

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL IDENTITY IN THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to who is responsible for the academic gap, there is significant debate. Based upon the literature, both the psychological and social factors that made up and maintain a society should be held accountable. Social identity theory and self-determination theory provide conceptual frameworks to explore perceptions and experiences related to social identity and academic achievements among undergraduate college students enrolled at a historically White institution. Together these theories consider the influence social identity has on African American students' academic experiences and motives to achieve academically. The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions and experiences related to social identity and academic achievement among undergraduate African American college students enrolled at a historically White institution. Seven volunteers who met the selection criteria participated in this study. For this particular qualitative research project, I utilized an approach called qualitative interviewing. There were a total of 6 demographic questions and 8 primary interview study questions. Findings from this study add to the paradigm shift of African American students being aware of the stereotypes affiliated with African American students and using the pressures of disproving stereotypes as motivation to achieve academically.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me and guided me through the trials and tribulations of creating this manuscript. In particular, my family and close friends who stood by me throughout the time taken to complete this work.

To my grandfather, this thesis is specially dedicated to you. With great pride you always express to me: “You are accomplishing things your grandmother and I could only dream of. You are achieving those accomplishments in places where we once weren’t welcomed. And I am blessed to be alive to see you do it all.”

To my mother, with great pleasure, I too dedicate this work to you. You are my inspiration and my peace! You have, not only, encouraged me to be the best version of myself, at all times, and in all spaces, but you also have always and continue to demonstrate how to successfully do so.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Interest in the academic gap continues to be on the rise in research. Academic gaps are presented as differences in academic achievement, usually between different social groups, such as between racial or ethnic minority and nonminority students (Syed et al., 2011). According to the American Psychological Association (APA), academic achievement is defined as any identifiable success in areas of scholarship or discipline study usually based on the results of standardized ability tests and assessment of performance by a teacher or other supervisor (APA, 2020). More specifically, this interest expands among social science and education disciplines (Owens & Lynch, 2012; Rust, 2019; Syed, 2011). Within these disciplines, research on the academic gap extends its foci to the contributing factors that maintain the differences in academic achievement between social groups.

In the United States, previous research regarding academic achievement gaps have compared African American students' academic achievements or Latino/a students to White American students (Alfaro, 2008; Caldwell, 2020). When comparing these racial groups, it is also essential to address the history of their educational opportunities in the United States. The United States' historical background is significant because it has not always provided equal opportunities of success for minoritized ethnic groups. The United States's history of educational disparities led to unequal opportunities for minority ethnic groups to obtain quality instruction or any formal education at all (Syed et al., 2011). As a result, education, especially higher education, and lucrative careers were much less attainable for minoritized groups. Therefore, it

would be inappropriate to not acknowledge the historical gap in educational availability, at least in part, as an essential role player in forming academic achievement gaps.

Statistical trends from previous studies regarding the academic gaps between African American students and White American students expressed significantly lower academic achievement scores by African American students than White American students (Aronson, 2002; Awad, 2016; Caldwell, 2020; Cokley, 2008; McGee & Martin, 2011). However, from a historical perspective of the United States (U.S.), the trends should be of no surprise. The constant presentation of an academic gap highlights the impact of the educational and racial history on today's generation of African American students in the U.S. These findings imply a need for change. As a result, the U.S. has constituted and reformed laws to lessen the gap in quality education and educational availability among minority students. Former US president, George Bush, passed the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2002, and it was most recently revised to the *Every Student Succeeds Act* in 2015 by former President Barack Obama. However, the establishment of these laws did not remove the gap. These inequities were generated and upheld for centuries; consequently, it is likely to take centuries to cork the gap. There isn't a quick fix for eliminating the academic achievement gap among minority and nonminority groups, but research should be conducted to continue learning and understanding the factors that contribute to the maintenance of the gap.

Less acknowledged, but equally important, the existence of the opportunity gap does not imply incapability, fixed intelligence, nor unworthiness of quality education for minority students. Data on minority students and their academic achievements can provide information beyond underperformance and low academic achievement in research. In educational research, along with many other research domains, African Americans are most often underrepresented

and, when represented, are presented negatively (Syed et al., 2011). Subsequently, this imbalance has promoted cultural mistrust and heightened stereotype threats in education amongst minoritized individuals, especially towards African Americans (Caldwell & Obasi, 2010).

When it comes to who is responsible for the academic gap, there is significant debate (Danforth, 2018; Dixon, 2017; Powell, 2003). The origin of these inequities points to the U.S.'s history, but the conservation of this academic gap remains a mystery. Some literature places blame on the misconceptions of a lack of intelligence, consisting of low SES backgrounds, lacking parental support, and scarcity of resources among African American students. Thus, some researchers have abandoned the notion of the achievement gap for that of the “opportunity gap” (Patrick, 2015). Other scholars put the responsibility on the low expectations from educators, racism, the perpetuation of inaccurate stereotypes, negative self-fulfilling prophecies, stereotype threat, and low self-efficacy. Based upon the literature, both the psychological and social factors that made up and maintain a society should be held accountable.

In effort to establish a safe space where African American students feel they can be recognized for achievements by way of their cultural standards and values, African Americans began celebratory hashtags that developed into the movements of “Black Girl Magic” (#BGM) (Halliday & Brown, 2018; Williams et al., 2020; Stewart, 2019), “Black Boy Joy” (#BBJ) (Lu et al., 2019), and “Black Excellence” (Emmanuel, 2021). Black Excellence celebrates those who identify as Black and portrays great qualities and abilities that make the Black community proud. Similarly, Black Girl Magic (BGM) and Black Boy Joy (BBJ) are gender specific derivatives of Black Excellence. These movements have served as a protection of African American students’ social and personal identities. As termed in African American culture, a “woke” generation has emerged increasingly more aware of the impact of their identified ethnic group’s past, the

influence they have on their present, and their duty to improve their futures. African Americans have created an avenue that acknowledges, praises, recognizes, and celebrates African Americans' achievements and accomplishments in all domains, specifically in education. These avenues are represented by the movements of BGM and BBJ, and Black Excellence.

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions and experiences related to social identity and academic achievement among undergraduate African American college students enrolled at a historically White institution. This study aims to examine how social identity affects African American college students' motives to achieve academically, awareness and perceptions of stereotype threat, and recognition of academic success. This research intends to identify qualities that allow African American students to be successful to overcome the risk factor of stereotype threat, determine the motives for academic achievement in African American students, and examine whether the same pressures responsible for stereotype threat can also be responsible for academic achievement. Supportively, the goals of this study are: 1) elevating the voices of African American students to understand their realities in higher education as an African American college student, 2) learning about the experiences and perceptions of a modern generation of African American college students, and 3) promoting productive research regarding African American students. Hence, this study will first address the general role of social identity to exemplify how it can impact the three variables that will be addressed throughout this study: stereotype threat, academic achievement motivation, and academic success.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have deemed social identity as a key component in the development of the self (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Dixson, 2017). Social identity relates to an individuals' knowledge of his/her sense of membership to in a social group, like an ethnic or racial group. Identifying with a social group allows individuals to establish values, attitudes, and significant feelings associated with the particular group. Additionally, research has supported that strong ethnic identifications tend to promote positive learning and more successful academic achievement outcomes among African American students (Chavous & Carter, 2018; Dixson et al., 2017). The information regarding social identity provides a base for exploring its role on African American college students' academic experience.

In contrast, social groups of all kinds can have associated stereotypes. In this context, African American students' stereotypes usually include ideas related to deficit perspectives (Cokley & Chapman, 2008; Williams et al., 2020). Negative stereotypes associated with students' social group toward education can affect students' academic concepts and lead to unworthy and defeated attitudes regarding academic achievement (Aronson et al., 2002). Consequently, those socially identifying effects can influences the self. Hence, this influence on the self contributes to the students' academic achievement motivation. Thus, this study wants to explore to what extent social identity influences the self, its academic achievement motivations, and its response to stereotype threats.

Social Identity

The concept of social agents influencing self-identity is not new and is commonly known as social identity. The role of social identity in the formulation of the self and its impact on the various concepts related to the self, have become of great relevance. William James coined the term social me (Gilovich et al., 2019), which refers to what a person knows about her/himself from social relationships (Gilovich et al., 2019).

In education, whether at the primary or secondary level, the relationships between and within faculty, peers, and students are considered social relationships. Gilovich and colleagues (2019) furthered the concepts of social identity by implying that the image one paints of her/his/their self is constructed, maintained, and negotiated in the social environment.

Conclusively, social identity theory says that not only is self-esteem derived from personal identity, but too from the attainment of a persons' associated groups in which they belong (Gilovich et al., 2019). Therefore, the self and the identities attached to it ultimately derive from the interaction between and within social agents and social situations. In context, how students perceive their academic concepts is influenced by the social relationships they encounter in academic environments.

Furthering that notion, social groups tend to give an individual purpose and place (Haslam et al., 2009). The Identity-Based Motivation (IBM) theory suggests people use identity to make sense of the world and be motivated to act (Oyserman & Destin, 2010). The minimal group paradigm in social identity theory implies that individuals' identity and self-esteem are connected or "intimately tied up with the triumphs and shortcomings" (p. 468) of individuals' valued affiliations and associations of interest, including academics (Gilovich et al., 2019). Consequently, student's lives, who they are, how they think, and what they do are guided by the

social aspects of their academic experiences (Haslam et al., 2009). Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers, (2007) expressed that,

depending on how important the group is for an individual's self-definition and how contextually salient that identity is, being in an educational or employment setting in which this group is devalued or stigmatized negatively affects one's social identity and self-concept (p. 221).

Social identity issues develop when groups' identity begins to appear as devalued (Derks et al., 2007). Negative stereotypes are considerable risk factors that devalue group identity. Particularly for African American students, stereotypes can affect their academic performances and achievements. That effect supports the social identity theory's connectivity between social identity and self-efficacy. Stereotypes associated with the status of minoritized groups' social identity can promote negative assessments of one's self-efficacy to achieve academically (Cokley, 2003).

Stereotype Threat

The consistent negative light shed on African American students' academic achievement has produced psychological barriers and social impacts that have resulted in a phenomenon known as stereotype threat (Owens, 2012; Gyll et al., 2010; Massey, & Fischer, 2005). In Steele's (2010) introduction of this phenomenon, he stated that: stereotype threat or the fear and anxiety of confirming stereotypes can be experienced when a person encounters a situation where the stereotype is relevant, and the person values the situation (Steele, 2010). Hence, African American students must value their education and its experience for them to experience the phenomenon of stereotype threat. Similar to the effects of the social aspects of a person's life, being a member of a stereotyped group can affect how a student thinks and behaves (Steele,

1997). The performance of stigmatized groups, such as African Americans, can be impaired by the fear that they will confirm the stereotypes others have about them and their social group—also known as—stereotype threat (Steele et al., 2002).

In society, the most prevalent stereotypes among African American students are centered around intellectual abilities or the lack thereof (Enrique, 2009). Therefore, in “intelligence-based” situations such as educational spaces, African American students may worry about risking confirming the stereotype that they are intellectually inferior. As an African American student, it can be challenging constantly to believe that what one says or does reflects on their entire ethnic or racial group. The idea behind this phenomenon is emphasized through Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive learning theory expressing that humans are more affected by what they believe will happen than by the events that take place.

African American students performed just as well as White American students when African American students thought it was the test being assessed instead of their intellectual abilities (Steele & Aronson, 1995). However, when the African American students perceived the test to be assessing their intellectual abilities instead, they performed much worse than the White American students. Further, Steele & Aronson (1995) study demonstrated that having the participants indicate their racial identity on their paper worsened African American student’s performances compared to the control group that did not provide racial identifying information. These studies served as evidence for stereotype threat interfering with students performing to their best abilities during those times. Consequently, stereotype threats are potential risk factors contributing to continuous racial and gender gaps in academic achievement (McGee & Martin, 2011).

Accordingly, students perform poorly in areas they are stereotypically supposed to (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and this elicits positive feedback of self-fulfilling prophecies. African American students can begin to internalize the negative characteristics of the stereotypes, allowing them to go through the process of confirming those false expectations and inaccurate stereotypes (Steele, 2010). Such prophecies perpetuate the stereotype further with poor performance (Guyl et al., 2010). Repetitive encounters with stereotype threats can lead to diminished confidence with, subsequently poor performance, and consequently, loss of interest in areas of academic achievement. Additionally, Derks et al. (2007) found that stereotype threat indirectly elicits coping mechanisms that reduce motivation and performance.

Academic Achievement Motivation

Whether intentional or not, educational research involving African Americans may have contributed to and perpetuated African Americans' inaccurate stereotypes. Some researchers have conducted research consistent with the stereotypes on African American students and overlooking African American students who seem to “vary” from the groups’ stereotypes (Cokley, 2003; El-Amin et al., 2017; Gilovich, 2019). To stereotype is to overgeneralize (Gilovich et al., 2019). Each student is unique, and there is always variance within particular social groups. Individuals derive a sense of self by their uniqueness perceived as personal identity and at the root of their self-efficacy and self-worth derived from their social groups (Derks et al., 2007).

Motivation is an innate phenomenon humans acquire to achieve goals for survival (Amrai et al., 2011). It is also a preliminary construct for academic achievement. Achievement motivation is described as the willingness to strive to succeed at challenging tasks and to meet high standards of accomplishments (Shaffer, 2009). There are several viewpoints responsible for

academic achievement motivations (e.g., intrinsic & extrinsic; mastery & performance; drive theory) (Choi & Kim, 2003; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). However, there are not as many perspectives regarding African American students' academic achievement motivation, as most of the research is performed among White American students. There is limited research regarding academic achievement motivations of African American students; however, of this research, the use of attributional theory has been most popular in attempting to understand African American students' academic motivations (Cokley, 2003; Vuletich et al, 2019).

An attributional theory expresses reasons for students' successes or failures by locus, stability, and control (Shaffer, 2008). These causal attributions can influence students' academic motivation: locus refers to external/internal causes; stability refers to causes that can change over time, and control refers to having the power to influence the causes. Causal attributions have been supported in many academic motivation studies sampling White American students (Cokley, 2003; Vuletich et al., 2019). Those studies often concluded that academic success attributed to ability and effort associated with greater academic achievement and greater persistence to overcome challenges. Additionally, studies have found positive relationships between internal attributes and high self-esteem.

Along with other theoretical frameworks, causal attributions can be contextually supported by culture and the stereotypes associated within social groups. Achievement motivation reflects differently among different cultures. Many African Americans represent those who live in America, an individualistic culture, and are of African descendants, often consistent with collectivistic cultural values (Choi & Kim, 2013). Oyserman and Markus (2010) express that collectivistic cultures tend to define their social identities in terms of the groups in which one is born, such as religious or ethnic groups. Western cultures tend to view the self as

individual products instead of social processes consisting of relationships with significant others. Therefore, achievement motivation may not translate the same between groups nor within groups

Similarly, Vuletich et al. (2019) explained that students' attributions are informed by the social context in which they form those attributions. Also, different cultures tend to have differing marks of standard and value. As a result, the perception of academic achievement is likely to range. The U.S.'s education system is based on its individualistic culture, which infers individual accomplishments through Eurocentric standards of excellence (Shaffer, 2009). In contrast, collectivistic cultures strive for social welfare and to maximize optimal reflections of the group's goals. However, if an education system containing a culturally diverse population, is based on a single culture's standards and values, then gap developments are probable.

Academic achievement is rooted in social achievement- an intrinsic orientation stemmed by extrinsic orientations (Shaffer, 2009). Likewise, many African Americans may share a mixed model orientation by way of their ancestry. Both internal and external dimensions affect African American students, not only regarding their belief in their intellectual abilities but to the extent of the beliefs they have of their control of a Eurocentric-based educational system. African Americans are likely to be influenced by both non-race-specific factors like effort and ability attributes and race-specific factors such as awareness of stereotypes and systemic inequalities in educational systems (Vuletich, 2019).

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a non-attributional approach to motivation less frequently used to explain African American students' achievements (Cokley, 2003). Self-determination theory is often overlooked in explaining African American students' academic achievement motivations due to the misconceptions of African American's value of education. This theory explains behaviors being self-determined or caused by internal locus and being

controlled or caused by external locus (Shaffer, 2009). SDT is commonly divided into two types of motivations: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. These two types of motivations differ in that intrinsic motivation prompts a willingness to learn while extrinsic motivation is grounded in instrumentalization (Vansteenkiste et., 2018). However, simplifying motivation into those two divisions neglects several motivational forces (Vansteenkiste et al., 2018; Wang & Wind, 2020) likely to better explain academic achievement motivations among African American students (Cokley, 2003). Instead, the process of internalization within SDT is best suited to determine the motives of academic achievement.

Deci and Ryan (2002) and Vansteenkiste et al. (2018) describe the process of internalization as a transformation of external regulations into internal regulations and developing personal value by way of external values (Wang & Wind, 2020). Extrinsic motivations break down into three types of regulations—*external regulation*, *introjected regulations*, and *identified regulations*. External regulations are driven by the expectation to gain external rewards, avoiding the threat of punishments and commands. Similar to external regulation, introjected regulations refer to behaving in a certain way due to internalized demands like shame or guilt. Identified regulations refer to individuals' engaging in learning activities because it is valued, and students identify with it to attain an outcome (Cokley, 2003; Vansteenkiste et al., 2017). From an academic perspective, *to know* is the subtype of intrinsic motivation that refers to learning for the sake of learning. *To accomplish* is the second subtype of intrinsic motivation that describes engaging in academics for the enjoyment of accomplishing (Cokley, 2003). And thirdly, *to experience* provides stimulation to the sense of the self by way of experiencing learning. These subtypes represent motivational forces within intrinsic regulations of intrinsic motivations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2017).

Both theories summarize motivations as either a regulated choice dictated by oneself or regulated by compliance. Also, these theories deal with behaviors deriving from the self and from the outside self. As a result, African Americans are likely motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically. However, Cokley (2003) speculated that extrinsic motivations might be “more adaptive and psychologically healthy” (p.536) for African American students than intrinsic motivation compared to the findings in previous studies on White American students.

People of collectivistic culture are likely more motivated by the status of their social groups as it pertains to their social identity. Individuals’ self-esteem is attached to their social groups’ status and is used to elevate their status and all members within it (Gilovich et al., 2019). Furthermore, stigmatized groups, like African Americans, do not take threats to their identity lightly; therefore, they also seek ways to actively protect their social identity (Derks et al., 2007). The relationship between social identity and social support promotes teamwork amongst disadvantaged groups battling negative consequences of their shared situations (Haslam et al., 2009). From the social identity perspective, social identity protection additionally protects one’s self-identity.

Academic Success

Evidence from resilience studies showed that resilience could “counteract and change negative attitudes of those who believe that nothing can overcome student backgrounds” (Wasonga et al., 2003). Resilience is defined as the process of the capacity of, or outcome of successful adaption despite challenging or threatening circumstances, referring to patterns of positive adaption in the face of adversity (El-Amin et al., 2017; Finzel, 2019; Slavin, 2018). Stereotype threat, for example, is a risk factor for African American students to overcome within education. Academic resilience is a self-identifying characteristic often associated with achieving

and, in educational research, associated with academic achievement (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Too, it appears that resilience has become a social identity protective characteristic for African Americans within academics (El-Amin et al., 2017).

African American students have been recognized for being resilient but usually limited toward socio-economic challenges. Less acclaimed is the persistence they possess in the face of educational risk factors like stereotype threats. Noticeably, academic resiliency is often the most positive academic association to African American students in literature. Has it been considered why this might be? It is likely because society sees a need for African Americans to be resilient to overcome an educational system that favors Eurocentric culture. Encouragingly, many African American students do perform well despite the risk factors. The academic resilience perspective indicates that resilience factors can influence the relationship between risk factors and academic success by serving as mediators and outcomes (Alfaro, 2008). Resilience is a strength, an asset, advantageous, and desirable. Resilience tends to have a positive impact on individuals' performances, achievements, and overall wellbeing (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018). A study by Martin and Marsh (2006) reported a positive relationship between academic resilience and academic achievement.

Within the last decade, achievement gaps have begun to lessen substantially (Nisbett, 2011). Accordingly, this study is premised on the idea of a paradigm shift amongst African Americans college students pertaining to their achievement motivations, specifically academic achievement motivations. Modern generations have greater awareness and consume greater responsibilities and pressures to succeed and maintain their social identity as an individual student, family member, community member, and ethnic group. Academically, African

American students could maintain persistence against risk factors like stereotype threat, to achieve academic success for themselves and the social groups they identify with.

Conceptual Framework

Social identity theory and self-determination theory provide conceptual frameworks to explore perceptions and experiences related to social identity and academic achievements among undergraduate college students enrolled at a historically White institution. The self-determination theory emphasizes the motivational factors, both race-specific and nonspecific, driving African American students. Social identity theory provides insight into the impact social agents and social environments have on students' identities and perceptions. Together these theories consider the influence social identity has on African American students' academic experiences and motives to achieve academically.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study focused on undergraduate African American college students at a historically White Institution in the southeastern United States. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do African American college students describe the relationship between racial and social identities and their academic experiences?
2. How aware are African American college students of stereotype threat?
 - a. What are their perceptions of the relationship between stereotype threat and academic achievement?
3. How do African American college students define and experience academic success?

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions and experiences related to social identity and academic achievement among undergraduate African American college students enrolled at a historically White institution. The goals of this study were to: 1) advance the voices of African American students in our strivings to understand their realities in higher education as African American college students, 2) educate ourselves and readers about the experiences and perceptions of a modern generation of African American college students, and 3) overall, promote productive research regarding African American students. This study intends to shift the focus from blaming to understanding, assuming to asking, and limiting to listening.

Qualitative studies align with this study's intentions by capturing the richness of experiences. Qualitative research is a reflexive process organized into stages. These stages consist of collecting and analyzing data to develop or modify theories and elaborate research questions (Maxwell, 2008). Researchers have used qualitative data as a tool in educational and

social science research (Creswell, 1998). The goals of qualitative research are to understand, describe, discover, and generate meaning about human experience. For this particular qualitative research project, I utilized an approach called qualitative interviewing. Qualitative interviewing can also be known as in-depth interviewing as it allows participants with firsthand experience regarding the project's subject to explain what it's like. This approach encourages the kind of flexibility important to researchers to generate questions during the interview process in effort to elicit relevant responses (deMarrais, 2004). A qualitative interviewing approach is most appropriate for this study because, like the focus of qualitative research, this study's focus includes the essence of human experiences to construct a complete picture as possible of participants' academic experiences from their interview responses.

An interview is an important and commonly used research method within qualitative research used to collect data. An interview is defined as a process in which the researcher and participant engage in conversation focused on questions relevant to a research study (deMarrais, 2004). Interviews are conversations between the interviewer and the interviewee guided by a set of interview questions, developed in connection to the research questions (deMarrais, 2004). In a semi-structured interview, the interview questions are only a guide as researchers create probing or follow-up questions based on the depth of participants' responses. Interviews become semi-structured when researchers use open ended guided interview questions in a conversational style to gather rich material from interviewees (deMarrais, 2004). Thus, the purpose of these interviews was to elicit detailed information from interviewees about their perceptions, awareness, and experiences.

Participant Selection

Seven volunteers who met the selection criteria participated in this study. Purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2008) was used in order to ensure that participants met the selection criteria. An essential part of this study was to find and incorporate participants who have experienced being an African American college student at a historically White institution. Maxwell (2012) indicates purposeful selection can be used in the recruitment of participants in pursuit of interviewees who will provide the most relevant information related to the purpose of the study. All participants were at least eighteen years of age, identified as African American/Black and were enrolled as undergraduate students at the same institution. Participants were sought through recruitment emails to the presidents of five of the university's African American student organizations/associations, which were then sent to the members of their organizations.

Participant data from the demographic information survey given at the beginning of the interview was used to understand how the participants self-described. All students reported identifying as African American, and the participant's ages consisted of a mean age of 21. Participants also were asked about their birth country, as academic and social experiences may vary between countries (see Appendix A and Table 1 below for more specific participant demographics).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Sex	Birth Country	Age
01	Female	U. S.	23
02	Female	U. S.	22
03	Female	U. S.	23
04	Female	Canada	24
05	Male	U. S.	19
06	Female	U. S.	19
07	Female	U. S.	18

Data Collection

Data were collected via interviews. Age, birth country, ethnicity, sex, and university experiences, were collected as demographic information during the beginning of the interviews. Following the demographic questions, participants were asked interview questions regarding their experiences and perceptions as an African American, a college student, and an African American college student as these identities relate to the purpose of this study (see appendix D). There were a total of 6 demographic questions and 8 primary interview study questions. Each interview took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

Zoom audio was used to record the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded in a private study room at the university between the interviewer and the participant only, with no other individuals present. No video recording was used to conduct the interview. Using audio recording allowed the participants to express their experiences and perspectives in-depth with anonymity. All audio recordings were deleted immediately following the completion of transcription, and all identifying information was deleted from the interview transcripts. No personally identifying information was used with or for the interviews beyond the demographic answers provided by the participants. Each participant was assigned a random participant number.

Data Analysis

After interview responses were transcribed and checked for accuracy, data were analyzed inductively using thematic analysis. The audio recorded interviews were first transcribed via Zoom's transcription feature, and each participants' audio transcript data was checked and edited for accuracy by the researcher. The transcriptions were then analyzed and coded using thematic analysis, which is a method used to identify, organize, analyze, describe and report themes

(Nowell et al., 2017). The thematic process began with familiarizing myself with the interview transcriptions and making marginal notes of initial thoughts. Next, I generated codes using open coding. Open coding is the process of making marginal notes of words, phrases, theories that can add up to concepts to address in the write up of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). The initial coding process consisted of an evaluation of the raw transcription data labeled with descriptive to define emerging categories and reflexive writing. Reflexive writing throughout the coding process allowed me to examine ideas and keep track of the meanings and possible connections (Nowell et al., 2017). After all data had been transcribed and coded into a list of identifiable categories, the next step of the process was to sort the data extracts into potential themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Then, the themes developed were refined to assure there were enough data extracts supportive and fitting for each theme and subtheme. I defined and named the themes in ways I felt would be most meaningful to provide a sense of what the themes were about. And finally, I wrote up the final report of the thematic analysis. To ensure that the concepts and descriptive categories remain as close as possible to the participants' own terms using in vivo codes as appropriate throughout the thematic analysis process (Given, 2008). In vivo coding involves labeling data, like the interview transcriptions used in this study, using a word(s) and/or phrases from the data extracts (Given, 2008). This practice of in vivo coding is usually incorporated during the open coding stages of thematic analysis. In vivo coding was fitting for this qualitative semi-structured interview study as it allowed the participants' words and voices to be the core of this research. In vivo coding permits me to honor and trust the experiences the participants share and make available for others to read, listen, and understand.

Positionality

As an African American female, graduate student at the University of Alabama majoring in Educational Psychology, I'm often exposed to text and literature regarding academic related content. However, it has been disheartening to observe the small amount of information provided about African Americans to be negative. The negative portrayal of African American students reflected in textbooks that are distributed to thousands of students and teachers do not accurately portray all African American students and further perpetuate the inaccurate stereotypes. The messages those texts often reflect do not reflect me as a student, nor those around me, especially during my undergraduate experience at North Carolina A&T State University (an historically Black institution); therefore, many readers are getting a poor perception of African American students. Upon reading so many texts shedding negative light on African American students, I wondered where the authors or researchers got their information and negative perceptions of African American students from. As a result, I wanted to ask African American students, myself, some of the questions that arose within me after I had read those negative portrayals of African American students.

This research matters to me because I believe it is important to understand that people are becoming more aware and are responding differently to their awareness than they may have previously been. Modern generations of African American students are taking control of their academic success, yet still are perceived and portrayed through the lens of the deficit perspectives.

Research Quality

Qualitative research designs, like this study, presents quality through the use of following eight criteria: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f)

significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (Tracey, 2010). By applying these eight criteria when conducting research, I am able to ensure that the voices of the participants are not manipulated. Tracey (2010) expresses that the conceptualization of qualitative quality encourages researchers to reflect on their creativities while still respecting and keeping the participants at the core of the research.

Each criterion is described. Worthy topics refers to relevant and significant concepts or theories that emerge through the study. Most often these topics emerge from societal and personal events (Tracey, 2010). Rich rigor implies the study uses an abundance of appropriate and complex information. Sincerity represents the self-reflexivity of the study regarding transparency about methods, and inclinations of the researcher. The idea of showing rather than telling refers to the credibility of a study. The influence of the research or the transferable finding developed from the research refers to the resonance. Significant contribution involves just that, the significant contribution the research makes, whether practically, morally, or conceptually. Ethics discusses how ethical the research is. Lastly, meaningful coherence refers to the interconnections between the important features of the study, like the literature, research question, findings, and interpretations. These eight markers provide common language for qualitative research (Tracey, 2010).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Findings from the interviews are presented in this chapter from each of the three main themes. The three themes are: 1) academic influence, 2) sources of motivation, 3) receiving recognition.

Academic Influences

How students perceive their academic concepts and ultimately their academic experiences are influenced by the social relationships they encounter in academic environments. The “social me” of an individual refers to who an individual pictures themselves as by way of the social relationships they develop. As students, much of their academic career involves interactions with stakeholders in their education, such as parents, peers, and faculty. Similarly, environments like students’ home and or classroom as well as agents like students’ parents, professors, and peers can influence how students’ experience academic situations. As result, two subthemes developed from the data: 1) academic environment and 2) academic agents.

Academic Environment

Participants described their experiences being an African American college student at the institution as “outcasted” (Participants 2 and 6) or “being the only one” (Participants 5 and 6), referring to being the only African American in their classes. Further, female participants also mentioned being not only the only African American, but the only African American female. Across the interviews, participants expressed discomfort, confinement in being/expressing themselves, and constant pressures to prove their belongingness.

One participant, Participant 6, reflected on mixed emotions regarding her academic experiences, stating:

It's just like you can't just openly walk around, you know, like angry, or just showing your emotions because it's just like others will perceive that as like harmful or you're about to do something that could be, you know, harmful to others. Mainly it's just like you have a target on your back so you're more skeptical, and you stand out more. I just look at the Zoom classroom and notice that you're like probably one of the only African Americans or let alone the only African American female in such a, you know, big class. Just because you are minority um, you know, like I said, you still have a target on your back, you can't do certain things. If you go to certain places or like, you know, that's held up to high standards, people will be like 'how did you get here?' or 'why are you here?' You still have a target on your back, but it's a little bit more like relax because it's more of a college setting. I'll say that of course we are part of like, you know, the small ratio, so you don't really see like other people like your nationality and all of that, but once you do see them it's kind of like a little relief.

Here, Participant 6 described her observation of being one of the only African American students in such large classes. She expressed a relief that she experienced when seeing other students that look like her, as it seemed rare because she is a minority on the campus. In her experience as an (African American) minority, she repeatedly referred to having a target on her back that restricts her being, her expression, and questions her belongingness especially in relation to high academic standards as an African American.

Similar to Participant 6, another participant also reflected on mixed feelings. Participant 4 expressed:

I'm actually proud to be African American, but right now I can't I guess. It's kind of like a sensitive topic, you know, because of what's going on right now. It makes me feel uncomfortable because it makes me feel like when it's time for me to go into the workplace and I'm in the same like environment with all white people I feel like I'm gonna have to do a lot just to show them I'm just as equal and I feel like I shouldn't to, that shouldn't be an added stress. It does make me stand out because in my program. I'm literally, the only African American person in my program, so I do stand out and like I have a role in my classroom because you know the people already have a stereotype of black people or African Americans. And it's not really good. So, yeah we really don't have a good reputation in the classroom, so I feel like I have like a role to play, like, I feel, like, I have to, you know, like stand out.

Participant 4 shared that as one of the only African American students in her class, she has a role in bettering the reputation of African American students in the classroom. Her comment also intersects with the notion of group uplift as discussed in the second theme. Participant 4's response also expressed future concerns being in the workforce where she will likely have to do extra work just to prove her worth and belongingness. In addition, she implied that she has already had to prove herself in her academic environments, and that it is stressful to have to constantly prove yourself.

Participants explained uncomfortable feelings resulting from growing up in environments where the people around them looked similarly or at least there were characterized as well diverse (e.g. home, school, etc.). Furthermore, they expressed college attendance being their first experience outside of the comforts of their communities or home environments that consisted of relatable groups of people, sharing similar cultural aspects, outward appearances, and ultimately

common social identities. Like Participant 6, another participant expressed having to confine her expressions of herself. However, she has learned that how she usually expressed herself around familiar African Americans is no longer how she can do so in her current college surroundings.

I feel like I have to kind of do things differently or plan them out specifically or be a certain way or, you know. Just being a black girl with coming from a different background was really kind of challenging. As far as, you had to adjust to a lot of things, you couldn't say a lot of things. Now, like, I'm learning like you cannot say a lot of things or you can't do a lot of things because it gets looked at as something else. So, I can honestly say that it's just, it's, it's nice, but at the same time you still have to kind of like walk on eggshells

Here, Participant 1, highlights these ideas of being restricted as well as misperceived that Participant 6 previously mentioned. Participant 1's reference to having to walk on eggshells, depicts what they have learned to be and to not be socially acceptable as students at their university. They have learned that in that university environment, they cannot fully express themselves without caution or limitations. Additionally, Participant 1 refers to this conflict as a challenge attributed to the difference between her environment she grew up in versus her current academic environment.

Participant 2 continues this subtheme of academic environments by explaining what her environment, prior to coming to college, was like and the feelings attached to that environment compared to her academic environment at the university.

I'm not gonna lie, it felt normal (being African American) until like, when, I came here and I had noticed how big a deal, it was, and it makes sense because when I was in North Carolina, all I saw was African Americans everywhere so when I came here it was just

like a big setback just because I wasn't used to it. And like I was different from everybody else, and the stuff you see on the internet it just makes you seem like an outcast, it's just like a bigger problem than what I'm like, used to.

Like Participant 1, Participant 2 described having to adapt to this unfamiliar academic environment as being a challenge or setback. Also, Participant 2 mentioned feeling like an outcast and being different, as in differing from the race majority, than everyone else in her academic environment. She expressed how being African American in her current setting is much more of a problem and bigger deal than in her home environment.

Participant 4 shared similar feelings with the other participants, even though she was not born in the U.S.:

Before I got to college I didn't really kind of think about none of the like actual problems because I didn't have to go through those things because everybody around me looked like me. In Canada it's very, very diverse like we don't have one race in one class like that's not a thing. So, I came here, I was really surprised I was like, what this is real? Like this really happens. Because I'm with like my team most of the time, right so, I'm used to seeing, my group, which is pretty Black, but you know I mean like, the entire team is diverse so yes, so it's like I'm not used to being the only Black person.

This response is even more significant as it shows she too had not encountered discomfort being an African American student in an academic setting prior to college. However, her home and previous academic environments consisted of great diversity. Her initial college experience took place in the U.S. where she first experienced being one of the only African American students in her classes.

Academic Agents

In addition to the influence of academic environments, the participant's initial college entrance and experiences represented the settings in which they also said to have personally experienced stereotypes for the first time, largely through social interactions. Although participants shared that their parents were typically responsible for their awareness of stereotypes, it was an academic setting of some sort, college for most, but primary or secondary schooling for others, where their awareness became their reality. Moreover, those experiences tended to take place between student and peer interactions and/or student to professor/teacher interactions. This subtheme demonstrates specifically the influence academic agents can have in those academic environments on students' academic experiences.

Like many other participants, Participant 7 stated that her maternal parent cultivated her awareness of stereotypes:

Mainly just like my mom always making sure that I was aware of the kind of views that people had about the African American community. And just like to always just be aware and have your eyes open and when people try to like, apply that to me. But I've also had like been through experiences where my teachers like, they didn't think, or they just basically thought like I just didn't have the right education, like I wasn't really educated, and they like really underestimated me. Even when I was like really young, like in fifth grade, my teacher, she said something about me, she's like, 'Oh, I thought you like I didn't think you'd get that.' I literally remember, and I was like wow. But, yeah, I was just like this is what they think of me, because, you know, I'm African American.

Participant 7's response first expressed that her maternal parent made her aware of the stereotypes that were associated with the racial group they identify with in which people may try to apply to

her. Participant 7 went on to share an experience where her teacher uses a microaggression to apply a stereotype to her that underestimated her ability. She stated,

So, when I first came to [the university] and I was in my first class, when I was the only Black person, my professor asked me a question and I didn't know the answer, right. I felt very embarrassed. Everyone was looking at me and I was like I kind of knew when I first walked in the classroom, they all kind of looked at me like, you know, it was like okay an elephant's in the room, like she's the only black person and she's a female wow. The first question the professor asked she actually looked at me and asked me, and I didn't know the answer. And then ever since then I kind of just felt like that was wrong, like I should not have done that, like I should have known the answer to it, because when we got put into groups, this is a good example, we got paired into groups and um, well ever since then, the professor never asked me a question, by the way, but got paired into groups and they're kind of like going on with the group kind of like without me, if you get what I am saying, like I was making suggestions and they were kind of like, "yeah that's good but..." I was like okay, whatever I'll just let that go. And my other class I was on it, I was not playing with them, I was on it. And then, when we got into groups they're like '[participant's name] what do you think we should do?' Like you know they're involving me in the group so it's like I'm noticing what the differences I did in each class like, you know, so I feel like that was a stereotype like I don't know, maybe that wouldn't have happened with like a white person, but I feel like it was because, I'm black you know. Yeah, but I noticed that, I was like wow that's kind of sad!

The class display of how the professor behaved toward the participant influenced the way her peers in the class treated her. Fortunately, the participant used her feelings of embarrassment and

what she deemed as a stereotypical experience to fuel her. The participant's positive response to that experience and positive reinforcement from the inclusion in her other class also connects with the second theme, sources of motivation.

Parents, teachers, peers, and the environments in which all those social relationships occur appears to influence the awareness and experiences of students and therefore, their perceptions. The interaction between these social agents and social environments demonstrates how they individually and collectively impact the views students may have on their academic experiences. Most participants in this study only shared negative interactive experiences with their peers and professors/teachers (e.g. Participant 2, Participant 4). These negative experiences with social agents like their peers and professors may explain why many students indicated mixed emotions regarding their academic experiences.

Sources of Motivation

The second theme introduces the sources of motivation most reflected among the participants. This main theme contains two subthemes: 1) stereotype resistance and 2) group uplift. These themes represent the primary motives for participants to achieve academically. Additionally, the themes express what the participants are motivated by and what it is about these sources of motivations that continues to drive them.

Stereotype Resistance

As introduced in the literature review, researchers typically perceived stereotypes and the threats attached to them as a source of reducing motivation. However, participants have shared contrasting perceptions regarding the impact of stereotypes. Stereotypical experiences along with the additional stereotypes' participants stated to be associated with their racial group have served as a source of motivation. Each participant communicated that stereotype awareness affected

them by driving them to work harder. The forces behind that drive stemmed from a desire to disprove inaccurate stereotypes and prove capabilities.

Participant 3 talked about going above and beyond to prove a point, to disprove negative stereotypes among the groups she associates her racial identity with, as well as her sports team.

I strive for my own individual academic success um I do try to actually yes, it does affect me a little bit because I always made sure to try and get my work in on time, over participate in class, you know just go a little bit above, just not like the average effort, because I want them to know like and to make, you know, the situation for other people in other sports better, make us look better.

Participant 3 revealed that she goes above and beyond to ensure her work ethic is obvious and reflects well on both her racial group and sport group. Her response captures both of the subthemes within the sources of motivation.

Another participant, Participant 5, shares how stereotypes affect him: “It affects me because it makes me wants to just go hard in everything I do because people gonna stereotype you regardless, whatever you do they still stereotype you.” Together with Participant 3, these quotes demonstrate that African American students feel that they have to continue prove themselves to those outside of their group. They are motivated to work harder in every aspect to make sure that others are aware that the assumed inaccurate stereotypes are not fitting to their actions. Additionally, Participant 5’s quote, implies that, from his experiences, stereotypes are inevitable.

Along the lines of stereotypes, when participants were asked if they felt stereotypes affected academic achievement, they expressed contrasting responses to the question; however, their explanations for why they had chosen their response were rather similar. The first

participant to say “no” expressed her reasoning as: “Because they may say, like hey like you know like Blacks aren’t smart or anything but, like, I feel like that's like more motivation, because you want to be able to prove them wrong” (Participant 2). However, another participant responded with “yes” to whether she felt stereotypes affected academic achievement, though also implies stereotypes motivates her: “Yes, yes, you stand out. You have a natural target. And it's just pressures, unwanted pressure, unwanted stress, and I can say, so it's just basically like you have to go 10 times harder” (Participant 6). Conversely, Participant 1 responded “no”, to whether she felt stereotypes affected academic performance. She simply expresses her reason as: “No, because I think that we are, whatever we allow academically.”

This pattern demonstrating that the participants believe that the affect stereotypes have on academic achievement is by way of a student’s choice continues with Participant 2. Participant 2’s response explained why she feels how the stereotypes affected her academic performance is a matter of choice:

Yes, yes, just because when I was younger I just felt like, people, didn’t really say African Americans are smart and I just I feel like sometimes, I feel like it makes us want to push to improve more and sometimes it [stereotypes] tears us down, and make us don't want to do it like maybe they are right, maybe we are as dumb or all we want to do is fight or get into gangs, or this and that, so I feel like it works both ways I feel like it affects in a good way and in a bad way cause it maybe you're wrong or just saying maybe they are right.

Participant 2 emphasized the contrasting impacts that stereotypes and stereotype threat can have on a student. She did so by sharing that it can either effect you negatively or positively. By allowing the stereotype to motivate a person represents the positive response stereotypes can

elicit. On the other hand, a person allowing him/her/their self to confirm that stereotype and eliciting a poor performance is a negative representation of the effect stereotypes can have.

Sharing a more in-depth explanation of these opposing effects of stereotypes, Participant 4 exemplified why it is up to the person to decide how they will allow the stereotype to affect their academic achievement:

Yeah, because I feel like it does because, you know, there's a stereotype about you, so you just accept it, like some people just accept it like, okay, whatever people already think this and this so I'm just not going to do it anyways you know, like. I don't know I feel like yeah, I think it does it does affect performance because if you know you're perceived certain way, sometimes some people will, you know, do the most to beat that stereotype, but some people will just settle with it and just allow it to happen.

Whether the participants felt that stereotypes affected academic achievement or not, they attributed a negative academic outcome to “choice.” A choice they feel students can make in deciding whether to allow themselves to confirm the stereotype/expectation and have it negatively impacted their academic outcomes or to disprove the stereotype and allow the stereotypes to push you to positive outcomes.

Group Uplift

Participants revealed that they were motivated not only by personal/career goals, but they were also motivated by the desire to uplift the status of their affiliated social groups. They explained that they wanted others within their social group to better by way of knowledge or encouragement because of the personal contributions they invested. Participants expressed being motivated to learn so that they may share their knowledge with people within their group, or to achieve a college degree in effort to work at a job they enjoyed while providing stability and

security. The subtheme of group uplift refers to behaving in manners that elevate the status of the social groups that a person associate with, encompassing the idea of collectivism. Group uplift symbolizes the equal or possibly the greater importance of the group before the self/individual.

One participant expressed a desire to help other African Americans by using her educational major to educate them on economic competence. Participant 4 stated,

Well, my major is financial planning and I want to like with my major, I would like to help low income people and being in Tuscaloosa in Alabama like it's really shown me why I want to be in this major because we do have a lot of black people here and I feel like. And when people talk about Alabama they always say it's a ghetto, like Tuscaloosa like oh yeah Tuscaloosa is the ghetto, we have a lot of like ghetto this this and ghetto that. And I'm like wow like that's kind of sad and they say ghetto Black people, it's not like they say, ghetto white people its ghetto black people that are taking up Tuscaloosa so it's like, that's what's really encouraged me to finish this, like I want to help, I just want to help, help the community. Because I feel like just being Black like, I don't know, we just have that image put upon us that we don't know how to handle money we're just not responsible, all that stuff I kind of want to like. Help like educate people on that cause we don't learn that in in high school you don't like that about managing money and stuff like that, so I feel like having someone like me in the community will kind of help build. You know that knowledge of money and stuff like that so that was really encouraging me.

Participant 4's thoughts and actions show her awareness of the economic and financially related stereotypes about her social group and, as a result, she desires to use her academic achievement of majoring in financial planning to better the group. Her financial planning major goals goes beyond herself. Her response illustrates the selflessness that is attached to this subtheme of group

uplift and the extrinsic motivational forces of identified regulations that drive this theme.

Many of the participants embodied this concept in other responses as well. However, Participant 3's responses added to this theme, but with the intrinsic regulation of *to know*, and not only to know, but to share too:

I think my motivation to learn just stems from I'm trying to be knowledgeable, I tried to be knowledgeable on as many topics as I can just to like to enlighten other people who may not have known something. I think that's the most interesting thing to me that keeps me motivated just spreading new information to somebody who potentially may have not known that, like I didn't once upon a time.

Her motivation, stemming from knowledge, shows that being knowledgeable is of value to her. In addition to valuing knowledge, she expressed being knowledgeable so that she essentially can teach others. Participant 3's response supports the selflessness characteristic that is associated with group uplift.

Continuing with the intrinsic regulation motivational forces, one participant pointed to the intrinsic regulation of *to accomplish*:

Actually, the excitement of something new. So, like, um, I like challenges, and I kind of like to be told that I can't do something, just so I can like, go do it. So yeah, the challenge of figuring it out, or the challenge of oh how difficult it is.

Overall, it appeared that participants displayed uplifting the self as a contribution to uplifting the of the group. This type of motivation is most resembling to the identified regulation of the extrinsic motivational forces. Without a doubt, participants appear motivated despite few differing in types of motivational forces behind those motivation. For the majority of the participants, motivation resembled identified regulations, which refers to individual's engaging

in learning activities because it is valued, and students identify with it to attain an outcome (Cokley, 2003; Vansteenkiste et al., 2017) they valued their social group.

Receiving Recognition

To complement the previous theme of uplifting the group, recognition of the individual participant's academic successes represents a scoring contribution to the social group's overall "team points." In support of the participants efforts, participants like to be recognized. However, what they value most is the feelings it brings to themselves and to those that support them, as an acknowledgement of their efforts. In this section, I discuss the way participants discussed the notion of recognition and how that recognition came to be meaningful for them.

Making the Dean's List was most mentioned by participants when answering one of the interview questions to describe a time where they felt academically successful. Some participants also indicated verbal, tangible, and self-rewards symbolized a sufficient acknowledgement of their hard work. One participant reflects on making the Dean's List during a busy time at a previous school:

Making the Dean's List, I had a hard semester, this was in juco (junior college) and I wasn't at Alabama. But I'll say I was in a junior college and I really was like at the verge of giving up because junior college was just not fun, for me, but um yeah, I made the dean's list and I didn't, I didn't think my grades were gonna be that well because I was missing a lot of school and stuff like that. (Participant 4)

Participant 5 provides a similar response, sharing her excitement to have made the Dean's List. She reflected, "I have to say, last semester, making the Dean's list, I'm really proud of that because I don't know, but I was like, I thought I was gonna be awful my first semester. I'm really excited about that." Another participant indicated making the Dean's List as representing her

hard work: “Finally, my hard work is being you know I’m getting some kind of achievement for it. So self-reward basically, so yeah definitely the Dean’s list” (Participant 6). Each of these participants expressed gratitude in making the Dean’s List. Making the Dean’s list reflected their hard work and represented just that—hard work. Additionally, these participants imply an internal positive feeling from receiving the recognition because they seem to have surprised themselves or exceeded their own expectations.

Although still expressing gratitude, Participant 1 expressed her teacher’s praise and acknowledgement of her experiences and efforts was the recognition she appreciated:

The teacher would send me emails separately saying things like, "Wow, thank you for being honest" because a lot of people, I want to say, may not say that they don’t know or don't really admit it like, ‘Hey, I actually didn't have this knowledge as an African American I didn't know this was going on.’ So, I think her applauding me and saying thank you for sharing your experiences, your lack of knowledge, because now that opens a door for more knowledge and more understanding.

This participant’s expression shows additional forms of recognition that also stimulate African American students. She appreciated her professor acknowledging her honesty and efforts to deeply understand a topic during class. Furthering, the praise she received is likely to reinforce her honest behavior and lead to more knowledge and understanding as this participant expressed earlier being motivated by the intrinsic forces of *to know*.

The reward and the recognition meant more when the participants felt that they earned it and put their academic matters into their own hands to ensure the positive outcome they received. There was greater meaning for participants’ recognitions when they felt as though they held themselves accountable and took responsibility to establish academic success and then

reaped the harvest of those initiating actions. Participant 3 expressed challenges she had with a particular course, but she was determined to pass the course. She did all she could to ensure an outcome she desired, explaining:

When I passed accounting, oh God, accounting is so hard I had took it twice in the summer. With a tutor and it didn't work out both times and my third time I took it, like during the school year and I got a tutor by myself and I had two tutors, I had a school tutor from our academic building for athletes and I had a tutor separately by myself. And I got a C in accounting and I was like oh my God, I'll take it just I gotta get out of here at this point, so that was the one time, I was like I'm academically successful, I've legit done everything I could possibly do to make this work. It was like towards the end like I would finally like understand the answers I was given like so I was like getting the information retaining it and able to apply it, when I was on the test, so I was like this is academic success, it has to be.

The participant's response demonstrates that she recognized she needed additional help and acted on that realization by getting the additional help she needed. She implied that she made the decision to do better by using her available resources and executing a plan that would produce an outcome she deemed successful. The metacognitive behaviors she illustrated combined with the favorable outcome she wanted revealed her earned success.

Another participant said that her recognition of making the Dean's List proved inaccurate stereotypes wrong:

I feel like I overcame. I beat that stereotype like, not being smart and not, you know, graduating. I feel like making the Dean List says like I beat that stereotype and I showed the professors in school that you know, like we can do it, like we're not dumb we're not

what you guys think we are, we actually work hard, we do care about school. (Participant 4)

Like many other participants, this participant expressed her Dean's List recognition being a triumph over the deficit perspectives placed on African American students. In her response she also transitions from the use of "I" to "we." This shift highlights the participant's personal accomplishment, and her sense of representation for her social group. Her use of "we" shows how closely associated the self can be intimately tied with the group. This continues to support the idea represented in the subtheme of group uplift in Theme 2, sources of motivation.

Finally, participant 5 articulated what earned recognition is like and why it is different from being given recognition.

It just kind of brings a feel good the moment, but like success. I mean, it's something that you have to work for. Like if it was something that like I didn't have to work for, and, like, then I probably would be like, oh, that's just another thing. It must be like a participation award, you know, yeah so everyone gets it, but like, there's only like few actually like work for something to actually get that like trophy that gold medal or something.

Participant 5's response demonstrated that: 1) there is a difference between being given recognition/reward and earning it, and 2) that earning the reward is much more respected. She shares the good feeling it brings to see the fruits of her labor.

Summary

In summary, participants stated in their interviews that they have been raised by their parents to value education. Education, and more specifically, a degree earned from completing higher education, is an academically successful outcome instrumentally used to promote upward mobility. As one participant put it: "Like, you don't have to have it in order to be educated but

that's the way society tells you you're educated, is when you have your degree” (Participant 7). Participants implied being educated or academically successful leads to paths of economic and social mobility. Hence why their parents likely passed on that valuing of education, for it provides a greater sense of power or control over the future. As Participant 1 stated: “I think that knowledge is power.”

Overall, participants expressed a positive experience being African American and an African American college student at the university at which they were enrolled; however, negative feelings were still attached to their overall experiences through social relationships employed between faculty and peers. Participants constantly work hard in the classroom to disprove the inaccurate stereotypes and use those stereotypical experiences as motivation to achieve success that reflects positively on themselves and their social group.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions and experiences related to social identity and academic achievement among undergraduate African American college students enrolled at a historically White institution. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven African American undergraduate students enrolled at the institution, averaging a mean age of 21. Through thematic analysis, three main themes were constructed: 1) academic influences, 2) sources of motivation, and 3) receiving recognition. This study supports the significant role of social agents and social environments on African Americans' social identity as relatives, professors, and peers contributed greatly to the academic experience of the participants.

Participants answered the first research question-- How do African American college students describe the relationship between racial and social identities and their academic experiences? —by describing their mixed emotions regarding their academic experiences. As implied in the themes developed in this study, much of the description of their relationships between racial and social identities and their academic experiences stemmed from the influences of their social relationships in academic environments between academic agents. Parent's contributions to the participant's perceptions and educational values within an academic and social context influenced the participants "social me" as well the negative social interactions between professors/peers and the participants influenced their academic experiences. It is likely that the participant's parents feel it is necessary to make them aware of stereotypes in effort to prepare them for the "that's what they think about me" moments.

Corresponding to the second research question, notably, none of the students denied an existence of stereotype threat; however, some just believed that “you get out what you put in.” In fact, all participants indicated they were aware of stereotypes. Not only were they aware of the stereotypes, their perceptions of stereotypes challenged the indications that stereotypes elicited reduced motivation and underachievement (Derks et al., 2007, Steele, 2010; Steel & Aronson, 1995). As stated previously, to stereotype is to overgeneralize (Gilovich et al., 2019). However, although students may be associated with a particular social group, they are still individuals with variations in their value, motivations, perceptions, and awareness. Similarly, the findings reflect that there are differences in motivational forces even within a social group (Wang & Wind, 2020).

Additionally, in this study I aimed to identify motives that contributed to the academic achievement motivations of African American students. From a motivational perspective, the findings express African American students being motivated both intrinsically, by way of “feel good moments” or self-rewards and extrinsically by desiring to disprove those outside of the self, wrong regarding the stereotypes about their social group and uplifting their social group. Further, participants attributed academic achievement to effort, and controllability despite the external risk factors of attending college within a Eurocentric education system. The findings imply that African American college students value education, are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically, but most extrinsically by way of their selflessness to elevate their social groups’ status. However, it is not much of a surprise, as mentioned earlier in this paper, although students may a part of a social group, they are also individuals. These findings promote Cokley’s (2003) suggestion that African Americans have a greater extrinsic motivational force driving them. Based on the literature, this is likely due to the collectivistic culture African American culture

derives from although they live within an individualistic society. These findings support this suggestion because of the emphasis each participant put on being motivated by identified regulations to uplift their social groups.

In relation to the third research question-- How do African American college students define and experience academic success? —participants associated academic success with recognition of their hard work. Not just any achievement, but rather earned achievement revealed to be of importance to the participants. To the participants, earned achievements indicated they worked hard to attain the reward, deserved the reward, and ultimately are worthy of receiving recognition. The Dean’s List recognition symbolizes both proving capabilities and disproving the stereotypes that African American students lack intelligence.

An ultimate goal revealed throughout this study, is African American college students drive to elevate their group’s status. Within the findings, African American students have indicated that they don’t want to stand out simply because they are the only African American student represented, but because of their academic achievement efforts. Pressure seems to be a positive motivation, one that has been previously deemed insufficient by external motives; however, extrinsic motivation may well be sufficient for minority groups like African Americans (Cokley, 2003). It is like an investment that keeps on giving. A win for the self scores a point for the group, and the accumulation of group’s points in effort to “win” reinforces those behaviors.

As some of the participants indicated, and as I mentioned in the introduction, there is likely added stress and pressure to succeed for African American college students as the weight of achieving academically goes beyond their self. Choosing to use a qualitative semi-structured interview design exemplified and elevated the voices of African American college students about the impact of their social identities on their awareness, perceptions, and academic experiences.

This study shows that learning is a social experience where students learn more than subject matter. As expressed within this study, students may also learn what others think about them from the social relationships with faculty and peers (Slavin, 2018).

As a result, this study's implications suggest counselors and educators who work with African American college students should provide support to African American college students, particularly freshmen year when transitioning to college. As the findings indicated, African American college students may face challenges upon entering college on top of the likelihood of dealing with great pressure to achieve not only for themselves, but for those within the social groups they identify with (racial, ethnic, gender, familial).

Future research is needed to further examine how the pressures of stereotypes motivate African American college students, as well identify other types of motivation that may drive African American college students. The limitations of present study should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, this study consisted of a small sample. The current sample of 7 included college students all from the same university. Also, the sample included only one African American male and six African American females. It can be argued that African American college students must have certain levels of academic achievement motivation because they are pursuing higher education. It should be kept in mind that the findings of this study do not reflect the general population of African American college students.

Navigating the academic experiences of higher education can be challenging to initially adapt to for African American college students. In pursuit to understand how social identity impacts the academic experiences of African American students in higher education, the present study set out to explore and understand the perceptions, awareness, and experiences related to social identity and academic achievement among undergraduate African American college

students. Findings from this study add to the paradigm shift of African American students being aware of the stereotypes affiliated with African Americans and using the pressures of disproving stereotypes as motivation to achieve academically.

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APPENDIX A: Preliminary Demographic Results

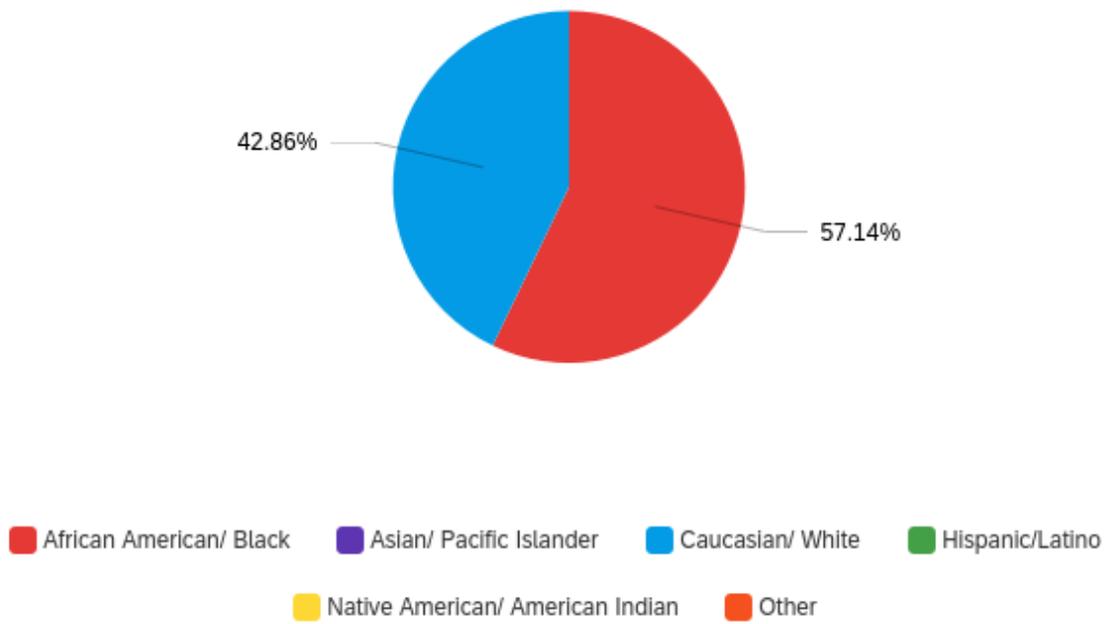


Figure 1:
Participant Reported Identity of Most of their Professors

APPENDIX B:

Initial Coding

Open Coding	Description
Sources of awareness of stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially parent(s) • Followed by personal experiences or witnessing stereotypical activity
When participants experience stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not until college • Middle school • High school
Where participants experience stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom: faculty-student interaction
Impact of stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive- associated with motivation to work harder • Negative- associated with a lack of control circumstances
Participants motivated by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self • Parents (most commonly, maternal) • Believers of the stereotypes associated with their identities
What are participants motivated for Types of motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prove worthiness and capabilities • Disprove stereotypes • Establish security • Teach others • Elevate the status of African Americans
How participants identify academic success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition by Dean's List/ GPA related • Verbal praise • Internal feeling

APPENDIX C: Pre- Interview Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?

2. What gender do you identify as?

3. What country were you born in?

United States (U.S.)

Other _____

4. Do you identify as African American/Black?

Yes

No

5. What race/ethnicity would you consider most of your peers to identify as?

African American/ Black

Asian/ Pacific Islander

Caucasian/ White

Hispanic/Latino

Native American/ American Indian

Other _____

6. What race/ethnicity would you consider most of your professors to identify as?

- African American/ Black
- Asian/ Pacific Islander
- Caucasian/ White
- Hispanic/Latino
- Native American/ American Indian
- Other _____

APPENDIX D: Interview Questions

Participant Number:

Date:

<p>SECTION I: SOCIAL IDENTITY-RACIAL/ETHNIC</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tell me what it feels/is like to be an African American? ➤ Describe what it is like to be an African American college student on this campus.
<p>SECTION II: MOTIVATION</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How has your racial/ethnic background contributed to how you value your education? ➤ What motivates you to learn here at UA? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How do the people around you perceive learning/education?
<p>SECTION III: STEREOTYPE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Tell me how you become aware of stereotypes about your race/ethnicity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Have you had experiences with those stereotypes? If so, describe the experience(s). ➤ How has your awareness (or unfamiliarity) of those stereotypes affected you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Do you think stereotypes affect academic performance? If so, how?
<p>SECTION IV: ACADEMIC SUCCESS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Describe a time you felt academically successful. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How did you know you were successful?
<p>SECTION V: ADDITIONAL COMMENTS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What haven't I asked you about, related to your identities and your academic experiences, that you think I should know?

APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA | Office of the Vice President for
Research & Economic Development
Office for Research Compliance

February 22, 2021

Kristoni Barnes
Capstone College of ESPRMC
The University of Alabama
Box 870231

Re: IRB # 20-11-4133: "The Role of Social Identity in African American College Students' Academic Achievement Motivations, Academic Resilience, and Perceptions of Stereotype Threat"

Dear Kristoni,

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your application has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 16. Approval has been given under exempt review category 2 as outlined below:

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(i) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects

The approval for your application will lapse on February 21, 2022. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the annual report to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Sincerely,


Carpantato T. Myjes, MSW, CLM, LCP
Director & Research Compliance Officer

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