisions about their education and life in general while keeping them connected to positive adults who care about their wellbeing. This advice, which may come from corrective criticism, promoted self-growth and self-regulation among those interviewed. Having access to advice in the face of the inevitable challenges these young men will inevitably encounter in college has served to help them remain focused and persist in their academic pursuits.

Charlie's experience with the Black church reflects the awareness that disparity is based on his racial and gender profile. Charlie shared, "Many people don't go to college from my church, and the ones who do are often female. But the congregation will help me with whatever I need. When I say anything, I really mean anything, like money, school supplies, and books. They just really have my back, because not many people make it out of the church with a degree." Charlie's observation is also recognized by college persistence data of African Americans. During the 2015-16 school year, African American women earned 67% of associate and bachelor degrees among African Americans in comparison to males earning only 33% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Charlie's comment acknowledged the achievement gap and the dilemma of African American males' lower college enrollment and completion rates. Thus, he readily recognized the marginalization of those with his own profile—as an African American male—but received support from fellow congregants such as money and textbooks that supported his academic goals. Being connected with individuals who provide needed support ultimately helps him persist in college.

Anthony recognized his own disparity and feelings of isolation. Anthony shared, "It feels lonely when you realize you are the only one who left to get a degree. School is a lonely place, because I don't have family here like I have at the church. I actually only come home for holiday breaks and funerals. So I often feel disconnected because I don't know what's going on

at the church and the church doesn't know what's going on with me on the campus. So when the church members check on me I no longer feel alone...I call them family because they are really there for me." This feeling of isolation illuminates the value of community the Black church provides. Anthony felt lonely away from the Black church community, but this void was filled when church community members checked in on him. This sense of belonging may be valuable to African American male persistence by keeping them connected with caring communities that do wellness checks. Anthony shared, "I've been a member at my church my whole life and we are a tight-knit community." These wellness checks may serve as an opportunity for these young men to share their needs and/or gain motivational support to validate they are still a community member and be inspired to keep working toward their educational goals.

The attended Black church's safe and trusting atmosphere seemed to create strong bonds between congregants. Several of the research participants made expressions about family-oriented, bonds/connections, and some participants even mentioned mentoring. When asked in what ways church members have supported his academic progress, Malcolm stated, "My mentor goes to my church, and he sends me job and scholarship opportunities to help with college affordability. He helps me keep my mind focused on things that are relevant like school and encourages me to be a moral man." Avery also expressed, "The members provided me with information about scholarships and speak to be about striving to be debt-free." Similarly, David commented that he has two mentors at his church who were both educators and supported his academic goals. "My mentors always tell me to stay on top of my grades because if you want to achieve, you will have to put in work." And Mark stated, "I lost my father, so it's been hard to accept another male role model. But I finally decided to open up to my mentor at my church, and he has helped me a lot, and it feels good to know someone is there for you mentally and

emotionally.” When asked what church experiences best prepare him for the racial realities of a Black man, Charlie expressed, “We are given mentors at the church, and they help prepare us for the real world and show us how we should carry ourselves.” Clarence also shared, “Being able to seek advice from others and access to mentorship within the walls of the church has helped him persist in college.” The Black church seems to nurture relationships that benefit African American males to continue to problem solve and persevere through the obstacles they may encounter. This continued perseverance seems to reference a sentiment shared by Nelson Mandela, which states, “Either I will find a way, or I will make one. It always seems impossible until it’s done.” These connections may be informal, but some students have more formal relationships, such as mentors supporting their academic objectives. Having direct access to a mentor may help African American males solve challenges much sooner because they have a personal advocate who wants to see them achieve. Proactive support from mentors seems to help these young men solve challenges before the conditions worsen, which may help these young men persist.

The connection and relationship with church members and the institution, in general, seemed to create accountability for some African American males to succeed in school. When asked how does he use his spirituality to cope with the challenges he encounters being a Black man, James responded, “I know as a Black man I’m held to a higher standard. Therefore, I have to get good grades and use school to my advantage.” Avery mentioned, “The church sets high standards, so I have to set high standards with my academics. I’m learning to listen more and be more responsible for my actions, especially since I’m an adult now.” Pierre expressed, “The members remind me why I’m in school, so I have to constantly work and remind myself of the why, so I can get the best ROI [return on investment] on my education.” And Clarence stated,

“When you are in college, church members always ask you how’re your grades looking? ... So you want to be able to say I’m doing good in school. You want to be able to take pride in saying I have good grades.” He also stated, “Those casual conversations with people in the congregation helped motivate me to want to be successful in school, not just to prove something to them, but so I can prove it to myself because someone is always watching me.” Clarence’s reference to the positive impact of casual conversations is cited by social learning theory, which references social connections with others serve as a motivator to learn or excel. Casual conversations seemed to condition Clarence to want to achieve because questions about his academics could easily come up when speaking with congregants. When asked what impact does his church have on his desire to achieve, Anthony noted, “The people push me to bring out my full potential and strive to be the best. It’s the pushing that is what drives me to focus on my work.” David also mentioned, “Church members help me not give up because they believe in me, which helps me want to do better regardless of adversity. This source of motivation seems to encourage these young men to persist. Charlie shared, “I had to think of all the people who were proud of me when I got accepted to college. My pastor even gave me a gift and told me to never give up, which gave me the motivation to keep pressing forward and stay focused even when I felt like giving up.” The Black church seems to offer connections to positive adults who want to see African American males succeed, which serves as a point of motivation for these students because they want to make others and themselves proud.

In sum, the findings emerging from the interviews revealed that African American male students benefited from fellow congregants and leaders from their churches. The benefit and value seemed to increase their access to support by helping to get their needs met. This advantage often took form of receiving encouragement or advice from church members, which

allowed them to overcome challenges and to remain focused on their academic goals. Informants showed in general how African American males having access to a group of adults who are themselves likely to have diverse experiences and access to resources appears to serve as a safety net sheltering them and helping them confront the barriers that threaten their progress toward completion of academic goals.

Support and Encouragement from Peers

Support and encouragement from their peers contributed to informants' potential for positive academic persistence, as supporting testimonials provided in this section will show. Yet, support from participants' peers was distinctly different from support from church members. Many of these young men were able to take advantage of the support from their church peers even though many young people have left religious institutions across the nation. It's projected that approximately 35 million young people raised in Christian homes will disaffiliate from the faith by 2050 and Christianity in America will make up just 59 percent of the country's population, compared to the current 73 percent (Pinetops Foundation, 2018). Church members were frequently referenced as individuals who were much older than the study participants were. Support from these members was frequently viewed as parental support figures. Charlie provided insight on this difference when he shared, "Though we are not actually related, the members are like play grandparents and godparents." Anthony similarly shared, "Church members are like my aunts and uncles though we are not related." The African American males in the study met these adult figures directly in their church. When it came to peer interactions, these were with people study participants often encountered on the college campus and were close to their age. Encouragement and examples gained from older church mentors seemed to equip participants with the confidence necessary to build and sustain positive peer relationships.

And Joshua seemed to believe, for instance, that peers who live positive lives are valuable to his persistence, stating, “I go to a Black church, but many of my friends in college are White Christians. Having other Christian friends or even friends from other minority groups helps my mind to different outlooks and perspectives. Church has taught me how to recognize different thoughts/theories and how to talk with people and it not lead to an argument. This helps me communicate and dialogue with people who have different viewpoints on the college campus.” Joshua’s experience of empathy is valuable because college courses often require students to understand various perspectives and at times be able to debate and defend particular views.

When asked what type of peers do you deem most valuable to your persistence, Charlie shared, “I have to be with people who have an understanding of spirituality because they are more awakened because of me being around them and understanding what they understand is going to help push me towards the future I want.” Similarly, David spoke about the importance of being around individuals who want to see him moving towards a positive future, sharing, “When I was in high school, I had the wrong friends. I thought they wanted me to succeed, but they really didn’t. Now I have friends who want me to succeed, and they are still here for me today.” Mark echoed this notion of being conscious of your peers when he shared, “You just have to trust God when it comes to your peers because a lot of people can lead you astray.” James added, “My peers have to have a relationship with God, talk to God, and pray to God. You have to surround yourself around those who are successful in God in order to reach higher limits.” James expressed that in order for him to achieve academically, he needed to surround himself with peers who were achieving spiritually. James added, “The peers that are most valuable to my academics are those who are invested in their spirituality.” And Pierre noted, “The friends I associate with have to be more disciplined than me. They have to be more

spiritual, older, and wiser than me because that's how I'm going to learn better from them.” Pierre seemed to imply that he had to be among people who were doing better than he was, which would serve as a source of inspiration for him to become better. If the study participants surrounded themselves with peers who are similar or more developed spiritually, they seemed to feel this would help keep them focused on their academic goals and that being surrounded by other peers may negatively influence their academic growth. Mark noted, “My peers are fellow brothers that I believe God sent directly to me. It's just easier to come together and discuss, edify, and talk, and be ourselves and display who we are because we take on this path of life with a greater understanding. I need peers where we can pray together for healing or over situations we face.” Malcolm shared the same feelings in regards to the need to be surrounded by male spiritual peers. “My brothers in Christ that are on the college campus are the most valuable friends because they are there for me when I'm down, they lift me up, and they use scriptures to help me realize I will overcome. God brings people into my life that love Him that I can fellowship with, and we build each other up.” Mark also shared, “It's just good to be around people who have the same faith, priorities, and ambitions.” Charlie said in his men's group, the leaders often tell them to spend time with other brothers, and they don't have to be with their girlfriends all the time.” The concept of surrounding themselves with peers who value spirituality may help reinforce spiritual principles, which seemingly are valuable to their overall academic persistence.

In sum, this section has provided an overview of how the study participants gained support and encouragement from peers and that their church membership and active involvement influenced their selection of peers. The African American male study participants valued friends who were also spiritual and had their best interest at heart was valuable to their achievement.

These peers' support and encouragement seem to help keep African American males focused on and persisting towards their goals.

Support and Encouragement from Within

In this section, supporting testimonials reflect how the study participants became—because of their own spirituality—able to internalize a sense of support and encouragement based on their own spirituality. When asked how he manages his other identities alongside being a Christian, James stated, “I could not be in school, not an African American, or other things, but I’m still going to have my spirituality.” James seemed to suggest that he had to depend on his spirituality because all his other identities are temporary or not as important. Malcolm noted, “If I want to be a leader, I must be bold and stand on what I believe. Standing up for what he believed in was his way of countering negative peer pressure. Malcolm, for example, noted, “Before college, and during college I stand my ground on my beliefs. I never have an issue speaking on what’s real and true. I don’t even know what peer pressure is, but of course, there are seasons of low points, but overall I don’t have a problem standing on what I believe.” Pierre shared, “My spirituality is nonnegotiable with anyone because that’s how I stay disciplined. It’s more so me telling them rather than reasoning with them because there are certain things I just can’t do because it’s not right, and it’s not what I want to do.” Pierre seemed to suggest he had to view life boldly through his spiritual identity, which wouldn’t allow him to reason or allow himself to be tempted to do things he considered immoral or take him off track of his academic goals. Charlie expressed very similar beliefs when he stated, “I can’t compromise my spirituality because it’s something that’s nonnegotiable for me. I don’t blame my religion for not participating in certain things...it’s more so me just sticking to the guidelines of what is right.” When these young men stand boldly on their spirituality, it seems to keep them focused on their

goals. This sense of dependency and confidence to practice their spirituality despite what others may desire them to do seems to support the development of a sense of boldness and an ability to resist conforming with negative stereotypes about the African American male identity.

In responding to a question about how he negotiates his spirituality with his peers, David commented, “My peers know my beliefs won’t change when I’m around them because it’s about me remaining the same wherever I am and them accepting that I’m spiritual and will do the right things.” Clarence shared, “I’m not doing everything everybody is doing, so it’s important to know my boundaries of what to say and what not to say and where to go and where not to go.” Additionally, Joshua shared, “I won’t be peer pressured by anything that’s against my religion.” Remaining dependent on their spiritual identity seems to assure they stay on track with their academic goals and not detouring due to distractions or peer pressure. The African American males referenced here appeared unlikely to be victims of peer pressure but instead to serve as positive exemplars. This is important because participants were generally able to support and encourage each other to continue to persist in their academics by surrounding themselves with like-minded people.

Additionally, with spirituality at their core, research participants commonly referenced the idea that “Faith without works is dead.” Frequent comments about the need to align their actions and behaviors towards the academic goal and the importance of putting faith into action reflected confidence that things would ultimately work in their favor. The research participants were aware that their actions and personal decisions could affect the attainment of their goals. For example, Avery shared, “I know faith without works is dead so I have to take into action what I believe, and that’s what motivates me personally. Knowing I woke up today while others didn’t, that just keeps me going.” This is important because it reflects a general acknowledgment

among participants in the study that achievement requires that they practice persistence behaviors—attending class and studying for a test, for example.

Charlie shared this perspective while acknowledging his occasional struggles to maintain his spiritual identity due to peer pressure. This idea was recognized when he shared, “Sometimes I make a mistake and do the wrong thing or do something I know is against the Bible, and I know I need to work on that. When I do slip up, people say I’m a hypocrite, like, “You will smoke and drive, but you won’t drink and drive.” Joshua also shared a similar reference, “When you go to the wrong place or do the wrong things, something always pops off [goes wrong], but it’s your fault because you knew it wasn’t right according to your spirituality. Understanding there may be life consequences or judgments from their peers when wrongdoing occurs seem to help these young men become aware they need to make better decisions that could help them persevere. Anthony commented that he takes his spirituality very seriously, stating, “I can’t speak for anyone else, but I’m actually scared to do wrong.” Charlie’s peer pressure experience elevates the challenges of drugs and alcohol on college campuses. Drugs and alcohol are common on college campuses and can result in expulsion from school, thus disrupting their collegiate dreams. Still, the condemnation he stood to receive by being called a hypocrite from his Christian peers tempered his risky behavior.

This section highlighted the data that shows that the African American males in this study place their primary identity in their spirituality and are aware of the behaviors that may have academic consequences. This finding is important because it provides insight that whatever way the study participants respond to racism or adversity it must be aligned with their spirituality first. Their spiritual identity was greater than their racial identity. This component was rooted in encouragement and support the participants had internalized on account of their spiritual

commitments. These study participants, that is, tended to interpret their life and to make decisions primarily based on their spiritual identity. A sort of *spiritual dependency* seemed to derive from a shared conviction that their spirituality is non-negotiable and is a foundation of their conduct. This positive conduct seems to prevent African American males from participating in high-risk activities that might hinder or curtail their graduation persistence. As the comments and experiences gained in the study's interviews have shown, the participants affirmed that their academic pursuits must align with their spirituality—that spirituality was the most important and valued aspect of their identity.

Coping and Confidence

This section will provide supporting testimonials to show how the study participants used their spirituality for coping and confidence. One of the key findings was that African American males used their spirituality to combat various obstacles they encountered. Interviews with the young men participating in this study generally communicated that they 1) used their spirituality to respond to racism, 2) made historical references to the application of spirituality, and 3) desired liberation.

Response to Racism and Stereotypes

Study participant Malcolm seemed to believe the sermons at his church helped keep him on track even when he is confronted with racism: he commented, "With police brutality, rioting, and protesting it's easy to get caught up in politics and get sidetracked and lose the plan for your life. My pastor constantly says, keep the peace, stay focused, and don't get tied up in the drama. Even when the enemy tries to distract me, I know I can press forward." The term "enemy" was frequently used broadly to place a label on anything that could sidetrack them from their collegiate objectives or appropriate conduct. For example, Malcolm shared, "There are enemies

and distractions out there that will try to hinder my growth and knock me off track, but I have to remain rooted in my spirituality.” Mark added this similar observation: “The enemy tells you to just procrastinate and lose focus.” Pierre provided a similar insight when he shared, “I have to stay disciplined from anything that deviates against my academic success like hanging out and partying.” References stemming from participants’ spiritual experience reminding them to *stay focused* and propelled them in their commitments to graduate college and achieve their career goals pointed directly to a shared perception about the importance of persistence to the ultimate accomplishment of their goals.

The involved African American males often noted their consciousness of prejudices and stereotypical assumptions people made about Black men or their capability to achieve:

Mark: Being a Black man in America is the hardest thing I’ve had to experience because people judge a book by its cover and don’t know the story behind it... It sucks, and it hurts a lot.

Avery: Being Black and being a Christian is always under attack. And being a Black male and a Christian is a lot because being a Black male you can’t win for losing, especially due to the negative images promoted by the media, rappers, and criminals.

James: I know there are things not going well for the Black community according to the news stations and papers, and I may feel a certain type of way about it, but I can’t show my negative emotions towards people that are not of my race... I still must show respect.

David: Being a Black Christian in America, other races look at me differently, so I can’t react to things in a certain way... I can’t even be seen in a certain way because I

will be viewed as a threat or dangerous.

Charlie: We have to uncover the ugly truth that we have an image out there.”

Yet in spite of these stark realizations, participants emphasized the strength they found in spiritually as a means for overcoming the challenges they encounter—helping them to overcome microaggressions and other experiences of racism that might otherwise have discouraged them from continuing their education. As Clarence noted, “My spirituality challenges stereotypes about my skin color, bigotry, and racial oppression because I have faith that I can conquer over all these things.”

Spirituality in American Slavery, Summer 2020, and the Present

Interview data reflects that the African American males seemed to see spirituality as salient, linking historical challenges like slavery with contemporary instances of racial oppression:

Avery: Spirituality is in our DNA...it’s what helped the slaves survive. My ancestors believed in God and made it through slavery. Spirituality was a necessity for Black people in American back then and it is a necessity for Black people who live in America today... it’s the motivation to live.

Clarence: Most African Americans have a history in the Black church, because we found resilience in the Black church well before country clubs and social clubs.

Joshua: I believe the Black Christians are very inspirational people...making it through slavery is empowering. We have been doing this for a very long time.

James: I’m grateful to be a Black scholar because we didn’t have opportunities to be educated back in the day, so I take my academics seriously as a result.”

And, noting, “You don’t have to be an atheist to be an academist,” Clarence asserted that African

American males could pursue scholarship without compromising spirituality. In sum, the research participants, recognizing the beneficial historical use of spirituality, seemed often to gain inspiration through a sense that they can persist in their academics in the face of dire circumstances.

In comments offered regarding how participants' spirituality helps them cope or navigate racial oppression, the participants commonly referenced pivotal events such as "Summer 2020" along with "American slavery" in contextualizing their comments, further evidencing a shared sense of confidence in overcoming racism they may encounter on campus (summer 2020 having been a particularly vivid touchpoint on account of civil unrest caused by various killings by law enforcement of primarily unarmed Black men). Mark shared, "Even the police look at me weird when I tell them I'm graduating college." Anthony commented, "Even if I get pulled over by the police, I'm going to believe that everything will be okay." And James noted, "When African Americans have died and were not given justice...like George Floyd and Brionna Taylor, I can't just go to someone of a different ethnicity and start saying something negative to them because I know they didn't cause the death. I won't show hate towards them because I know it's not right." Malcolm also added, "It's easy to participate in protest and scream and yell in the streets, but how does that help my spirituality? When my pastor brings up points like that...it really helps me reflect on my spirituality." These narratives are important because they illustrate how these young men could identify racialized experiences but allow their spirituality to inform their responses to it. These narratives also provide insight into liberation theology and Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) dialectic between other-worldly and this-worldly. Liberation theology emphasizes a person's focus and actions on seeking liberation or access to the full pursuit of happiness in this lifetime. Malcolm was conscious of the protest and political involvement

around him however he seemingly was able to cope using his spirituality. Malcolm seemed to be oriented to the other-worldly function based on his pastor's recommendation to limit political involvement and remain spirituality grounded. Other-worldly orientation may help African American males embrace the idea that true justice can only be served in the next life time therefore they must seek comfort and direction in their spirituality while not seeking liberation at the potential detriment of their spirituality. This is important because it suggests that spirituality may equip Black males with non-hostile responses to racism, serving as a critical tool for de-escalation.

When asked what church experiences best prepare him for the racial realities of being a Black man, Mark shared, "We understand the world is corrupt, so the pastor assures we are well prepared. As a Christian, there are certain ways we can and cannot act." Understanding that society is not perfect and that adversity is expected seems to help these African American males understand they need to have a strategy to address their adversity. This idea related to the types of sermons the pastors preached about things happening in the surrounding community—"this-worldly" events in terms Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) employed in their work on the dialectics of the Black church. This-worldly pastors focus on community issues like poverty and racism and provide recommendations or solutions to address them. African American males who attend churches of this focus seem to gain advice that, as Mark commented, allowed them to navigate around obstacles that are in the way of success.

Pierre seemed to endorse the importance of stories from the Bible as motivators for persistence in his academics when he stated, "Israel and Jesus went through many trials that tested their faith, but there is a reward for all of those who keep their faith in tough situations when it's the hardest to have faith. I just talk to God because he can change things that are

outside of my control like racism...this gives me assurance that I'm never alone and will end up on top in the end." James also referenced the Bible story about Moses, sharing that, "Reading and knowing stories about Moses and trusting that everything will end well helps me achieve." Critical race theory identifies compelling ways racism is ingrained into America's social institutions—schools, courts, and laws—sometimes making circumstances appear impossible to confront. Yet African American males seem to gain strength through their spirituality that they can still achieve regardless of abundant and often frightening obstacles. Malcolm also offered comments on use of scriptures to gain encouragement: "The men in the Bible were strong because they were able to overcome obstacles that are similar to what I go through today. Reading scriptures and attending Bible study helps me learn how to overcome, and I gain confidence to get through college." Mark also believed everything would work out in the end by sharing, "There's always a greater meaning to life, and the situations we go through are just temporary." These narratives display that African American males use the Bible to relate to hardship and solutions to the difficulty. This association and solution-oriented connection provide African American males with the strength to press forward, despite their obstacles.

In remarking on what spiritual supports compels him to achieve despite encountering racial oppression, Avery shared, "I can't allow myself to be triggered by racist people, especially when I'm the minority surrounded by the majority. I think we have to be a little more patient and give people a chance because some people are naturally ignorant. It's not that they are intentionally spiteful towards Black people. These people can be taught and educated if they are willing to listen." Based on these statements, Avery seemed to believe with patience he could teach people who may not know how they are being racist. Avery added, "Because it's not intentional, they have a chance to be taught, and I just remember growing up there were sermons

that help me to be wise and patient in how I respond as a Black man in general and when I'm in school and the community." James added to this point when he shared, "Everyone isn't perfect, some people just won't like you, but I won't disrespect them." Avery's and James' narratives are important because they point to opportunities these informants felt their spirituality empowered in them to teach or model an understanding that racist views or deficit notions do not define their worth. This finding points to the potential for *teachable moments* to help Black males persist with less resistance.

David shared a similar viewpoint as to using his spirituality not to be triggered by adversity. "I have to use self-control and just remember to do the right thing in my words and actions. I can't lash out and make things bigger than what they already are...I have to choose the harder route, which is self-control." Based on these statements, David seemed to believe the more complex route was the best route for him to go. He also confirms this point by sharing, "Whatever you go through, you can get through it. I know it's just something I have to do, so every chance there is to get better, I must take it." Malcolm also endorses the notion of self-control by stating, "I study the fruits of the spirit [Bible: Galatians 5:22-23], specifically self-control because it helps keep the peace." Pierre shared, "I just have to constantly remind myself that I have to do things out of positivity to produce the best outcome." Thus, pursuing the positive route can help these students persist in their academics by not participating in activities that could be damaging to their persistence, such as fighting.

In discussing what about his spirituality compels him to achieve despite encountering racism, Mark also shared, "I achieve despite encountering racial oppression because I know I have someone who is more powerful on my side [God]. It's just better when you have a source of support that is backing you up regardless of what others may say." When the African

American male participants recognized their adverse experience, they seem to use their spirituality to understand if they don't allow negativity to cause them to become negative, they will have a positive outcome. Self-control is essential because it may reduce the number of African American males being suspended from school or forced into special education, as noted in Chapter Two.

Patience in Liberation

Data discussed in this section will reflect that the study participants had confidence that they would be liberated from barriers. When asked what about your spirituality compels you to achieve despite encountering racial oppression? Anthony shared, "My spirituality pushes me to be better and understand that no matter what happens, everything will still be okay. You can waste time complaining all day about how life isn't fair...it's just like complaining about the professors giving too much homework....it's still going to be due! I just trust everything will work out and it always does... sometimes in an hour, or a day, or year...but it always work out." Anthony's patience was highly evident because he understood it's possible challenges may not be reconciled in the immediate future. Therefore, he was prepared to wait however long it took. In discussing the impact church has on his desire to achieve, Malcolm offered that the "idea of keeping going and I will be prosperous in the long run is instilled in me." Mark shared, "My confidence is in what is in store for me...it gets me through everything I encounter." Avery also shared, "Every day won't be a good day, but you still have to keep on going." Clarence shared, "I know racial oppression is not of God because it works against my progress, but my spirituality tells me in spite of the mechanism against me, I still have a great future and a way will be paved for me." And David commented on his spirituality compelling him to achieve despite racial oppression by sharing that, "Being Black is to be different from others, but I have to do what it

takes...stay focused and stay determined.” With remarks of this kind, African American males show they use their faith to overcome obstacles, helping them persist towards graduation.

Patience that everything would work out in their favor may correlate to Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) dialectical tension between resistance and accommodation. The participants resisted the dominant culture’s narrative about their identity. Clarence shared, “We are all uniquely created, and it was fit that I be an African American man, but it wasn’t to be a product of someone else’s abuse, so I know my spirituality helps me through the challenges that are placed by the negativity of the human mind.” Clarence’s spirituality seemed to resist the notion of defeat, which kept him persisting in his academics. Simultaneously, it’s reasonable to understand that patience in future liberation can be inclusive of accommodating to some level. In this study, the African American males patiently waited to be liberated while actively resisting deficit notions about their achievement. Resistance was commonly practiced by recognizing the adversity and not folding to the hardship but remaining focused in school. The resistance/accommodation dialectical tension recognized in the participants’ spirituality is important because it does not allow the study participants to conform and accept the deficit stereotypes about their success, such as that they are incapable of achieving. A resistant mindset seems to support the active participation of participants’ excelling and persisting in school because it helps close the achievement gap instead of accepting the disparity.

This section has provided an overview of a second prevailing theme emerging from the research: the research participants used their spirituality as a source of confidence and coping. Participant comments emphasized the overall belief that with patience and hope, everything will come together in their favor as long as they remain focused on their goals, and elevated the importance of spirituality as a reminder to avoid responding negatively or in a retaliatory fashion

when adversity such as racial oppression is encountered. The voice of color tenet of critical race theory legitimizes the experiences of African Americans. The study participants' testimonials offer a presumed competence to speak about how they make meaning of their spirituality and persistence. This particular theme elevates the voice of color tenet of the critical race theory by granting these young men the opportunity to share their own narratives on how they respond to racial and power struggles. These shared narratives help challenge the assumptions and narratives commonly made by people who are not them.

Spiritual Practices

An additional finding was the involved African American males gain motivation and skills from their spiritual practices. One of the key findings was that African American males benefited from participating in various spiritual activities and church programs. Specifically, prayer, scripture, church-based social groups, and church-initiated community service experiences were valuable to their academic goals. Data in the forthcoming sections highlight these findings in turn.

The Use of Prayer

"I prayed all summer that I could enroll in a university and be an athlete," Malcolm commented in explaining his use of prayer for academic guidance and motivation. "It was in late August when my mentor helped me find a scholarship to the university I currently attend. I had never heard of the university prior, but I was willing to try my best, so I enrolled. Later a friend introduced me to the coach, and now I'm a college athlete. I just really believe anything is possible, and I'm grateful God answers my prayers." Avery added his belief that his faith allows him to believe in academic goals that might otherwise have felt impossible, sharing: In reference to school, "Having a desire to achieve in school is based on knowing that anything is possible."

Charlie shared similar feelings “As a Black man, you don’t get the answers you want...the path is never clear. So I always have to pray that things get better.” Anthony also shared this similar understanding when he stated, “A lot of things just don’t pan out the way you want and you have to hold on to something, and that something is my spirituality.” In addition, Joshua shared, “Through prayer, I received firm direction that I should pursue an engineering degree.” David confirmed that he had similar experiences when he commented, “I believe I can do anything that I put my mind to even if it’s something I want to do and I’m not familiar with it...I just pray for help and guidance to help me do it. If I put my mind to it, there is nothing that can stop me.”

Clarence valued the use of prayer in his academics. He shared, “If I do my class assignments without prayer I don’t do well [considered below average]. When this happens, I know it’s because I’m trying to separate my spirituality from my academic life...and that doesn’t work, so now I pray before I do assignments. I earned a “C” without prayer, then retook the test and got a 98%. All I can tell you is... there is power in prayer.” African American males’ belief that prayer can build their confidence to earn higher grades could potentially reduce the achievement gap by increasing their overall grades.

Mark shared, “Prayer is the only thing that keeps me sane, especially during final exams. If I don’t pray, I know I’m not doing well and will lose focus....I’ll procrastinate.” Avery shared, “The college workload can be heavy on my mind [stressful], so prayer is a necessity to my achievement. After I pray, I feel much better about life, and it’s a good source of motivation and helps develop my faith so I can be more persistent in my studies.” Clarence also shared, “Through prayer, I find myself getting out of emotional hang-ups and issues and make more sound decisions with my everyday life.” Anthony shared, “Sometimes I do homework, and it’s like I’m reading in Hebrew because I just don’t understand it, but then I pray and gain

understanding.” While the students mentioned above used prayer for mental support, Malcolm added that he used prayer for overall physical health by sharing, “I’m an athlete, so sports wear my body down so I pray for healing and restoration of my muscles that hurt.” The data shows that African American males are using prayer to request clarity and understanding and reduce stress and anxiety. These beneficial effects ultimately contributed to better persistence and performance in the classroom, those interviewed claimed.

Not only was prayer practiced by the African American male study participants, but participants sometimes commented on the confidence they found in knowing others were praying for them:

Malcolm: The whole congregation continuously prays for the young people at the church to help them press forward. I have confidence in their prayers.

David: Church members support my academic progress by just praying for me while I’m at church and on campus.

Mark: We [the church] come together as one and become stronger.

In addition, research participants frequently noted ways in which congregants provided moral support and encouragement. In sum, the use of prayer emerged as valuable because it contributed to participants’ confidence in the potential of a favorable outcome among research participants as they worked toward their academic goals. Using prayer for guidance and direction has provided the African American males involved in this study with more clarity on navigating and persisting through college. Also, knowing others were praying for them often seemed to grant research participants additional confidence that they could succeed.

The Use of Scriptures

Another spiritual activity emerging from the data was the use of scriptures as a motivator.

Mark shared his favorite Bible story was about David and Goliath because it helps motivate him to achieve regardless of the odds. “You see how David [a short man] goes against Goliath [a tall man] but he remained fearless and had an ambitious desire to be great. I have the same ambition to be great and continue to be great.” Similarly, David used scriptures for inspiration by finding specific passages that were relatable to his current needs. David shared, “I read scriptures throughout the day; I actually search for them when I need to hear a specific scripture to help me achieve.” Malcolm also shared, “Scriptures help me to learn what people did before me and how they overcame obstacles in their life.” Clarence used scriptures to make sense of what’s going on in the world around him, sharing, “Scripture helps me to be more aware of the things that are unfolding and how to apply the scriptures to today’s experiences.” He also stated that he listens to various theologians as he completes his homework because it puts him in the mode of desiring to be a scholar. “It helps me realize I have to work and do my part.” Charlie shared before he makes an important decision, he looks for scriptures to support or refute his potential decision. This is important because of the various obstacles African American men have to overcome, such as the achievement gap, school suspensions, and diagnoses of special education, which together can seem monumental [Their Goliath]. Nevertheless, using scriptures as a source of motivation to realize no matter the odds, achievement is still possible may motivate these young men to persist.

Malcolm accessed scriptural motivation in a different manner that differed from the experiences of other research participants. When asked how he spiritually copes with the challenges of being a black man, Mathew mentioned he could stay motivated and focused throughout the week due to his church’s content on their social media page. Malcolm shared, “My church has a Facebook page where they post quotes [scriptures] about God and life, which I

apply to my life. It's little things like that that make a big impact. It helps me make it through the week. That little light of encouragement goes a long way." Mark cited an acronym for the word Bible [Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth], adding that studying scripture helped guide him in life in general and through challenging times.

The Use of Youth groups and Men's groups

According to the data, participation in church-sponsored groups and workshops was another spiritual activity that motivated the involved African American males to achieve. These sessions often enlightened and prepared African American males with insight on what they may encounter in the future or on the college campus. For example, Malcolm shared, "We learned that temptation is all around college campuses and many students move away from home and finally have the opportunity to rebel. They think because everyone is doing something, they can do it too, but I have to remain rooted in order to overcome these temptations."

When asked what church experiences best prepared you for life in college, Mark referenced the positive impact of attending the Men's retreat at his church. Mark shared, "Many of the guys who attend the retreats don't have fathers in their household, and going to college with no male role models in your life is tough, but the retreat provides you with that. They worked with us on devotionals but also showed us how to do resumes, which help us in college and beyond." In commenting on church experiences that prepare him for the racial realities of being a Black man, Mark explained, "Involvement with the men's group is an opportunity to connect with others through the unification of the guys, and we can talk about issues like the George Floyd murder." David also shared similar thoughts with Mark regarding forums with other African American men in the church. David commented further that "We talk as Black men about the assaults we go through that we don't deserve and just how we are doing in

general. We also talked about how we can't act like other races because we know we are viewed as dangerous, so we must move [navigate] differently. This helps keep me smart and informed." David learned from the stories and experiences of other Black men, which helped him better navigate as a young Black man. James also valued the men's group at his church and believed it helped him become more successful in school. James shared, "The men's group at my church helps me learn how to bond with other men that I don't know, which is similar to meeting new people at school. This skill is the same strategy I use to meet new friends. I see men open up about their challenges, and when you go through tough times, we can talk to each other." One of the values from Charlie's men's group seemed to be they don't have to be tough all the time and that it's okay to have an emotional side. Timothy's experiences were very similar to James. Both had the opportunity to learn about the struggles of other Black men and possible solutions or advice of how to handle those challenges if they were to have a similar encounter. According to these data references, it is clear the Black churches attended offers a counterspace for these young men to discuss and learn about the challenges and solutions to the problems they may face based on their race and gender profile. These counterspaces provide hope and motivation to continue to persist forward toward their collegiate goals.

Charlie shared participation in the workshops facilitated by the youth ministry at his church prepared him for life in college. Charlie mentioned the youth leaders talked to him and the youth at the church about college and education in general. He shared, "One thing they kept telling us was the people in college will test your religion and peer pressure, drugs, and drinking is huge on the college campus." And in his comments about what church experiences best prepare him for college, Charlie also shared, "The workshops helped me understand it's okay to say no and be a lame...what really matters is don't be a victim of peer pressure [don't allow

people to force me to do something I don't want to do].” Charlie shared a personal example about a peer pressure encounter that he experienced, which the lessons he learned from the youth workshops helped him navigate the experience. Charlie shared, “Many people hate me for not doing drugs. They call me out my name and try to say I’m scared. But I’m not going to change how I feel to get a rush for a quick moment and make them happy.” Even though Charlie’s peers pressured and ridiculed him, he was able to recall the lessons taught from his church’s youth group and stood his ground. As Pierre mentioned, “Being spiritual, I can’t participate in everything that happens at parties.” Making the right decision not to do drugs due to peer pressure may help keep these young men in the classroom instead of the prison system.

Anthony mentioned the value of participating in various fellowships with the youth and adults at his church. Anthony mentioned, “Fellowship outside of church like going to the bowling alley or getting something to eat you really get to know people for who they are outside of church. It helps you establish more one-on-one connections with people. Being able to know people on a deeper level, those skills help me get to know people on the college campus better.” Anthony seemed to believe fellowships provided opportunities to learn people more holistically than just one side of the person. This skill set seemed to help Anthony understand people better in order to better interact with them. Anthony also shared, “Speaking with people of different personalities is preparing me for the real world because it makes me aware of what’s going on around me.”

The Use of Service to the Community

Some research participants were motivated to do well in school based on their church involvement with the community. When asked about the impact church has on his desire to achieve, Charlie shared, “The church has instilled in me to pay it forward because the Bible always talks about giving back, and that’s what we should do. I know I want to be successful, so

I will be able to give back.” Pierre seemed to believe the same notion of giving back by commenting, “I want to give more than I receive, so I have to achieve great success in order to do for others...like supporting low-income kids.” Mark referenced the impact of various community outreach programs his church offered and the positive impact it had on him. Mark shared, “At my church, we have reading/literacy programs, resume building, math workshops, and mental health services. The mental health programs are supported by students who are psychology majors who are passionate about their fields...they get really in-depth with the support to make sure they are leading you down the right path, but not just spoon-feeding you. I struggled in Algebra and got a tutor through the church’s tutoring program. It’s definitely an extra push just to know others believe in you.” Pierre mentioned he was able to participate in various educational activities that helped stay focused with his academics. And as Pierre further shared, “The church-sponsored various community events like field trips, community giveaways, and fundraising for college essentials like socks and clothes.” Access to these programs is important because these young men may otherwise not get their needs met. Unmet needs could result in these young men failing in school or even dropping out of school.

David shared he’s inspired because of the services his church provides for the people in the community. “It’s something we do every day to help the community we are in, like food, gift cards, dental care...just daily help.” James seemed to believe participating in various community outreach programs through his church helped him stay encouraged to progress academically by sharing, “We help people through volunteering with the food drive, helping the needy during the holidays, and just encouraging other members to attend the volunteer opportunities. This helps me because I can use what I learn at church and the classroom, which makes me successful.”

Clarence remarked, “My first paid job was actually through a work program at my

church. That was the first place where I learned to work smarter, not harder. They also taught us character-building lessons, which helped me find out who I am. These experiences even helped me look at other departments and auxiliaries in the church to see what I'm good at. I was then able to use those experiences to tie it into my academic experience to become genuine in who I am in the classroom." Based on these statements, Clarence believed his church experiences and community participation were significant motivators to his college preparation. In addition, early exposure to the workforce and career interests may help these young men become more committed to their educational goals because they have become aware of their passions.

Overall, the data infer that these young men frequently embraced various spiritual activities for inspiration and not just a Sunday-only motivation. This is important because these young men can use scriptures whenever they need encouragement instead of having to wait for the availability of a person to motivate them. Thus, scriptures may provide a more timely motivation to get them through their challenges instead of potentially becoming overwhelmed and discouraged, resulting in dropping out of college.

Enhanced Discipline

The research participants identified unique parallels and similarities between the Black church and college/university campus, which often served as motivators for them to achieve. Bowles and Gintis (1977), in identifying a so-called correspondence principle, critiqued ways in which certain mechanisms within educational settings can serve to socialize students to accept beliefs, values, and forms of behavior. Turning this critical outlook somewhat on its head, informants noted in positive terms a welcome correspondence between educational and church-based practices and routines, identifying ways in which these parallels tended to enhance their overall academic discipline. These motivators often were associated with church operations or

activities. For example, Pierre commented, “Attending Sunday school, which started at 8:00 AM made me a morning person, which helped me during college because I had to be in class that began at the 8:00 AM.” Avery noted, “Listening to sermons and having to pay attention to the main points helped me listen and apply the same skillset in class by listening to the core details in the class lesson, which often helped me do well on exams. He also shared, “Not listening to the main point of the sermon can be detrimental to your life, but the same applies in the college classroom.”

Charlie shared he was a greeter at his church, and this helped enhance his first impression skills on the college campus. “Greeting people with a smile and passing out pamphlets at church is just like shaking someone’s hand. When you meet someone, you leave a first impression, especially when you meet visitors. I want everyone I meet outside of church to feel the same warm welcome we experience in church.” Joshua firmly concluded Bible study directly correlated with studying for college classes. “Bible study requires you to dig for deeper meaning/understanding of the scriptures. As an engineering major, you have to figure things out and dig for deeper meaning.” Charlie seemed to believe Bible study helps him become familiar with topics and subjects in his college history courses because he stated, “I’m already familiar with certain topics or meanings like the time frames AD and BC and certain names of historical people because I was made familiar with them from Bible study.” Joshua also shared, “Church has taught me how to endure...not that church is boring, but lectures are. But church has taught me how to pay attention and get what I need out of it, which is similar to college lectures.” Students’ recognition of the parallels between the two entities seems to create a sense of familiarity, which better prepares them to achieve and persist towards their academic goals.

Most intensely, James seemed to believe there were numerous similarities between

church and school, which helped him achieve in school. He shared, “It’s engraved in my head that church is a requirement just like school is a requirement. Homework is required to understand and pass school, and church is required to understand God. You have to take what you learn in church and apply it to your daily life, and you have to do the same with school. In school, you have different subjects, and in the Bible there are different people, concepts, and stories, which are all used to create teachable moments.” Based on these similarities, James seemed to believe his spiritual and church experiences better prepared him to succeed in academics because he was already practicing the competencies within his spirituality.

Pierre shared, “Reading and interpreting what the scriptures mean helps me with my critical thinking skills I use in school. It also helps me be more disciplined and overcome the temptation to skip class and be more self-controlled to actually study in order to pass college exams.” Charlie had similar experiences with the impact of scripture reading on his academics, sharing, “When studying the Bible you have to annotate/write things down to get a better understanding, and you have to look up the things you don’t know or don’t understand. In my science classes, I have to highlight certain things and take notes to refer back to.” Pierre and Charlie developed their reading comprehension and study skills in class from scripture reading and interpretation they developed in the Black church. Learning and practicing academic skills seems to help sharpen African American males’ skillsets, which are valuable to the collegiate environment.

This section highlighted the data that reflects that African American males commonly used prayer, scripture reading, youth groups and men’s groups, and community services as sources of inspiration. All ten study participants referenced the use of prayer as a beneficial practice to their persistence. These students used prayer to make requests for

direction/guidance/clarity and peace. The Black church holds dialectics in polar opposites in tension, constantly shifting between the polarities in time (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). This finding supports the Black church dialectic priestly and prophetic. The priestly function uplifts the use of prayer as a function to enhance the spiritual character and commitment of the Black church congregants. Priestly churches are more likely to focus on the spiritual growth of congregants, while prophetic churches focus on solving community issues.

Additionally, the study participants benefited from participation in various youth groups and male groups at their church. These groups provided a counterspace for empowerment and solution and motivated students to persist in their academics and life in general. The African American male participants were also inspired through their participation in various community outreach endeavors hosted by their church. Involvement in community service inspired these young men to value service to their community and advance in their education with the mindset of one day being able to support their community.

Summary

Three themes resulted from the study that summarizes the perceptions of African American males' faith membership in the Black church and its impact on their academic persistence. First, the participating African American males generally had improved persistence in college due to the support and community of the Black church. More specifically, as multiple comments from participants reflected, access to leaders, members, and peers often served as sources of motivation and support towards participants' academic goals. Church leaders demonstrated what leadership looks like, which subsequently inspired the African American male study participants to replicate these mannerisms. The character traits referenced included persistence, honesty, and moral character. African American males embracing these attributes

seemed to believe it was valuable to their collegiate experiences and overall success.

Research participants appeared to believe the Black church was safe, familiar, and provided a trusting atmosphere. The comments of study participants frequently confirmed that their fellow congregants were concerned about their wellbeing and provided support for these young men. Through the various shared experiences, participants often explained that they could get their emotional and natural needs met by fellow church members. Some of the participants were also able to develop deeper bonds that turned into formal mentoring. The mentors helped advise and guide the young men to continue to press forward academically.

Additionally, the African American male participants consistently valued peers who were also spiritual and were concerned for their best interest. These spiritual peers encouraged and kept these African American males focused on their academics and proper conduct. The African American males participating in this research articulated various ways in which they felt they could confide in these peers and support each other through various challenges they encountered. The research participants also valued their spiritual peers because they could participate in spiritual practices like prayer and scripture reading with them, which also served as motivators to their achievement. This theme seemed commonly rooted in the fact that the African American male participants were dependent in their spiritual identity. Many of the research participants did not negotiate their spirituality and were not easily swayed by peer pressure. Their spiritual identities served as a source of internal motivation and helped them understand that their behaviors and actions must align with their desired outcome. Overall, this finding seemed to point to persistence as it created accountability among the African American males involved with others, such as leaders, members and friends, and themselves in light of their spiritual identity.

A second major theme emerging from the data was that the African American males involved here commonly used their spirituality as a source of coping and confidence. The participating African American males were able to challenge racism and stereotypical assumptions through their spirituality and membership in the Black church according to several accounts. The participants alluded the challenge of living in the body of a Black Christian Man in America, articulating a feeling that they are viewed to be dangerous and unable to succeed. They seemed to believe they were viewed to be dangerous and unable to succeed. The research participants were conscious of the bias treatment of their race and gender profile but found humanity in their spirituality.

A shared sense of humanity among participants was articulated primarily through Bible stories and relatable sermons those participants mentioned with some frequency. The positive outcomes of the stories and words of encouragement from the sermons provided African American males with a sense that they could overcome the opposition they encountered on campus and in life. Their spirituality provided a solid counterpoint to the dominant culture's narrative, challenging stereotypes about the value of American African males in society and thereby offering means for resistance against this prejudice. They were able to embrace a mindset that anything is possible, such as excelling in school if they don't escalate conflict or allow it to trigger a negative response.

Additionally, the research participants understood the historical connection African Americans have with spirituality. The research participants expressed that if their ancestors were able to use spirituality to get through slavery, they could also get through their current challenges with racism. "Summer 2020" was a critical point of references in their lives where they recognized that society continues to target African American males systemically. However, their

spirituality directed them not to retaliate with violence but to remain focused on their purpose and goals in life, which commonly was college graduation.

Finally, a third major theme revolved around ways that spiritual activities and services can motivate African American males' and can enhance their discipline. The most common spiritual activities were prayers, scripture reading, youth/men's groups, and community service. The data repeatedly reflected that African American males used prayer to help them understand course content and the world surrounding them and to relieve stress from the pressures they encountered. In addition, prayer commonly provided them with a sense of confidence to achieve with their assignments and college life in general. The data discussed in the several sections above infer that the young men involved frequently embraced various spiritual activities for inspiration and not just a Sunday-only motivation. This is important because these young men can use scriptures whenever they need encouragement instead of having to wait for the availability of a person to motivate them. Scripture and Bible reading encouraged and motivated African American males that they could succeed in their academics. Research participants tended not only to value the scriptures provided by their pastors and peers, but they also revisited or searched for scriptures on their own that encouraged them based on what they were going through in that moment. Scriptures seemed to provide timely motivation to participants to get them through their challenges instead of potentially becoming overwhelmed and discouraged, resulting in dropping out of college African American males used scriptures frequently as a reminder to remain focused and disciplined in school.

Participation in church youth groups, predominantly male-focused groups motivated the African American male study participants to achieve. Within these groups, the students were forewarned about the challenges of peer pressure, drugs, and misconduct that are commonly

found on college campuses. These youth groups also introduced and connected African American males with other African American men who tended to be older or more experienced with the challenges Black men encounter. The sessions gave these young men the space to share issues and learn solutions from others who participated. As Mark had commented, “The men’s group provides me with the opportunity to learn about leadership from other male leaders.” James echoed, “I see men open up about their struggles and challenges and asking for prayer to solve them.” Additionally, their churches provided community outreach programs, which provided access to work readiness and tutoring programs, which helped increase their academic success. These young men were motivated to excel academically from their church’s support to the community. The motivation to excel was based on their desire to be successful so they could support their community one day.

In addition, research participants identified unique synergies between the Black church and the college campus. These parallels between the two settings as places requiring disciplined self-application served as a motivator that enabled the participating African American males to progress in school. They were able to operate in various roles in the church that helped them identify their strengths, which helped inform their passions and college majors. Participants gained study and comprehension skills from interpreting scriptures, which the same skillset was practiced in their college courses for test and class assignments. Additionally, the African American males involved in this research often became familiar with historical events and deciphering key points when learning. These skills were valuable to their achievement because they were acquainted with the content and could to identify key points that may have been on the course exam. Overall, their experiences with the Black church tended to reinforce skills that were advantageous to their success in the classroom.

The next chapter presents a discussion of recommendations and implications based on the themes emerging from the data as presented in this chapter and on the study's major finding that the study participants' identity as active members of Black Christian churches had a positive influence on their academic persistence.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

Due to the significant amount of research that examines African American male failure, there was a need to explore the achievement of many despite the substantial adversities African American males encounter. Instead, researchers have tended to amplify African American male failure with research that seeks to study their deficiency or their failure rather than their assets and their successes (Harper, 2010; Harper & Davis, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2012; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Wood & Harper, 2016). Thus, this study is important in its outlook because it counters this shortcoming, seeking to add to the body of literature by examining specific strategies African American males employ to overcome the racial barriers, oppression, and other adversities they encounter and to persist in their education. Examining this aspect of persistence not only counters deficit research conceptually, but it has also sought to elevate strategies these young men use to confront the so-called achievement gap between African American males and their counterparts in other demographic groups.

Derived using a qualitative approach, data for the study came from the interview responses of participating African American males. The interviewing process provided African American males a voice— heretofore missing but critically important according to critical race theory. This so-called “voice of color” tends to be diminished or altogether lost due to the prominence of the deficit narrative that prevail as noted. Providing African American males an avenue to share their own lived experiences also elevated experiences with racism and power struggles that often impede the persistence of Black males. Overall, this study has revealed ways

in which the Black church has positively influenced the academic persistence of the African American male participants. Based on the interview data and analysis, the study yielded evidence that the persistence of those involved was aided by 1) the support and community participants experienced as a result of their church membership, 2) the sense of patience and confidence gained through their spiritual pursuits, and 3) specific spiritual activities and services in which they participated on direct account of their active participation in their spiritual communities.

Discussion of the Findings

In providing a discussion of the study's findings, this section will review how the spirituality of the research participants had a positive influence on their academic persistence. Revisiting the data and offering implications and meanings reflected in the participants' comments, the discussion will summarize key understandings gained.

Support and Community

African American males engaged in the study gained support and community from the Black churches they attended. The participants recognized the positive impact of the management style of the church leaders. This finding is noteworthy because the church leaders may provide modeling often noted as absent in the experiences of many African American men in their homes and professional communities, as referenced in Chapter Two. That is, because African American men are often systemically removed from society through imprisonment, lack of access to employment, and other structures of social oppression, having access to a pastor or church leaders serves as a counterpoint to this tendency, offering instead a consistent source of positive male leadership. This finding suggests that the Black church's leadership can have a considerable capacity to inspire African American males to adopt positive character traits that can ultimately increase their academic persistence. This finding also illustrated that the African

American male study participants were willing to accept and model the leadership. Embracing the leadership traits demonstrated by church leaders seemed to help these young men gain the confidence to push through various obstacles that otherwise would have hindered their academic success.

Additionally, this theme reflected that the valuable influence that congregation members, spiritual peers, and their own spirituality had upon the participants' academic persistence. The African American males involved valued the support from those genuinely concerned about their wellbeing and their successful continuation and completion of their academic goals—support that otherwise may have gone unmet. The study participants were confident in the fact that family-like relationships experienced within the Black Church would be intact as sources of support when challenges arose in school.

This sense of access to support provided a valuable counter-narrative to a prevailing message that African American males are not worthy of investments of support to assure their success. In the absence of support from the larger society, African American males can and turn to the Black church for emotional and academic aid, and, as the participants in this study showed, do so. In short, for those involved, the Black church addresses a critical resource and opportunity gap confronting African American males and helps them remain persistent in pursuing college completion.

This research also found that the African American males involved internalized a degree of motivation to persist in school because of their spirituality. These young men articulated that they depended on their spirituality for the sense of security they required. The finding that participants' spirituality was core and influenced other identities is valuable because participants understood that their actions in out-of-church pursuits, including school, must align with their

spirituality. Actions such as displaying proper conduct, not skipping class, and avoiding peer pressure were all beneficial practices aligning their academic persistence with their spiritual identities. Thus, the study participants' spiritual convictions served as endorsements of the very characteristics that promote academic success.

Coping and Confidence

African American males are vulnerable to stereotyping and other manifestations of entrenched racism. Study participants were conscious of the pronounced disparities they would encounter due to their race and gender. The research participants articulated a sense of patience that, again, aligned with their spiritual beliefs and that served to encourage them not to respond to racial oppression negatively. Spirituality, that is, helped the African American males study participants practice self-control. This finding is valuable because spirituality provided African Americans with critical thinking skills to resolve conflict in manners that wouldn't result in potential trouble or harm.

These young men persisted even when they encountered racism because they were confident that they could transcend their oppression if they practiced patience, embracing an understanding that in due time the negative encounters they experienced would work in their favor in the end. This idea of patience and confidence in liberation gave these young men the tools to confront racist barriers wisely—barriers that might otherwise threaten their college completion. Their spiritually nurtured confidence that if they remained focused on the goal of graduation and practiced moral conduct, they would indeed persist.

The idea of confidence in their spirituality was frequently discussed in historical and contemporary contexts. The participants were, for instance, readily able to cite past events of when and how spirituality was used to overcome the harshest forms of racism, such as American

slavery and police brutality. Historical references tended to validate their current logic of why they could be confident in their liberation. These African American men did not cite the solution as protest, voting, or trusting Americans would eventually do the right thing. Instead, the participants articulated belief that the holistic solution to the challenges they faced as Black men was located in their spirituality. This finding is valuable because it suggests that African American males do not have to wait on the collective movement of Americans or new policies to be drafted for their support, but can instead pursue their spirituality and Black church membership as a means of developing and enhancing their resilience from within.

This idea points to the often-salient nature spirituality has for Black America. The student participants often indicated that spirituality and being African American has a historical link that shouldn't be separated if they are to overcome American racism. This consciousness was reinforced through church leaders who spoke to the challenges of modern-day living but endorsed spirituality as the means of coping with adversity. The African American males in this study valued Black churches that focused primarily towards the dialectic direction of "this-worldly" ((Lincoln & Miyama, 1990, p. 12). This-worldly references the devotion to changing things in the current world. Church leaders being conscious of what these young men encountered on campus and in the community was valuable because it frequently served to provide the African American male participants with a sense of acknowledgment of their humanity. In this way, the Black churches attended by the study participants address circumstances these men will encounter and offers solutions to overcome the challenges they face.

Spiritual Activities and Services

A third major finding was that the African American males participating in the study used

prayer, scriptures, youth groups, and community service as a source of motivation. Spiritual activities were stimuli that reinforced their desires to achieve. As discussed in Chapter One, public education was not envisioned and created to serve African American students. And in spite of—putatively intended to assure that all students, regardless of race, have access to education—the achievement gap reveals that education inequities persist. Nevertheless, spiritual activities tended to inspire the participants in this study to achieve despite the entrenched inequity they face.

Prayer and scriptures were commonly used for direction and understanding. Education is not a clear path from start to finish for African American males. As discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two, experiences with schools, policies, or staff are not regularly positive for African American males. As Black males are disproportionately diagnosed with learning disabilities, suspended from schools, and faced with negative interactions with school staff, their path to success in education becomes elusive. Unclear direction and little academic motivation negatively affect their persistence because dropping out of school becomes the easiest way to respond to these adversities. However, as did participants of this study, African American males may practice a variety of spiritual activities such as prayer and scripture reading that provides them with the motivation to persist despite the barriers and negative experiences. The discipline of praying for better grades on assignments among the research participants reflects that African American males can and do aspire to succeed in school, also reflecting their confidence that spirituality can influence their performance more than secular resources. Coupled with the participants' belief that they had to align their actions with the goal they wanted to achieve, motivation and aligned actions worked together in sustaining participants' academic persistence.

Each of the several spiritual aspects reflected in this study's findings provided the

participants with a unique source of support in response to the needs they felt they needed in a given moment. In this fashion, having access to what might be called customizable inspiration provided these students with a reservoir consisting of various forms of emotional capital upon which participants could draw to drive their persistence. Some participants overtly likened their spirituality to the spirituality used historically concerning the long era of American slavery and, contemporarily, as a way of grasping and coping with racial affronts such as the murder of George Floyd and others coming to a head in Summer 2020. Specifically, study participants sometimes cited biblical events gaining the confidence they could achieve similar positive outcomes if they adopted the spiritual lessons of these biblical models. Participants often seemed drawn to biblical passages in which the odds of success seemed impossible but in which spirituality placed success within reach. African American males participating in the study often turned to scripture, relating stories found their own challenges and capacity for success.

Participation in men's and youth groups and fellowships also seemed to comprise a critical source of inspiration and motivation among African American males involved in this study. Unlike prayer and scripture reading which tended to be practiced privately and independently, men's and youth groups provided opportunities to engage and interact with like-minded others. This finding means that African American male study participants here gained social capital by connecting with other Black men and youth, reinforcing their persistence. In addition, the male-focused groups provided the research participants with a counter space that offered empowerment, encouragement, and resolution to their challenges. African American males who have experienced absent Black fathers, as well as a dearth of Black male teachers, or professionals have limited opportunities to interact or learn from such exemplars. Through the sponsorship of special social groups, the Black churches referenced in this study offers access to

a Black-male counter space within which counter narratives about the Black male identity are communicated and reinforced. By exposing young Black males to other Black men who share the experience of the study participants, these counter spaces encourage African American males to persist towards their goals. In short, access to this type of space equips African American males with reinforced perspectives that success is attainable.

Additionally, the Black churches attended in this study have offered various academic and career support programs to the community, and these have been beneficial to the research participants. These services provided the African American males with tools and resources that assisted with their academics in direct ways, such as tutoring and homework assistance. Participation in various outreach programs helped equip these young men with practical skills used in the classroom. This demonstrates that the African American male study participants can receive complimentary support from the Black church, which helps enhance their academic skills. And these improved academic skills often ultimately serving to reinforce the persistence of study participants in their academic endeavors.

Conclusions Based on the Results

This section will provide an overall conclusion of the study based on the research results and regarding supporting literature. The data revealed that a first important finding is that access to support and a community can be beneficial to African American male persistence as pertained for those involved in the study. According to the research presented in Chapter Two's review of the literature, a supportive community is valuable to the wellbeing of African American males. Dancy's (2010) research found that African American men view the church as a supportive community. Similarly, one of the themes that arose from the Donahoo and Caffey (2010) was that the African American research participants those researchers engaged believed that the

church demonstrated a family-like orientation, taking a genuine concern in their educational goals. The men in the Donahoo and Caffey (2010) study specifically highlighted the sense of family was evident in the resources and efforts that benefitted them in college. Additionally, the African American students in Donahoo and Caffey (2010) affirmed that church helped them stay focused, grounded and made them want to keep progressing towards their goals. These findings align with the current study's conclusion that participants' spirituality increased their access to community and support through the connection of people through the church—findings that are in addition in step with Kim and Hargrove (2013), who also concluded that African American males were able to receive support through church relationships.

Dancy's (2010) study resonates with the current study's finding about its participants' spirituality as core to their identity. In Dancy's (2010) study, the African American men acknowledged their other identities must clearly coincide with their spiritual identity. Dancy (2010) recognized African American males might experience identity conflicts, but the faith identity remains the core identity of their understanding. For instance, this finding reflected Charlie's experience as he discussed falling victim to peer pressure and feeling remorseful with this straying from his spiritual identity. Jett's (2010) research also concluded that spirituality was one of the driving forces behind academic success in college and success in general for African American males. The research participants' spirituality as their core identity serviced as a support to their academic persistence.

Specifically, to Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) dialectic between the charismatic and bureaucratic, the data from the present study also reflects that the participating students identified the support gained from Black church leadership as charismatic in nature. Indeed, this charismatic governance was dynamic enough to have inspired some study participants to

replicate the skills demonstrated, ultimately giving those students the mindset that they could persist by replicating positive leadership in the college classrooms.

To the broader field of education, this finding means African American males may persist at greater probability if they have access to individuals who genuinely care and support their academic goals. Unfortunately, due to the various social issues African American males encounter, they are commonly isolated from the classroom and certain occupations and professional spaces. Isolation tends to reduce their community and the provisions and support that come with such a community. Therefore, educators who want to see African American males achieve must explore opportunities and garner support for these young men to build and sustain a sense of community. One primary strategy to garner support would be to recruit more Black male teachers and administrators. This support would be advantageous to Black male students because they may begin to recognize themselves in spaces where they are commonly absent. The presence of more Black male educators could inspire Black male students to achieve and pursue education degrees to transform their own communities. The support and community finding was not limited to solely adults, rather, in addition to support gained through leadership and adult congregants, the African American males in this study gained support from peers and spiritual practices they had internalized.

The data revealed the second finding that African American males could and do their spirituality for coping and confidence. According to the literature review presented in Chapter Two, resilience is valuable to the American males' academic achievement. Herndon (2013) showed how spirituality provides African American males with resilience to pursue their education even when they faced adversity. More specifically, Herndon's (2013) research participants used tools the research participants in the current study relied upon, which, as coping

mechanisms against adversity, included church attendance, prayer, and scripture reading. In sum, as did Donahoo and Caffey's (2010), Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2009), and Watson's (2006), the present research also reflects that African Americans use their spirituality for endurance and inspiration to achieve.

Regarding Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) dialectic between other-worldly versus this-worldly, the current study's participants comments reflected that the Black church places emphases primarily on this-worldly, focusing on these African American students experiencing success and accomplishment in their earthly life. The current research revealed that all the participants received some type of positive support from the Black church, and, as a result, all possessed a mindset to reach towards excellence regardless of the odds against them. This mindset ultimately helped them persist in their education.

Similarly, the African American men in Dancy's (2010) study conveyed confidence in their spirituality by believing that their lives' anticipated outcome would resolve favorably. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) confirmed this dependency of future liberation and cited that it is rooted in Old Testament scripture. Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) stance foreshadows the current study's findings because the current research participants commonly referenced Old Testament Bible stories such as Israel's enslavement in Egypt and David's defeat of Goliath as testimonials of the liberating power of faith. This study's finding in this area is also better understood in terms of Lincoln and Mamiya (1990)'s resistance and accommodation dialectic, with this study's participants practicing patience while awaiting liberation but also practicing resistance by persisting despite the odds. Hilton and Wood, in their 2012 research, also observed African American males using their spirituality to seek liberation or the sense that everything would work out in their favor in the end. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) cite the prophetic Black church

nurtures the quest for liberation for African Americans, and the prophetic and priestly dialectical tension was also revealed in this study, as the research participants in the current study used their spirituality to navigate toward liberation and to resist conforming to stereotypes and racial encounters. This quest for liberation and resisting stereotypes often worked in favor of the academic persistence of study participants.

To the broader field of education, this finding means African American males have found a sense of pride in their spirituality to manage and challenge racial oppression. This finding also confirms the need of the current study as referenced in Chapter One, namely, to explore how young men are thriving rather than exploring their failure. This means there are valuable opportunities educators can give students by providing them their own voice to communicate how they are overcoming adversity instead of prescribing in a narrow and deficit-driven manner *how* they should overcome via correction or remedy of that deficit. This finding shows educators that other entities such as the Black church succeed in nurturing valuable skills that help African American men persist in school. Instead of dismissing African American males' cultural assets, such as their spirituality, educators and educational institutions might benefit by considering of opportunities to collaborate with the Black church to sustain these nurture abilities.

The data revealed a third finding, which is that African American males gained motivation from spiritual activities and services. This finding echoes research presented in Chapter Two that spirituality is a motivator for African American males. Hilton and Wood (2012) determined their African American male participants used prayer when they encountered barriers and would receive necessary help through their spirituality. Additionally, the African American male participants used prayer for guidance and success before taking tests and coursework. This finding resonates with the current research's findings in that the African

American male research participants discussed here used prayer for direction and as a motivator to earn higher grades on their coursework. The current research also concludes that African American males used prayer to cope with anxiety and the mental stresses of college demands. It may be beneficial for schools who want to see these students excel to have time and space allocated for students who may want to practice their spirituality to excel in class. These could be made tangible with dedicated space such as a prayer room or allowing students a moment to pray prior to taking exams and other high stakes assignments. Herndon (2003) confirms the same finding that spiritual activities such as prayer helped African American male participants in bearing the stresses and anxieties of college and helped these young men excel in the face of academic and social adversities.

Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) dialectic between communal and privatistic points to the spiritual activities and how these motivate African American males and sharpen their academic skills. The data from the current study provide insight on the use of church sponsored youth groups and support services to the community as motivators. The communal perspective is based on some Black churches' involvement in the community through various support and is not limited to the privatistic, which focuses primarily on spirituality. Based on the research participants' interviews, it's clear their churches valued communal because they offered tutoring, youth groups, resume building, and college/career preparation workshops. These forms of engagement were Black church-sponsored programs, which the African American males of this study participated in, and it served as a motivator for their success. According to Barnes (2004) study, youth programs are among the topmost commonly sponsored supports offered by the Black church. This finding and confirmation is critical because each participant in the current research commented that their church provided some type of support that helped them persist in

their academics, reflecting strikingly that the Black church is not limited to solely providing spiritual support.

To the broader field of education, this finding means these African American males can use their spirituality as a source of motivation to persist academically. This finding illuminates specific practices such as prayer, scripture reading, and participation in youth groups, and support services are motivators for African American male success. Some of these activities can be practiced individually while others are practiced in a group setting, which offers the flexibility of use. Options for inspiration may grant these young men discretion to choose what works best for them based on their individual needs.

Interpretation of the Findings

This section will interpret the findings and provide an explanation and the value of the findings. This study yielded the three primary findings because it pursued the intention to explore how African American males were succeeding in their academics. The findings provide a specific practice or benefit the Black church has on their academic persistence. This study was arranged to meet the qualifications of Harper's (2010) anti-deficit framework, which assures the research in general and the research questions are framed to uplift asset and resilience factors of African American males instead of exploring their failure. Due to adopting the anti-deficit framework, the questions challenged African American males to speak to success factors and not necessarily the obstacles they encounter. The study logically yields findings that provide insight on various benefits that help them overcome opposition and remain in the pursuit of their academic goals.

The study also yielded the three primary findings because the anti-deficit framework is aligned with the critical race theory framework. Together both of these frameworks challenge

the abundance of research that explores African American male failure, which subsequently associates failure with Black males instead of achievement. The critical race theory, specifically the voice of color tenet, provided the platform for African American Christian males to provide the narrative of their own experiences instead of accepting narratives that are not their own. These counter narratives by default would challenge commonly accepted notions that African American males can't achieve.

Additionally, because this particular study examined African American males who had a minimum GPA of 2.8 it assured the participants actually were academically succeeding based on common grade point average standards in use in contemporary postsecondary settings. Through the voice of color tenet of the critical race theory the student participants were provided the opportunity to share their own narratives. In this study, the African American males had lived experiences and narratives illuminating their understandings of what is required to earn good grades and to persist in their academics. These experiences made them expert witnesses in a sense, regarding how their church membership has influenced their academic persistence.

A key outcome of this study for the body of literature on academic achievement among Black males and for the educational community more generally is the understanding reinforced in this research that African American males have social capital in the form of their spirituality and church membership, and that this social capital fosters their academic persistence. Specifically, this social asset provides African American males with the tools to overcome and cope with racism and oppression and the motivation to stay focused on their academic and career goals. The outcomes also elevate the concept that African American males are not a monolithic group. In this study, African American Christian males have shared their unique experiences about their Black church membership and its influence on their academics— as opposed to

experiences of other African American males who do not fit the same profile.

The research findings of the current study fit well with the existing body of research about African American male achievement. It is logical to assume that if African American males are not persisting in their education, they would be failing or dropping out of school. The literature review in Chapter Two highlights the various challenges African American males experience with high dropout rates, high suspension rates, and high chronically absent rates. These young men also have limited access to AP/GATE courses, certified teachers, and equitability-funded schools, but they still manage to enroll and persist in college. Additionally, the findings of this study are generally not in conflict with major themes from the literature review about African American male spirituality and achievement.

Limitations

The original intention of this research was to conduct the interviews in person; however, this study was conducted during the global Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic resulted in numerous distancing policies, which would no longer allow in-person interviews as a safety precaution against the virus. Therefore, the interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom platform to be compliant with safety regulations. This affected the potential interview pool because prospective research participants were harder to access. After all, many students were in virtual/online school, which reduced the possibility of them seeing posters and other print materials regarding participating in the study. During some of the interviews, a few of the participants seemed to multitask other responsibilities or request a moment to address some type of interruption. If the interviews were face-to-face, research participants might have been more focused during the interviews and less likely to multitask based on the physical presence of the primary researcher. Additionally, virtual interviews reduced access to non-verbal cues, which

could have offered additional insight and interpretations of the participants' experiences. Conducting the interviews virtually also limited potential artifacts or follow-up questions that could have been asked based on the location of the in-person interview. For example, if the interview was conducted at the student's home, church, or school, there may have been tangible artifacts that could have been observed or shared that connected to their spirituality or persistence, which could have prompted further dialogue.

As the primary researcher, I am a Christian African American male who attends a Black church. On the one hand, this cultural capital and familiarity with the Black church and spirituality did grant me the ability to understand and even relate to various experiences the research participant shared. On the other hand, it's important to acknowledge my own affinity with my subjects and with the research topic and the bias that naturally resulted. However, to counter this bias, I frequently asked the research participants to explain their answers to assure I understood their viewpoint instead of assuming I naturally understood it. I also attempted to keep a critical view of the students' explanations to ensure spiritual experiences or religious expressions were unpacked so the common reader could understand the experiences of the African American males who participated in this study.

There are standard limitations of using a qualitative methodological approach to this study. The results cannot be statistically proven or verified as accurate nor scalable to a larger African American male population. At the same time, the results do provide insight into the shared experiences of the African American males who participated, it cannot be expected to reproduce the identical outcomes for all other African American males. Additionally, while critical race theory provided a framework to collect and interpret the research participants' experiences, it's understood that the themes and findings are based on my personal and

professional interpretations. Another researcher may have coded or interpreted the research participants' interviews differently. However, the depth pursued in interviewing participants provided for the emergence of themes via the reiteration and the intensity of the comments offered. These comments were partially able to be interpreted based on my familiarity with spirituality.

In addition, while the interviews followed a questioning protocol that was generally well maintained, one of the limitations of this study was that partial divergence from that protocol was sometimes necessary. For example, many research participants seemed to struggle to answer the question, "How do you negotiate your spirituality with your peers?" I commonly had to rephrase this particular question after the interviewees asked for clarification specific to the term negotiate. The intent of the question was to understand how the participants managed their spirituality and what role do peers play in the management of their spirituality. It seemed that the research participants might have been hesitant to clearly articulate the belief they did not negotiate their spirituality because their spirituality was nonnegotiable.

Implications of the Study

This research plausibly challenges the idea of separation of church and state and explains why schools should consider collaborating with the Black church. This study provides deeper insight into motivators expressed to help African American males persist in their education. Educators can use this study to enhance their understanding of the success factors of African American males. Educators, more specifically teachers, may appeal to students' spiritual capital by referencing historical events where African Americans used their spirituality to overcome adversity. The students in this study shared various historical passages in the Bible overlaps with history courses and other historical events such as American slavery and police brutality. These

African American males are more likely to examine these events from a spiritual perspective than from a secular standpoint. Their opinions should be uplifted to enrich the classroom discussions of how all students make meaning of American history.

Nonprofit organizations can also use this study to begin shaping work that specifically supports African American males. Youth groups, tutoring programs, and college preparation workshops are common functions embraced by this sector. Each of these support services was important, according to the study participants. Nonprofits and community organizations may be able to serve as a neutral partner and liaison between schools and the Black church and offer programming that supports the skills development of African American males, which ultimately helps them persist in college. In February 2021, President Joe Biden reestablished the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (i.e., The Partnership Center). This center is focused on collaborating with civil society to: address the COVID-19 pandemic and boost economic recovery; combat systemic racism; increase opportunity and mobility for historically disadvantaged communities; and strengthen pluralism (The White House, 2021). Nontraditional partnerships are necessary based on the systemic obstacles such as racism that African American men continue to face. As the country grapples with a global pandemic, a severe economic downturn, the scourge of systemic racism, an escalating climate crisis, and profound polarization, civil society partnerships are essential to meeting such challenges (The White House, 2021). The federal government endorses nontraditional partnerships despite the traditional strict separation of church and state. More specifically, African American male persistence could align with the faith office's priority areas of combating structural racism and increasing opportunity and mobility for historically disadvantaged communities. Local nonprofit and faith-based institutions could help fill the social service gaps with government endorsement

since they are more conscious of local problems. These organizations could assist in targeting similar priority areas as The Partnership Office, such as eliminating racist practices and identifying resources and supports for African American males, who are historically marginalized.

As such, policymakers can use the results of this study to establish more intentional supports regarding the achievement gap. This support could endorse collaboration between school districts and religious organizations. Policymakers could also ensure that policies encourage students to freely practice their religious beliefs and expressions within academic spaces without fear of discrimination or penalty. But even more important, policymakers should reexamine policies around school funding that perpetuate the known falsehood of separate but equal, which continues to marginalize African American males specifically and African Americans in general. Equitable school funding is critical to assuring African American males have access to quality K-12 schools, which better prepares them for college success.

The African American male study participants seemingly had no choice but to depend on their spirituality if they wanted to persist. This dependence in certain situations was a response to limited access to resources, such as financial support for school. Equitable school funding could have potentially addressed some of these issues. Equitable school funding could provide more African American males with greater access to certified K-12 teachers and a more rigorous curriculum that could help them earn even higher G.P.A.'s and standardized test scores, which may help them earn college scholarships. Scholarships and access to potential honors colleges could provide them additional support and/or, at minimum, help them graduate college owing less student loan debt. This study shows that the African American male participants had to embrace spiritual support to persist in their education, which may result from limited access to

the supports White schools commonly have. Therefore, it logically implores the question, where would these African American males be without the Black church's support and their spirituality?

This research should help inform educators understanding of ways in which the African American males involved have used their spirituality to deescalate negative interactions such as peer pressure, stress, and barriers based on stereotypes. Allowing African American males the space to use their spirituality to overcome these challenges helps them persist in their academics. These students have identified an intervention tool (their spirituality) that works for them that should be endorsed, not suppressed, or replaced by the more common punitive interventions. Educators could endorse African American male spirituality by creating academic spaces that are more inclusive and culturally relevant to African American religion. Commonly, when faith is spoken, it tends to be from the dominant culture's perspective (White American religion or the Catholic religious group). Still, educators could begin working towards equality of faith by being more inclusive of the Black church experience. Highlighting Black male scholars and leaders who were dependent on their spirituality to excel may motivate certain African American males to persist. Reframing from punitive interventions requires educators to view African American males as capable of achieving. Educators should search for strengths and assets among these young men and embrace cultural assets such as their spirituality to engage better and understand select African American males.

The Black church and those who embrace spirituality can use this study to expand church functions to support African American male congregants. Black church leadership had a significant impact on the African American males in this study. These young men were so influenced by church leadership that they replicated the leadership style in the college classroom

and campus. This warrants a deeper consideration of ways church leaders should be involved in the growth and development of young Black men. Church leaders could develop mentoring programs that connect Black men with younger Black men. Church leaders could also peer-to-peer mentoring programs that connects spiritual African American males with other African American males. The idea of modeled leadership and brotherhood may help equip these young men with the desire and motivation to persist in school and life in general. Church leaders could also be more intentional about speaking to the current challenges African Americans and Black men encounter, especially regarding racism and adversity, then identify strategies to resist being overtaken by misfortune.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research should explore the influence of Black church membership on African American high school students. College enrollment and persistence are significant accomplishments, but if African American males are not graduating high school, college enrollment is impossible. Exploring African American males in high school or lower grades may yield more insight on closing the achievement gap much earlier in their academic careers. Future research should continue to embrace the critical race theory framework to explore how African American males make meaning and overcome racial adversity. An additional approach that may shed more light is to add further interview questions that solicit their narratives on the explicit barriers that impede their success in school or out of school. This approach may grant understanding of the systemic issues they encounter that require additional competencies and/or support. Exploring their experiences and interpretations of the barriers to their persistence may also address the previously mentioned conclusion that these young men are not waiting on the goodwill of fellow Americans to intervene in the adverse experiences they encounter. But it

could offer a list of barriers such as practices, policies, or procedures that marginalize African American men. These barriers could then be targeted by allies of the African American male, leading to increased support to help dismantle greater or more complex obstacles that may help these young men persist at more excellent rates than solely depending on spiritual support.

The current study examined persistence, but future studies could examine more specific education barriers known to African American males, such as college enrollment, graduation/completion, and job placement. Future researchers could also investigate other academic measurements that are impacted by the achievement gap. For example, barriers such as over-emphasizing the use of standardized test scores, history of enrollment into remedial courses, and disciplinary referrals may add more robust data to this study.

Future researchers should also explore African American males with an even greater academic profile or other variables that may be uncommon to the dominant narrative about their success. Insights, for instance, into the achievements of excelling African American males—those with a minimum of 3.5+ grade point average, those entering particularly competitive fields, or graduate students—would be helpful in informing scholars about the sources and the nature of such successes to enable their replication in greater scale. Though the stricter the profile such work would require would present challenges identifying and tracking the experiences of these students would further build upon the hope among and about African American males that the present research helps initiate.

Future researchers should also explore additional tenets of the critical race theory. This study focused primarily on the voice of color tenet, but exploring other tenets that critical race theory asserts may produce deeper insight into African American males' experiences. For example, future research could highlight the social construct tenet. This tenet could highlight

how academically successful Christian African American males make meaning of the various constructs of race and how they overcome these constructs. In addition, based on the current racial climate in America, the tenet of critiquing liberalism may be valuable to the body of literature. Due to the common myth of colorblindness and the idea that we live in a post-racial society, many Americans seem to be unconscious of how racism affects Black and Brown Americans daily. Exploring how academically successful Black men challenge these types of narratives may lead to valuable insights. Overall, a deeper exploration of Christian African American males can expand critical race theory and explore how race and power influence the Black Church.

Conclusion

African American males encounter a variety of obstacles as they seek academic success. These obstacles tend to remove them from the education pipeline, which increases their probability of entering or remaining in poverty conditions. In addition, racism and power struggles create racial disparities among African American men, and this compromises their futures. Thus, critical race theory was used to make meaning of the Christian African American male experience.

This study supported the conclusion that African American males' faith membership in their Black Church often positively influences their academic persistence. The key themes established—that African American males gained support and community based on their engagement within their Black church, that their coping and confidence benefitted on account of their spiritual identities, and that they derived motivation through spiritual activities and services—were each valuable in illuminating how certain African American males have been able to persist despite the considerable obstacles they encountered. In short, spiritual engagement in

the involved Black churches nurtured various skills and contributed support that helped these young men succeed academically.

Supporters of and stakeholders in the success of African American men should consider the findings from this study because it offers insight on solutions to help close the achievement gap. Identifying achievement strategies employed by African American men provides insight into how they are achieving instead of failing. Based on the abundance of literature that explores their failure, this study adds to the developing body of literature that examines how they are assets to education. Anti-deficit framing begins to humanize the African American male study participants while also countering the negative narratives commonly portrayed about them by the dominant culture. This study elevated the African American male participants' experiences through voice of color tenet, providing a needed platform for African Americans to share, despite odds stacked against them, how their spirituality helped them succeed. The overall support that the Black church provided has clearly benefitted the African American males involved in this study.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Demographic Questions:

- What is your grade point average?
- What is your collegiate status (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior)?
- What college do you attend?
- What church do you attend regularly?

The Black Church Experience:

- What compels you to be a member of your church?
- How does your church experience help shape your academic persistence?
- What impact does your church have on your desire to achieve?
- In what ways have church members supported or assisted your academic progress?
- What value does church leadership (Pastor, Elders, etc.) add to your academic progress?
- What church experiences best prepare you for life in college?
- What church experiences best prepare you for racial realities of a Black Man?

The Spiritual Experience:

- What is it about spirituality/religion that inspires you to achieve?
- What religious activities contribute to the growth of your academic skills?
- How do you manage your other identifies alongside being a Christian?
- What religious activities enhance your academic achievement?

The Black Male Experience:

- What is it about your spirituality that compels you to achieve despite encountering racial oppression?
- How do you use your spirituality to cope with the challenges you encounter being a Black man?
- How do you negotiate your spirituality with your peers?
- What type of peers do you deem most valuable to your persistence?