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The Effects of Previous Traumatic Experiences on Learning Outcomes: Perceptions of Black
Men Who are Attending Community College

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership,

concentration in Higher Education

by

Willie Thomas

May 2022

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Keywords: self-efficacy, stereotype threat, Black male, trauma, persistence, retention

ABSTRACT

The Effects of Previous Traumatic Experiences on Learning Outcomes: Perceptions of Black Men Who are Attending Community College

by

Willie Thomas

Academic underachievement among Black students, particularly Black male students, is a troubling trend that has long attracted scholarly attention. The prevailing consensus is that the shortcomings of some Black male students in academic achievement may be attributable to traumatic experiences arising from environments of violent, inner-city poverty that disproportionately affect Black men. Traumatic experiences have been shown to negatively affect Black men's self-perception, emotions, self-image, and social and cognitive skills, with consequences in the form of measured shortfalls in retention and graduation rates. My qualitative, phenomenological study sought to explore how previous traumatic experiences of Black men affected their academic experiences and achievement while attending a community college. This study was conducted in a virtual environment setting using Zoom video conferencing and each interview ran approximately 45 minutes. Ten Black men were selected from a demographic survey to take part in this study. When asked about traumatic experiences, several participants mentioned the death of a family member as affecting their academic progress. Interpersonal loss may contribute to long-term effects on student engagement. Another reoccurring theme was negative stereotypes related to Black men being reinforced intentionally or unintentionally in the classroom. The findings from this study on the social and cultural experiences of Black men may encourage educational leaders to create more effective academic

supports and services designed to improve the success rate of Black, male students who have suffered previous traumatic experiences.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my father Bishop Eddie J. Thomas Sr. and my entire family.

My family have had the greatest influence on my life, which made me the person I am today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. Lord, thank you for taking someone with a fifth-grade education and showing them that life is not over. I am forever grateful for your love and grace towards me. To my wife, Kisha: you are my confidence, the heart and the passion for what I do. Thank you for believing in me when I did not believe in myself. I love you. To my sons Ian, Jamie and Andrew: listen—anything is possible with God. Do not ever let barriers, stigmas or roadblocks stop you from pursuing your dreams, and never let a disadvantage become an excuse. Now go and be great! To my family, Mama, Jonathan, Kim and Moriah: very few people know our story. I am honored to call myself your son and brother. Through all the joy and sadness, God is still good. I love you deeply. To my grandparents, Eddie and Allen White: it was my desire for you to see me graduate with my doctorate. Just know that I am riding on your shoulders. To Mr. and Mrs. Caldwell: your love has enriched my life beyond words. To my aunts and uncles, the Thomases and Whites: look where God has brought us. All of you have made a lasting mark on my life. To my WRC family: thank you so much! I could not have reached this milestone without your love, prayers and support. I would also like to thank Dr. Jasmine Renner: your labor was not in vain. Thank you for your time, care, and belief in me. To Dr. Lampley: since day one of this program, you have been encouraging and supportive. You made a mark that cannot be erased. Thank you for all of your guidance, time and effort that got me through this process. To Dr. Seymour: thank you for supporting me for who I am, but also challenging me to be more. Your wisdom, time and guidance have made a lasting impact on my life. Finally, to everyone who has ever advised me, prayed for me, supported me, corrected me, and loved me, thank you. Your love closed the gaps and affirmed greatness in me

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Universities and colleges have been placed in an awkward position concerning the challenge of retaining and graduating Black men (Berry & Bass, 2012). Although college selection has been competitive, African American men are still underrepresented in higher education (Naylor et al., 2015). Institutions that have successfully recruited Black men have found their success hindered regarding the rate the students graduate when compared to other races (Tate, 2017). Retention and completion rates are low for Black men. However, while falling behind in achieving successful learning outcomes, the enrollment of Black men on college campuses has been steady (Holloway, 2018).

The social and political climate in the United States has been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, tension about the 2020 presidential election, and police brutality toward African American people. These factors have resulted in Black men reacting directly and indirectly against micro-aggressions, stereotypes, community oppression, and racism (Miller, n.d.). Inner-city struggles have positioned life decisions between a career-guided path and choosing to support family responsibilities (Haskins, 2010).

There are many curriculum programs and financial support opportunities offered to underrepresented populations (National Urban League, 2016). However, research has shown that 38% of Black students complete college with a degree or a credential for gainful employment (Tate, 2017). These young men enter school with the intent to engage, only to encounter real and perceived barriers that restrict their ability to finish. Barriers identified by Gavins (2009) include complex factors ranging from societal practices that are inherently racist, budget cuts in programs, inequalities regarding race and class, few or no role models, and a high degree of segregation in residential areas.

Barriers related to socioeconomic factors, such as financial, parent education, and family influence, can create an impediment to the success of African American male students (Griffin et al., 2009) and may affect their ability to graduate. They are often found at the center of interpersonal, sociological, and psychological conflicts that can change the classroom dynamic from a cooperative learning environment to an authoritative environment (Burton, 2016). In most instances, media outlets publicize fights and troublesome behavior and overlook other concerns (Irving & Hudley, 2008). The media tends to underscore disruptive behavior as a cause for school failure although it is not an issue exclusive to a particular race or gender (Miller, n.d.).

Traumatic triggers are a problem of growing concern among African Americans, particularly young Black men (O'Brennan et al., 2014). Studies have shown that trauma can affect various brain functions and often results in individuals having to make adjustments related to their cognitive and comprehension skills (Barman et al., 2016; NIMH, 2017). Even though these findings have been established in previous research, they have not been applied specifically to the issue of how such trauma affects the learning outcomes for marginalized communities (Schumm, 2005). Traumatic events can have lasting effects on an individual, often resulting in a lifetime of conflict and stress (National Child Trauma Stress Network, n.d.). Miller (n.d.) suggested that a traumatic event overwhelms the nervous system due to a real or perceived danger because the nervous system cannot distinguish between real and perceived threats. Perception shapes what is dangerous, and experiences are essential in understanding how people interpret which situations are harmful.

For Black men, traumatic experiences are often shaped by victimization and perceived danger related to violence and abuse because of race (Reid, 2013). These threats may be real or perceived threats of harm and injury caused by direct or indirect experiences such as police

brutality and other humiliating or shaming events (Reid, 2013). The aggressors may be people from other races or ethnic backgrounds, religious and faith-based organizations, or individuals from different genders. However, the events create a permanent memory and can have a long-lasting effect on a person's self-perception and social engagement. Reid (2013) further suggested that while some can recover from these experiences, others undergo a long-term decline in their ability to cope with future stressors and threats. Daniels (2016) noted that these stressors are often triggered by constant reminders through social media and television that show painful images that can trigger strong emotions; however, not every African American watching these incidents on television or social media is traumatized. Daniels warned that some viewers develop phobias and a self-consciousness that results in disengagement. Conditions of poverty, such as hunger, poor living conditions, and even a lack of proper health care can cause trauma (Daniels, 2016).

African American children and adolescents exposed to violence often do not receive mental health services (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2011). A lack of cultural understanding can lead to an inaccurate diagnosis and inappropriate intervention, can lead to mistrust of a mental health system (Baker & Bell, 1999). Many African Americans forgo treatment because of having to receive mental health services from clinicians who do not understand their experiences. Tylor (2014) stated that those who seek mental health services are primarily misdiagnosed and receive inappropriate or unnecessary treatment, this can increase attrition rates.

Burdick-Will (2013) questioned whether areas with high crime rates had affected Black men in the classroom. He argued that there is a relationship between traumatic events and dysfunctional behavior that is often expressed through emotional outbursts, acts of aggression, rage, and detachment in the classroom. Burdick-Will suggested that mental health was an

overlooked problem in the African American community that greatly affected learning outcomes, particularly among Black men. There is a code of silence in the African American culture whereby people do not always reveal that they have experienced traumatic events such as rape, abuse, or violence. As a result, mental illnesses resembling post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and others are either unknown or misunderstood. PTSD is commonly associated with military war experiences and trauma. However, there is an unending war zone of exposure to violence and trauma in many African American communities. The effects of this trauma create challenges, not only in their respective homes, but also in the classroom (Burdick-Will, 2013).

Chronic trauma can cause serious problems with learning and behavior needed for academic success and completion. Trauma can be challenging for educators to address because students, particularly Black men, do not express the distress they are feeling easily and often mask their pain with aggressive behavior. Studies have shown how the effects of trauma have influenced Black men's decisions to remain enrolled in college (Boyratz et al., 2013; Daniels, 2016; Ferreira, 2012). Boyraz et al. (2013) found that Black men who suffered from PTSD symptoms while attending their first year of college were less likely to persevere and continue to their senior year of college. Boyraz et al. also suggested that being exposed to multiple traumas during childhood is associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out of college.

Banyard and Cantor (2004) explored the reasons for disparities in the transition between high school and college and found that variables including gender, racial identity, coping strategies, stress, social support and attachment contributed to a stressful transition. They further posited that many students begin college having survived exposure to traumatic events and are at risk for further events. A victimized college student cannot relate to fellow students who have no

history of trauma; victimized students' self-esteem and resilience are stifled, which contributes to substantial instances of dropping out (Banyard & Cantor, 2004).

Background of the Study

Black college students can experience many difficult situations contributing to trauma including “micro-aggressions and racism, Islamophobia, cyberbullying; encountering culture-related extreme expectations; and experiencing isolation” (Primm, 2018, para. 4). Banyard and Cantor (2004) suggested that trauma involves an experience leading to injury or death, a threat to a person's physical integrity, or witnessing an event that leads to victimization. Exposing young students to trauma has a detrimental effect on their academic performance and eventual transition to college (Banyard & Cantor, 2004). Whereas the transition and start of college life is an important milestone, experiencing a negative personal development during the transition can be challenging.

There are stressors to students, especially to those who have been exposed to potentially traumatic events (PTEs). According to Banyard and Cantor (2004), many students enter college having experienced at least one PTE and more report having exposure to multiple PTEs. Prior exposure to a PTE increases the potential for developing PTSD (Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011). Read et al. (2011) suggested that exposure to trauma significantly affects student success, and Duncan (2000) posited that college students with PTSD would likely drop out of school in the second year. Furthermore, students exposed to more than one form of trauma during childhood were likely to drop out of school. The implication is that trauma exposure creates both emotional and academic difficulties among students, which increase their inability to adjust well in school. Black male students have reported higher incidences of exposure to trauma and PTSD as compared to other groups (McGruder-Johnson et al., 2000).

Morsy and Rothstein (2019) contended that threatening situations are more sustained and are experienced more frequently by African American children because they are more often and socially and economically disadvantaged. Often, these children have less access to protective resources that can mitigate their stress to tolerable levels. As a result, they become more vulnerable to the effects of trauma exposure. These factors can contribute to a low achievement gap (Morsy & Rothstein, 2019).

Black students in college have reported considerable hostility as a result of their race. They may struggle to conform to academic standards when compared to students from other races (Chang et al., 2003). This affords additional stressors to their existing PTEs and causes an increased risk for academic difficulty. As a result, there is a large disparity in learning outcomes for Black students that contributes to low retention and graduation rates as noted in Garcia and Weiss's (2017) study that analyzed trauma effects on the learning outcomes of Black men in community college.

The Study Setting

There are more than 100 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) classified by the United States federal government, and six are in Tennessee. One goal of HBCUs is to develop resources that combat challenges to psychological health resulting from exposure to trauma in college among students of color (Walker, 2015).

Community colleges have begun to address and investigate ways to improve learning outcomes for men of color. Black men have been underrepresented in higher education overall, and those who enroll in college are more likely to attend a community college than a baccalaureate institution (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCSSE], 2014). "When broken down into quartiles of underrepresented minority populations, the most racially

isolated quarter of community colleges have student bodies in which almost two-thirds of students are from underrepresented minority groups” (Marx et al., 2013, p. 19). Although community colleges may be a critical access point to higher education for Black men, they are not graduating, transferring, or entering the workforce at an acceptable rate (Jones, 2018). Jones’s study sample was drawn from a population of Black men who were either presently attending or had graduated from a community college in the United States. Participants included Black men who had a high school diploma or a GED, were full- or part-time students, and were classified as either freshman, sophomores, or had graduated.

Statement of the Problem

Trauma can have a devastating effect on a person’s physiology, emotions, impulse control, self-image, relationships with others, and the individual’s ability to think, learn, and concentrate (Irving & Hudley, 2008). In low-income communities, trauma is linked to many problems including addiction, chronic illness, depression, anxiety, self-harming behaviors, and reactive aggression. Dysfunction and distress can be reduced or eliminated by increasing awareness of emotional intelligence and how to address traumatic experiences (Brandford, 2020).

Educators anticipate that their students will transition to higher levels of learning with excitement and enjoyment, but this is not always the case. McGruder-Johnson et al. (2000) have shown that most African American students have traumatic experiences in one way or another. The effects of trauma often prevent students from being able to learn in the classroom; students find it challenging to process the effects of trauma and prolonged stress that affect their cognitive abilities (Foa & Kozak, 1986). Consequently, affected students are forced to suspend their regular academic goals to manage stress and trauma.

Black school children are vulnerable to trauma as they may not have adequate prior experience about how to cope with these effects (Helms, 2003). While in school, students can be affected by experiences they have had because of their color. They may be forced to drop out or when they transition to a higher level of education, their performance may not be comparable to students from other races. My study explores the perception of exposure to trauma on the learning outcomes of Black men in community colleges. Interviews were used to explore the lived experiences of Black men in the classroom and the effect trauma has had on their college experiences.

Significance of the Study

Black men have been exposed to significant incidences of trauma in their lives; studies have shown “that approximately 62% have directly experienced a traumatic event in their lifetime, 72% witnessed a traumatic event, and 59% have learned of a traumatic event involving a friend or family member” (Motley & Banks, 2018, p. 2). My study explores the lived experiences of Black men in college and the effect trauma has had on their college experience. Study results and case studies can provide insight on how trauma affects Black men in the classroom and helps fill the gap existing in the literature on students experiencing trauma.

According to Adams-King (2016), Black men are among the lowest achieving group in higher education. The achievement gap is problematic not only for African American students, it also affects entire families and communities (Bowman et al., 2018). It is not just about racial disparity. It is humanitarian inequity (Blackwell, 2013). Young African Americans who strive to achieve a dream need an enabling environment to pursue their life’s goals (Ford & Triplett, 2019). Reasons associated with failure are primarily linked to an historical exposure to trauma.

Results of my study may provide meaningful insight into the need for a trauma-informed system that cares about student experiences. Consequently, the findings influence an adjustment of resources through programs that identify students and families having had prior direct or vicarious experience with trauma. Resources are needed to support African American students who can develop academically without stress (Chafouleas et al., 2016). Institutions of higher learning will benefit from this study because it addresses the stress that Black men face during their college experience and the underlying challenge of trauma-related incidences affecting their growth and success in college.

My study is essential for understanding and resolving issues related to college retention and graduation among Black men. It addresses why social bonds and student engagement are necessary. Proper methods can be developed to address traumatic stress among Black men attending college by showing them how to manage their stress constructively and offer tools for young men to be strengthened and guided to academic completion and academic success.

Key Terms and Concepts

In order to clarify meaning related to this research, several of the terms and concepts used in the study are defined here.

Academic Achievement: A measure of the knowledge gained in formal education; academic achievement is usually measured by test scores, grade point averages, and degrees earned (Volkart, 1986).

African American (Black): To include Americans having at least some ancestry from the continent of Africa. The term African American is used interchangeably with Black (Berlin, 2010). Black may be related more to how a person looks than their ancestry.

Persistence and Retention: For my study, persistence and retention refers to those students who are continuously enrolled full- or part-time in pursuit of a college degree. (Arnold, 1999).

Posts Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A psychiatric disorder that happens in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a serious accident, natural disaster, terrorist act, rape, war, or other violent personal assault (Torres, 2020).

Potentially Traumatic Event (PTE): Powerful life-threatening events that intrude on someone's life and may cause a significant threat to the person both physically and psychologically (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2017, para. 1).

Self-Efficacy: Bandura (2006) defined self-efficacy as the belief about one's capability to organize and execute an actionable course that produces desired performance.

Stereotype Threats: A social-psychological predicament that can arise from widely-known negative stereotypes about one's group (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797).

Stress: According to Morsy and Rothstein (2019), "'Stress' is a natural response to frightening or threatening events or conditions. These can be of greater or lesser severity and the resulting stress can lead to changes in behavior, emotional health, and cognitive capacity" (p. 4). When a negative stressor event exceeds the ability to cope or adapt, there is a stress reaction. Trauma is an example of stress that brings on spiritual, psychosocial, biological, and political effects; different events can cause varying levels of trauma and stress.

Trauma: A range of events that overwhelm an individual's coping capacities and involves threats of serious injury or death to self or someone close to the individual (Banyard & Cantor, 2004, p. 207).

Victim: One who is acted on and usually adversely affected by a force or agent (El-Bassel et al., 2011).

Violence: The use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy (El-Bassel et al., 2011).

Research Questions

My study focuses on trauma experienced by Black men in community college and how it affects their academic success. My intent is to understand how Black men cope with the effect of trauma while attending college. Research has shown that Black men with a history of traumatic events are less likely to complete college when compared to their White counterparts (Taylor et al., 2019). This implies that Black men can experience difficulties in adjusting to college both emotionally and academically. To explain these phenomena, my study was used to examine five research questions.

1. Have you ever experienced or been exposed to a distressing or a traumatic experience, directly or indirectly, while enrolled in school at any level?
2. What role, if any, have past traumatic experiences played in your college academics?
3. Did you notice any physiological or emotional changes after any of the experiences?
4. Do you think past traumatic experiences affect the way you interact with classmates or professors in the classroom?
5. Do you think stereotyping of Black men can trigger anxiety, anger, or isolation among Black students in college?

Reflexive Statement

Begoray and Banister (2010) wrote “reflexivity is an issue in establishing the quality/validity/trustworthiness of findings, in ethics, and in addressing power imbalances in a

case study project” (p. 789). In outlining a reflexive position statement, the researcher declares a “stance pertaining to the topic and to participants” (p. 789). As such, my cultural roots and life experiences are African American and male. In my statement, I delineate any preconceptions and biases of my history so the reader may consider the findings of this study in light of my history, life story, and circumstances (Begoray & Banister, 2010). In this study, I examined what is at stake for Black men, and the effects and barriers trauma produces when it is not addressed.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how previous traumatic experiences of Black men affected their academic and social experiences while attending a community college. The purpose was accomplished through semi-structured interviews to describe Black male students’ experiences (Jones, 2018). My findings allow educational leaders to create and implement more efficient supports and services that improves success rates of male African American students with previous traumatic experiences.

Findings from this study may also be used to show how social and cultural experiences affect Black men, particularly those raised and living in the inner city. Increased exposure to inner city crime and violence traumatizes Black men and ultimately makes them vulnerable to mental illnesses such as PTSD. Such mental illnesses compel these students to engage in delinquent conduct and coping mechanisms such as illegal drug and alcohol use, emotional outbursts, and misbehaving in general. My study will not excuse or justify disruptive behavior in the classroom, but it may help educators understand what drives some young Black men to behave the way they do.

Mereish et al. (2016) pointed out that violent activities experienced in the inner city can result in homicides; in many cases, Black men or young boys are the victims, either directly or

indirectly. Although education is everyone's right, it is evident that invisible boundaries cause discrimination against African American men, making teaching and learning difficult. Violence and discrimination lower the self-esteem and self-efficacy of Black men and result in reduced academic performance (Mereish et al., 2016).

Scope of the Study

This phenomenological study is limited to 10 Black, male community college students who participated in semi-structured online interview sessions. I developed interview questions based on a semi-structured approach that addressed the study problem. The study focus was on a small sample to analyze the perceptions of trauma on the learning outcomes of Black men in community college.

Theoretical Framework

This study employed a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, which supported an analysis of the experiences of Black male students in community college. CRT is an analytical framework developed from critical legal studies addressing racial inequalities in society (Hiraldo, 2010). CRT was used to fill a gap in the literature relative to the lived experiences of Black men, particularly those attending college, and allowed me to consider a proactive way of thinking about approaches to the intractable and unsolvable issues with trauma and its implications on Black community college students (Hiraldo, 2010).

Overview of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 provides the introduction, background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms, research questions, and the theoretical framework. Chapter 2 presents the historical background and theories related to the research questions and current empirical literature.

Chapter 3 includes the methodology used in the study. Chapter 4 reports the results of this phenomenological study, and Chapter 5 summarizes the results and conclusions regarding trauma among Black men, stereotype threats, self-efficacy, and learning outcomes.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to collect data, analyze, and report the findings related to the perceptions of trauma on learning outcomes among Black men in order to identify traumatic experiences and the role these experiences may have had on academic success or failure. Extensive research has been conducted in colleges across the United States to address disruptive behavior among Black men exposed to traumatic events. Rich and Grey (2005) noted that male African American students who faced frustrations leading to dropping out from community colleges attributed the causes to traumatic experiences in and out of school. This chapter focuses on a review of the literature regarding the relationship between:

- Trauma and Learning Outcomes
- Trauma and Learning Abilities
- Learning Outcomes of African Americans in Higher Education
- Violence, Trauma, and PTSD
- Black Culture
- Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health
- Trauma and At-Risk Behavior
- Community Violence, PTSD, and Trauma
- Trauma and Academic Development

This review builds a firm foundation toward understanding the exposure to trauma and experiences among Black men and the influence on their learning outcomes.

Educators in the inner city are in a difficult position. Educators receive constant pressure to increase student success and outcomes while they must also facilitate sociological and

physiological dynamics (Gehrke, 2005). Brunson and Miller (2009) noted that there is a conflict raging in the communities where these educators teach. As such, inner city teachers often find themselves at the center of interpersonal, sociological, and psychological conflicts among students (Brunson & Miller, 2009). Community conflict has not affected the content or the subjects they present, but it has changed the dynamics of student relationships (Wacquant, 2008).

Brunson and Miller (2009) further explained that even if curricular programs and financial support have been offered, statistics show that few complete their degree or receive some credential for gainful employment. These conflicts often change the classroom from a place of education to a place of facilitation (Burton, 2016). Exacerbating the problem, media outlets publish details about fights and disruptive behavior but overlook other issues.

Disruptive behavior and classroom disengagement is not an issue that is particular to any specific race or gender; however, according to Rocque and Paternoster (2011), it is a growing concern among African American men. Rocque and Paternoster described their research on the paradigms affecting African American men, but there has been little investigation of the mental health of this at-risk population. Kataoka et al. (2012) reported trauma to the brain often required an individual to compensate for decreased cognitive and comprehension functions. The high rate of trauma exposure in students living in inner cities is a major public health issue. Schumm (2005) provided a different argument, claiming that although sufficient information has been provided, it has not been specifically applied to the question of how trauma affects learning outcomes for certain communities.

A review of the literature found that traumatic experiences can adversely affect the learning ability of individuals – resulting in a poor self-perception; such experiences often lead to stereotype threat (Thames et al., 2013). According to Appel and Kronberger (2012), this type of

threat creates a situation that bars individuals in negatively stereotyped groups from achieving their full ability. Steele (1997) defined the concept of stereotype threat as conditions that impede Black students from excelling on standardized tests. This literature review explores how traumatic experiences affect academic achievement among Black men.

Trauma and Learning Outcomes

Peer rejection among students has a high likelihood of leading to trauma. Allen (1992) argued that Black students' performance levels in higher education had experienced periods of rise and fall. In a quantitative study, Allen examined variations among the performance of Black undergraduate students in historically Black colleges and universities and those who studied in colleges and universities with predominantly White student enrollment. Allen focused on the influence of key predictors on college results among the two groups. Self-reported depressive experiences were common among Black male learners in higher grades (Barker et al., 2018). Depressive conditions varied among learners who developed stress due to academic demands. Allen sought to compare the experiences of Black students in different environments under the assumption that those students in predominantly White colleges and universities experienced unfriendly learning environments. The study revealed issues in the dynamics of the African American experience beyond the boundaries of academia. Allen found that on historically Black campuses, African American students tended to be more connected, accepted, and engaged where they received extensive support and encouragement.

On predominantly White campuses, African American students faced the challenge of alienation, racial discrimination, perceived hostility, and limited integration (Beamon, 2014). Kataoka et al. (2012) shared similar insights, noting that trauma and peer rejection are closely related and implied that students who face social rejection were more likely to be traumatized.

Walter and Hobfoll (2009) expanded on the previous concepts and found that learning outcomes were often culturally associated with intelligence but they should instead be linked with learning ability. If the ability to learn is compromised through discrimination, alienation, and sensed hostility, minimal achievement can be expected (Walter & Hobfoll, 2009).

Students subjected to various forms of aggression and violence in inner city neighborhoods often performed poorly in schools (Gentile et al., 2004). Patton et al. (2012) contended that a correlation between high rates of crime or violence and poor school outcome is well-reported among African American males. Patton et al. focused on the effect of exposure to violence in neighborhood and school settings on educational outcomes for African American youth from low-income backgrounds. The authors defined exposure to violence as youth witnessing, experiencing, or becoming aware of violent activities in the vicinity of the school or neighborhood.

Other studies supported these findings on youth exposure to violence, suggesting that African American males experience higher rates of violence exposure (Bell & Jenkins, 1993; Sheats et al., 2018). Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) found that 30% of African American boys living in the inner city were exposed three or more times to violent events during the previous year. Sheats et al. (2018) further explained that violent activities may result in homicide, with young boys at high risk. A study by Patton et al. (2012) investigated the correlation between exposure to violence and low academic success. The authors used two major factors, being exposed to crime or violence and parental factors, to predict school outcomes among ninth-grade African American male students. The study built on existing studies through an examination of factors in connection to violence that youth face as related to their academic performance. The authors used a structural equation modeling strategy to reveal that violence leads to a reduced

sense of safety in the neighborhood and school. The researchers also asserted that violence exposure is an indicator of reduced levels of parental support and their actively taking part in school. Consequently, students who experienced exposure to violence in their school or neighborhood had lower self-esteem and struggled in academics (Patton et al., 2012).

It is important to note that community violence exposure is linked to a higher risk for depression, PTSD, anxiety, aggression, drug use, and low self-esteem. These are the negative side effects that substantially compromise learning outcomes; hence, violence ultimately results in reduced performance in school. King and Mrug (2016) supported these findings and expanded on the connection between exposure to violence and academic outcome in African American adolescents. The authors found that in comparison to other ethnic groups, African American adolescents experienced an increased degree of family and community violence. Such exposure is detrimental because it may lead to poor academic achievement (King & Mrug, 2016).

Burdick-Will (2013) investigated whether areas with high crime rates affected African American men in the classroom. His findings demonstrated a relationship between traumatic events and dysfunctional conduct in class. He also found that although educational outcomes vary significantly across schools in the U.S., many under-performing schools, particularly in Chicago, also dealt with an increased degree of violent crime on school grounds. McGaha-Garnett (2013) supported this premise noting that students exposed to violence and high crime rates expressed dysfunctional behavior through acts of aggression, emotional outbursts, rage, and disconnection and disengagement in the classroom setting.

Despite the literature providing evidence of the psychological effects of violence and high crime rates, mental health is an overlooked issue within the African American community. Ward et al. (2013) described a code of silence within the African American community in which

people do not reveal that traumatic events such as rape, abuse, or violence have been experienced. The silence often leads to mental illness such as depression, PTSD, and other conditions that are either unknown or misunderstood (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2007). The NIH pointed out that African Americans consider mental illness highly stigmatizing and rarely seek treatment. In the African American community, PTSD is often associated with military war experiences and trauma (Pérez Benítez et al., 2014). Burdick-Will (2013) explained that trauma is present in many African American communities and that its effect creates challenges not only in the home but also in the classroom.

Resnick (2001) argued that victimization, perceived danger associated with violence and abuse, and race shape traumatic experiences for African American males. These perceived threats may be real or assumed risks of harm and injury due to direct or indirect experiences such as police brutality and other humiliating events. Kataoka et al. (2012) explained that trauma is present in many African American communities and showed that regardless of whether the aggressors are Black or White, the events create a permanent memory and can have a long-lasting effect on self-perception and social engagement such as the classroom experience. The dilemma is that although some recover from these experiences, others experience a long-term decline in their potential to adjust and live with future stress and threats (Resnick, 2001).

When addressing trauma in African American males, childhood dynamics and culture in the inner city are crucial factors. In a study to evaluate childhood dynamics, Loeb et al. (2011) examined the validity of the child behavior checklist a PTSD subscale, that measures PTSD experienced by children. The authors assessed 51 preschool-age children who were exposed to some form of trauma and who were receiving outpatient child-parent psychotherapy for PTSD. The researchers found that 24% of the children in the study suffered from PTSD (Loeb et al.,

2011). Moreover, PTSD affected children differently than adults. For example, children who were suffering from PTSD without appropriate assistance and guidance were more likely to fail to differentiate right from wrong, and Loeb et al. noted that the children observed no social boundaries or absolutes. This lack of self-governance is problematic in an academic environment as learning is contingent upon student participation. If the purpose of being in the classroom is not apparent, then there is an opportunity for disengagement and isolation. A child may struggle between learning and entertaining. Additionally, children who suffer from PTSD often seek attention through emotional outbursts (Loeb et al., 2011).

Boyras et al. (2013) supported the premise that trauma can cause serious problems in the learning and behaviors required for academic success and completion. The authors analyzed 569 African American participants and their matriculation through college. Results showed that 423 participants (74%) reported being exposed to traumatic events throughout their life and 20.6% of the students were reported to have PTSD (Boyras et al., 2013). The study showed that African American students with PTSD symptoms attending their first year of college were less likely to continue their studies and graduate. Loeb et al. (2011) had similar findings, noting that exposure to multiple traumas during childhood was associated with an increased likelihood of dropping out of college. Boyras et al. (2013) explained that it is difficult for educators to address the trauma because students – particularly African Americans – do not often express the distress they are feeling in an easily recognizable manner. Instead, African American students frequently mask their pain with aggressive or off-putting behavior. Boyras et al. supported the argument that trauma can adversely alter college achievement. Although their study did not generate particular research on African American men, it outlined and supported the premise of how trauma affects learning outcomes.

Banyard and Cantor (2004) explored ways that victims of traumatic experiences adjusted to college. Banyard and Cantor analyzed why some students successfully complete college, while others struggle or ultimately drop out. Findings from their study indicated that factors such as stress and coping strategies, racial identity, gender, social support, and attachment are contributing factors pertaining to retention.

Daniels (2016) argued that traumatic stressors are often triggered by continual reminders in the media of perceived threats. Social and mainstream media (e.g., television) present painful reminders with the potential to trigger strong emotions. Although every African American watching these incidents on television or social media is not traumatized, some viewers develop phobias and a self-consciousness that result in disengagement. Daniels noted that students are often admitted to college with a history of exposure to traumatic stressors; they eventually become survivors who are at risk of further victimization. He asserted that some African American men are suffering from the intersectionality of the African American experience and the post life of traumatic stressors. Poverty is associated with traumatic experiences, and as Daniels's study revealed, lack of fundamental needs such as food, appropriate living conditions, and health care can be contributing factors to African American males' traumatic experiences.

These results are in accordance with Banyard and Cantor (2004), who found that the adverse conditions that most African American people, particularly those living in the inner city, experience are major traumatic triggers. Loeb et al. (2011) offered additional insights, noting that the influence of trauma during early childhood can be particularly difficult to assess, as young children and teenagers sometimes lack the ability to describe their symptoms. This difficulty brings into perspective the importance of including the parent when assessing the symptoms and effects of trauma among children (Loeb et al., 2011).

Learning Outcomes of African American Men in Higher Education

University retention and completion rates among African American men are lower when compared to that of other ethnic groups. According to Ro and Loya (2015), both retention and completion rates are much lower for African American men in comparison to their female counterparts; it is a trend that has triggered many researchers to study the experience that demotivates men during the learning process. For instance, their study indicated that a number of African American men had not completed their college or university studies following academic pressure from demoralization by fellow students as well as institutional administration.

Predominantly White colleges and universities frequently fail at integrating specific learning outcomes in their programs for African American males based on their cultural background, making it nearly impossible to attain objectives. Strayhorn (2010) explained that when African American male students were interviewed, they complained that professors and White peers were surprised when they performed well. The professors questioned them about which sports they played and assumed that they were underachieving affirmative action admittances who grew up in broken homes. Thus, learning outcomes for African American males were undermined and students were placed in a position, and stereotyped as low achievers.

According to Naylor et al. (2015), overall enrollment also plays a huge role in reducing the rate of completion and retention for African Americans males. One example is the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) which has been criticized for its small African American population. African American students complained to their UCLA research office that they felt a sense of inferiority due to a lack of diversity in the college where only a few slots were allocated to them with no limitation on recruitment for other ethnic groups (Allen, 1992). The university enrollment statistics indicated that the total makeup of African Americans was 3.8% of the

student population. Similarly, regarding the male student population, African American males were only 3.3% of the total. UCLA is just one representation of other predominantly White colleges and universities that admit a small number of African American students and expect the same learning outcomes as the learners from majority ethnic groups.

Trauma and Learning Abilities

Much attention, concentration, and organization are needed to gain academic skills whether in writing or reading. When a learner undergoes trauma, it is recorded in their brain (Goodman & West-Olatunji, 2010). When trauma is severe, the brain is no longer capable of regulating itself, which inhibits the flight response. In this case, almost all African American males have experienced unpleasant emotions in their youth. Opara et al. (2020) explained that learners raised in these environments tend to have difficulty concentrating on their studies because their brains are frightened, which makes it challenging to accommodate new concepts and ideas. In almost all predominantly White learning institutions, African American males face discrimination because of their skin color, ethnicity, and social background, which affects their learning outcome (Opara et al., 2020)

Based on psychological aspects of change, every individual exhibits certain behaviors when exposed to a new environment. There are those who adapt quickly while others may take much more time. It is the same with African American male students who are forced to adjust to a predominantly White curriculum and learning environment that may not be favorable to their African culture and upbringing. According to Davis (1994), learning is more interesting with less boredom in concrete contexts whereby learners can relate directly to the content presented with their personal experiences and physical surroundings.

Violence, Trauma, and PTSD

Ferreira (2012) discussed ways that children who live in neighborhoods with increased crime rates and violence are often exposed to external stressors that result in PTSD. Ferreira explored the outcomes of counseling sessions designed to prepare teachers to recognize student conduct linked to PTSD. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2017) PTSD can develop after exposure to a potentially traumatic event that is beyond a typical stressor. Events that may lead to PTSD include, but are not limited to, violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, combat, and other forms of violence. Ferreira's findings revealed that youths residing in neighborhoods with high violence and crime could be exposed repeatedly to external stressors, resulting in PTSD. Many studies confirm that it is not uncommon to find African American male students exhibiting poor academic performance as is associated with high rates of violence and crime (Burton, 2016; Irving & Hudley, 2008; Reid, 2013; Morsy & Rothstein, 2019).

Ferreira (2012) also found that PTSD often goes unaddressed. This can cause students' challenges to surface later and noted issues that arose in learning environments, such as severe challenges with discipline and academic achievement. These findings are consistent with the arguments of Ward et al. (2013) who observed that most African Americans do not acknowledge the challenge of trauma and its associated mental health conditions. They argued that it is particularly difficult for members of the African American community to seek professional assistance. The progression of stressful experiences at this stage is attributed to intrusive memories due to segregation perpetrated by society. Psychological conditions such as PTSD are masked, but there is an increased likelihood that the symptoms will emerge at later dates.

Ward et al. (2013) found professional development sessions for teachers to be highly effective in helping them gain a better understanding of student behavior. It is important for educators to undergo professional development so that they can understand their students' culture and learn how to address their challenges professionally.

Black Culture

Black culture is not immune to mental illness. However, mental illness is rarely discussed. Silence is viewed as strength and to break the silence is to go against an unwritten code. Ferreira (2012) expanded on this concept by stating that investigations of mental health among African Americans, particularly in the inner city, need a defined purpose and an understanding of Black culture. The research revealed that mental health training helped teachers with their approaches in curriculum and classroom management. The recommendations were consistent with the assertion by Mann (2021) on how classroom practices can effectively engage or *touch the spirit* of all learners, particularly Black youth. A suitable educational framework, according to Mann, should incorporate African cultural values such as spirituality, humanism, community resilience, verbal and oral expressiveness, unique style, realness, musicality, and emotional vitality. These values correlate with research on the human brain and are suitable for teaching children with PTSD. Similarly, van der Kolk (2003) supported and expanded upon these methods, noting that children with prior trauma require safety, predictability, strong relationships, clear humanizing communication, and rhythmical attunement with their environment.

Violence, Trauma, and Mental Health

According to Tylor (2014), most children and adolescents in the African American community who are exposed to violence on a regular basis do not receive mental health services.

Community mistrust and lack of cultural awareness are among the barriers cited for infrequent help-seeking behavior by African Americans. Lack of cultural understanding can lead to an inaccurate diagnosis and inappropriate intervention which increases mistrust of the mental health system (Tylor, 2014).

Many African Americans may forgo treatment because of having received mental health services in the past from clinicians who did not understand their experiences. Ward et al. (2013) found that many African Americans failed to seek medical attention, fearing that health care providers do not understand their culture and seeking treatment lead to stigmatization. Tylor (2014) also noted that individuals who seek mental health services were largely misdiagnosed and received inappropriate or unnecessary treatment. These factors could to lead to an increase attrition rate. Tylor further explained that traumatic experiences can create behaviors detrimental to life goal's or purpose.

Mazza and Reynolds (1999) examined the connection between violence and depression and PTSD in 94 young adolescents in an inner-city school. The participants completed self-report measures such as the Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire - Junior, the Exposure to Violence Questionnaire, the Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale, and the Adolescent Psychopathology Scale-Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Subscale (Mazza & Reynolds, 1999). The results showed insignificant connections between experiencing violence and PTSD. The researchers likened inner-city neighborhoods to war zones where many people do not fully enjoy life because of concern about survival. Their purpose in life has been lost through the experience of abuse and reasoning is replaced by self-justice. All of these factors contribute to creating a self-willed condition in many students who then take these experiences into the classroom (Mazza & Reynolds, 1999). A more recent analysis by Stansfeld et al. (2017) supported this study by

finding that exposure to violence and crime is associated with high anxiety, a high risk of self-harm, and depressive disorders, such as PTSD.

Trauma and At-risk Behavior

El-Bassel et al. (2011) examined the association between PTSD and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) risk behaviors among a random sample of 241 low-income women who had received services in an urban emergency department. The study revealed a pattern of behavior in women with PTSD; these women were more prone to participate in sexual relations with men who did not practice protected sex. Such men are considered risky partners (i.e., those involved in sexual relations with multiple partners without protection). El-Bassel et al. found that many women who suffered from PTSD also tested positive for HIV. The link between PTSD and HIV is similar to the association between PTSD and other behaviors as it causes emotions and practices that, for its victims, seem uncontrollable (El-Bassel et al., 2011). Remien et al. (2019) supported these findings by noting a relationship between mental health conditions such as PTSD and HIV as individuals with these conditions often engage in risky and uncontrollable conduct.

El-Bassel et al. (2011) also found that victims of PTSD lacked basic social and behavioral norms with triggers causing them to misbehave. The women who participated in unprotected sex suffered from feelings of avoidance, hyper-arousal, and re-experienced trauma. All participants with PTSD in the study had a history of abuse or a traumatic experience; examples of this sort of constant struggle was particularly evident in the inner city. Remien et al. (2019) noted that decisions made were reckless and without consideration of consequences. The group-think syndrome by participants was a result of a traumatized event that affected emotional, social, or psychological behavior. These studies support the study of African American males in

the classroom as it shows how traumatic experiences can influence risky lifestyle behavior which can affect individuals long after the traumatic experience has ended (El-Bassel et al., 2011; Remien et al., 2019).

In a related study, Lipschitz et al. (2003) examined the experiences of 15 girls who met the criteria for PTSD and showed patterns of substance and alcohol abuse. The pressure to connect with substance abuse, gang activity, or other forms of illegal behavior was constant in the inner city. Teenagers, particularly African American males, chose this lifestyle as a way to escape and feel safe. Substance abuse was a coping mechanism, and gang activity served as families replacing a support base that was frequently lacking (Lipschitz et al., 2003). Similarly, Cross et al. (2015) posited a connection among childhood trauma, PTSD, and substance abuse in African American men and women. Lipschitz et al. emphasized the need to ask how and why the children and teenagers had become involved in these behaviors instead of assuming that the children were born depressed or with PTSD.

Community Violence, PTSD, and Trauma

Morenoff et al. (2001) defined community violence as a social occurrence that negatively affects youth from low-income neighborhoods. Adolescents, males, members of non-dominant races or ethnicity groups, and low-income individuals had a higher probability of experiencing violence (Bell & Jenkins, 1993). Patton and Johnson (2010) supported those findings and expanded on the concept of community violence. The authors focused on the reasons behind the higher rates of violence, crime, and mental disorders.

The World Health Organization (WHO) (2002) acknowledges that urban community violence is a serious health problem. According to Post et al. (2014), PTSD affects youth – particularly inner-city African Americans – compelling them to engage in psychologically and

socially unhealthy behavior. The WHO reported several gaps in understanding urban violence, including types of violence, magnitude, causes, and the public health consequences of violence, especially regarding gender (WHO, 2002). Post et al., stated that the symptoms of PTSD include avoidance, hyper-arousal, and re-experiencing events as intrusive flashbacks. Although hyper-arousal and PTSD are not found frequently in the inner city, it explains many of the behaviors that take place in classrooms. Educators have experienced a rise in behavioral patterns that correlates with an increase of violence in the community (Post et al., 2014).

Exposure to community violence has been linked to negative outcomes for minority youth in poor, urban communities (Patton & Johnson, 2010). The concept of community violence is defined as witnessing, hearing, or participating in violent events in the school or neighborhood (Patton & Johnson, 2010; Patton et al., 2012). Patton and Johnson (2010) asserted that previous research primarily quantified the direct adverse effects of individual exposure to community violence on a person's psychosocial function. Although studies have failed to show the effects on cognitive performance, direct and indirect exposure to community violence harms social mechanisms (Patton & Johnson, 2010). Williams and Kniffley (2020) more recently supported the findings that community violence results in mental trauma, noting that violence exposure has been shown to affect development outcomes such as academic achievement.

Patton and Johnson (2010) explained that the consequences associated with community violence exposure are well researched and documented. For example, psychologists emphasize the adverse developmental stages linked to community violence (Patton, 1990). Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) found that witnessing or becoming a victim of community violence has been linked to a high risk for depression, PTSD, anxiety, aggression, drug abuse, and reduced self-esteem. Chronic and severe exposure to community violence has been linked to coping strategies

such as hyper-vigilance and heightened arousal states (Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Berman et al. (1996) examined how exposure to community violence influenced individual coping styles. According to their study, negative coping styles of individuals exposed to community violence were linked to PTSD symptoms, whereas positive coping styles such as high self-concept, academic achievement, and adaptation to environment were not (Berman et al., 1996).

Morenoff et al. (2001) demonstrated that violence affects not only individuals but also their communities. They claimed that those who have been exposed to violence lose their social capital with trust and respect being replaced by power and control. Social norms are often carried into other social settings, such as the church or workplace, as community violence victims search for surroundings that are safer than schools that are characterized by violence or crime. These flawed beliefs can be attributed to bullying and power control (Morenoff et al., 2001). Patton and Johnson (2010) further asserted that although teachers may be authority figures, learners find ways to manipulate and influence them.

Schwartz et al. (2005) examined 184 African American outpatients in a neighborhood mental health facility to determine the prevalence rate of PTSD. The researchers argued that PTSD was a common but under-recognized and undertreated source of mental illness in the urban community. They questioned whether trauma and PTSD rates among low-income, inner city, African American mental health patients were higher compared to figures for the general population. The study revealed that PTSD was under-diagnosed in African American communities and that individuals living in urban areas were at a higher risk of exposure to some form of violence. In addition, Schwartz et al. sought to understand if African Americans with PTSD were more likely than those without PTSD to have worse clinical and quality-of-life characteristics. They found that there were few resources to diagnose or treat the condition in

these communities (Schwartz et al., 2005). Post et al. (2014) supported Schwartz et al. and argued that trauma in poverty-stricken communities is on the rise, and often receives limited attention.

Often, the dual effect of community and domestic-based violence influences students. Post et al. (2014) explored the relationship between trauma and complex PTSD in inner city youth. The researchers contended that environmental aspects of trauma, rather than the proximity of the trauma, significantly affected the presentation of PTSD. Post et al. concluded that domestic trauma had a compelling correlation with PTSD symptoms among youth.

Trauma and Academic Development

Academic development is a key aspect in most schools because it focuses on improving the potential of students. According to Sutherland (2018), academic development assists students with building competencies and helps them socially, personally, and with respect to their career. Sutherland stated that academic development helps students establish healthy relationships and is associated with a positive effect on learning. They further argued that despite challenges of limited resources in schools, educators should remain committed to ensuring that academic development helps students with their learning process inside and outside the school setting (Sutherland, 2018). A shift of educators' rethinking must involve the transformative potential of blended learning, a combination of online and face-to-face learning, in community colleges. The approach encourages traumatized African American learners to complete studies with a plan to enhance the effectiveness of learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

Trauma can be a major factor that adversely affects inner city children's academic development. Resnick's 2001 comparative study explored behaviors related to trauma and how such traits affect academic development. Resnick (2001) found evidence that youth who are

exposed to high rates of crime and violence tend to be vulnerable to long term illness, including mental conditions such as depression and PTSD. As Lipschitz et al. (2003) further explained, children and adolescents exposed to violence or other trauma are more likely to engage in violent behavior and delinquency. Examples of delinquent behaviors include drug and alcohol use, misbehaving, and emotional outbursts (Lipschitz et al., 2003). Resnick had also noted that such behavior can lead to factors such as depression, impaired attention, and drug abuse, all of which are detrimental to academic development.

Resnick (2001) found that there was an increased likelihood for success when PTSD was treated within 16 to 18 months after trauma, leading to the conclusion that there is profound value in detecting and treating PTSD as early as possible. Resnick also found that PTSD affected the emotional, social, and academic development of young children. Although it can be difficult to diagnose in children, there are measures to help provide early indicators such as disengagement, low self-esteem, and emotional outbursts. According to Resnick, treatment success was the most promising when PTSD was detected early. In contrast, PTSD can become chronic and highly resistant to treatment when undetected and untreated.

Schechter et al. (2004) used a mixed-method approach to study mothers of children who had traumatic experiences to understand the fear felt by children with PTSD symptoms. The study demonstrated how interpersonal violence affects a child and found data that predicted the development of PTSD based on the violent behaviors of the father and trauma to the mother. Schechter et al. further explained that it is important to understand the environment of abuse where many children live. Childhood abuse often sets the stage for psychosocial difficulties throughout life (Schechter et al., 2004). The cycle of abuse can increase vulnerabilities for further trauma during adulthood. Similarly, Schwartz et al. (2005) expanded on the concept of

child sexual abuse and its effect on women living in the inner city. They examined ways that traumatizing events such as rape caused and changed the dynamics of interpersonal skills. The results of Schwartz et al.'s study showed a trend regarding victims suffering from PTSD and suggested that the effects of PTSD could have lasting effects on interpersonal relationships and learning outcomes. The research emphasized the necessity to help women and mothers rebuild interpersonal skills to help cultivate social relationships (Schwartz et al., 2005).

Schumm (2005) explored the connection between interpersonal loss and the long-term effects PTSD had on relationships. Although the study focused on women, it provided a qualitative and accurate insight into how traumatizing events affected interpersonal relationships regardless of gender. According to the author, exposure to traumatizing events was detrimental to students because it resulted in disengagement and the resulting loss of social capital and social withdrawal (Schumm, 2005).

Walter and Hobfoll (2009) analyzed the relationship between psychosocial and material loss and how it related to PTSD. The authors examined symptoms of 102 inner city women who met the criteria for PTSD after experiencing traumatic events and found that, as the symptoms decreased, women's material and psychosocial resource losses also decreased, which was important for recovery. Although the study focused on African American women, males also experienced poverty, psychosocial, and material loss; the research also supported the premise that impoverished environments may create symptoms of PTSD (Walter & Hobfoll, 2009).

Trauma, Stereotype Threat, and Learning Outcomes in the Classroom

Stereotype threat can lead to social and educational inequality for ethnic minorities and women. According to Steele (1997), stereotype threat is the state of being at risk of confirming, as a self-feature or trait, an adverse stereotype about a person's social group. For instance, Black

college students are more likely to perform poorly on tests (such as standardized tests) when a comparison is made to their White counterparts. When race is grouped, many Black individuals perform equal to or better than their White counterparts (Steele, 1997). Shelvin et al. (2014) explained that when a person is perceived in terms of membership to a salient group, there is an increased likelihood that performance will be undermined because of concerns about confirming negative group stereotypes. In this sense, stereotype threat can adversely affect performance; it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Aronson et al. (1999) researched the traumatizing effects of racism, often in the language of stereotype threat. In higher education, stereotype threat occurs when negative stereotypes about groups are evident. Students in situations that can reinforce negative perceptions (e.g., standardized tests, classroom discussions) may experience traumatic anxiety that has a negative effect on their academic performance (Aronson et al., 1999). As a result, receiving their education in stereotype-laden classroom environments, young Black men may exhibit disidentification, which is a psychological disengagement from academic matters and pursuits, as a protective mechanism against racism and stereotypes. Aronson et al., 1999 argued that students begin to reject association with academia and many scholars have discussed the academic disengagement that occurs as a result of stereotypes and negative perceptions of Black men (Aronson et al., 1999).

Liebschutz et al. (2010) described the challenges of engaging Black victims of violence with support and care. Liebschutz et al. used a qualitative method to conduct 14 semi-structured interviews with Black men who were the victims of gunshot and stab wounds. The researchers found a lack of engagement with social services that offered support (Liebschutz et al., 2010). All participants described an overwhelming sense of anger in the immediate aftermath of the

injury. The authors used *street culture* to describe the responses of silence and mistrust among the victims. Additionally, all interviewees experienced a dominant culture of suspicion regarding authorities and health care professionals. The mistrust can be justified as victims were under close police supervision while receiving medical care for injuries. Participants noted that healthcare personnel allowed police to question them while receiving treatment, which made some victims feel as though they were considered perpetrators or guilty, heightening their vulnerability and lack of trust. Liebschutz et al. attested to the vulnerable mindset that African American males encounter in any environment that challenges them to accept help. Jacobs (2017) supported the above findings stating that it is disappointing that the rights of African American men and women involved in violence are particularly curtailed, and that it is being used to justify police supervision when victims seek medical attention. Whereas Jacobs focused on social services, such as health care and counseling, stereotype threat is often incorporated in young men's thinking concerning the classroom. Institutional mistrust does not stop at the source of perceived victimization. Liebschutz et al. (2010) explained that this mistrust involves law enforcement and any entity that is perceived to cause oppression, including the workplace, social communities, and educational environments. The young men are faced with the perceived threat that some schools do not want them there while going through the admission process or applying for financial aid (Liebschutz et al. 2010). The ideology of these statements is especially powerful because it creates a reality in their minds before they even enter the classroom. Thus, relationships between faculty, professors, and administrators often begin in a place of mistrust as opposed to trust (Liebschutz et al., 2010).

Wood and Turner (2011) examined why Black men refused to make contact with teachers, engage in small group discussions or activities, attend faculty office hours, or provide

answers during classroom discussions. The study noted that participants indicated a desire to engage fully but were apprehensive due to fear of being perceived as *stupid* or *dumb* (Wood & Turner, 2011). Psychological variables have been important considerations in student success (Bean & Metzner, 1985). On the same topic, Wood (2011) stated:

The most predominant factors affecting the success of Black males are psychological in nature, resulting directly from barriers, negative messages and stressors in and out of the college environment. These environmental challenges impact students' motivation, focus on academic endeavors, and academic confidence. (p. 1)

College completion rates differ widely along ethnic and racial lines, with Hispanic and Black students earning their degrees and diplomas at much lower rates compared to their White and Asian counterparts (Tate, 2017). National data from 2017 indicated that Black males' academic completion rate is the lowest (40%) among all male groups (Tate, 2017). These statistics validate the discourse among researchers and practitioners about the low rate of academic success for young African American men. However, rather than focusing on the multiple areas in which young Black men underperform in contrast to their counterparts (e.g., enrollment, persistence, graduation, transfer), focus should be on the reasons for these trends (Wood et al., 2015).

Trauma and Self Efficacy

According to Schunk (1991) self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgment of their capability to perform given actions; Heslin and Klehe (2006) cite Albert Bandura when they defined self-efficacy as a person's belief in their capability to successfully perform a particular task (Heslin & Klehe, 2006). Together with the goals that people set, self-efficacy is one of the most powerful motivational predictors for how well one can perform at almost any endeavor. A

person's self-efficacy is a strong determinant of their effort, persistence, and strategizing, as well as their subsequent training and job performance (Heslin & Klehe, 2006).

Accumulated evidence supports positive links between students' academic efficacy and their achievement (Artino, 2012). Specifically, research has shown that students with high self-efficacy in various academic domains chose to engage in tasks that fostered the development of their knowledge, skills, and abilities in those areas; students also exerted effort in the face of difficulty and persisted longer at challenging tasks (Artino, 2012). It is important to understand the dynamics of confidence in relationship to academic abilities when completing independent study (Bates et al., 2011). Bates et al. (2011) found a positive connection between self-efficacy and academic preparedness. Concentrating on mathematics, they observed that as students' self-efficacy increased their anxiety about mathematics decreased (Bates et al., 2011). Using focus groups, Ihekweba (2001) found that Black men and women perceived that confidence in their academic performance potential was a critical facilitator of persistence. Wood (2011) noted that students perceived a lack of confidence in their academic abilities as a hindrance to their achievement and persistence in community college. In Wood's study, Black male participants saw themselves as exceptionally intelligent, thus distinguishing them from their peers as rarities. Wood also found that high self-efficacy allowed participants to embrace academic challenges, particularly when faculty doubted their abilities, and that self-efficacy aids young Black men in achieving their educational goals. Confidence in their ability to perform academically allowed these challenges to serve as motivators, in essence opportunities to prove themselves.

Reid (2013) found that a traumatized racial identity affected learning outcomes. In an analysis of 190 African American males, Reid argued that "perceived self-efficacy and racial identity attitudes cause African American males to idiosyncratically foster or inhibit their

integration into the institutional milieu” (Reid, 2013, p. 76). Reid concluded that self-efficacy beliefs have been positively linked to academic achievement, performance expectancies, self-perceptions of competence, and positive attitudes toward subject matter. Students with a heightened sense of self-efficacy also tended to take more challenging courses, were better at solving conceptual problems, persisted in searching for solutions, and demonstrated better time management. According to Reid, self-efficacy beliefs were acquired from four primary sources: progressive performance accomplishments, such as academic success; vicarious experiences (role models); verbal messages and social persuasions that affirmed one’s capabilities in the domain or at the task; and physiological states (i.e., trauma, anxiety, stress, fatigue, and moodiness). Reid further explained that the four sources of self-efficacy beliefs could potentially raise or lower a person’s self-efficacy (Reid, 2013, p. 76)

Benight and Bandura (2004) showed how trauma significantly reduced self-efficacy. They sought to understand how trauma affected self-efficacy in individuals and concluded that threat includes perceived coping capabilities and aspects of the environment that are potentially detrimental. Further, an individual’s belief in their coping ability influenced their vigilance toward potential threats and how they are perceived and processed (Benight & Bandura, 2004). The authors found that those individuals who believed they could exercise control over threats were better suited to cope with calamities and distress. In support of these findings, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) reported that those who believed potential threats were unmanageable were found to be afraid of many aspects of their environment. In addition, this group of individuals concentrate on their inability to cope, causing them to magnify the seriousness of potential threats. These factors, in turn, caused the group to remain worried about dangers that rarely, if ever, occurred (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007).

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) further noted that individuals with low self-efficacy experienced reduced performance in school. Occupied with such negative thoughts and ideas, people with poor coping abilities became distressed, which constrained and impaired their performance (Benight & Bandura, 2004). In this case, young African American men who had witnessed or viewed violent acts, abuse, or racial profiling often perceived a reality that caused distress and a phobia paradigm event, even if potential racism, violence, and stereotype threats were not real. These perceptions negatively affected their social motivation for academic achievement and for positive learning outcomes (Benight & Bandura, 2004). The researchers noted that perceived self-efficacy controlled how threats were constructed and whether or not individuals coped with them. Individuals better suited to cope with disturbing situations often developed abilities to change hazardous environments into more friendly ones. Young African American men often perceived these threats in beneficial environments such as the classroom or work environment (Benight & Bandura, 2004).

Self-efficacy is a key factor in human competence because it mediates between beliefs and behavior (Benight & Bandura, 2004). According to self-efficacy theories, these beliefs determine behavior (Pajares, 2002). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) asserted that learners with a high sense of self-efficacy exhibited strong achievement, whereas students with a low sense of self-efficacy exhibited the opposite. When students had high self-efficacy, they tended to work harder and persevere longer when attempting to accomplish tasks (Pajares, 2002). Thus, students' beliefs about their capabilities tended to determine how they used the knowledge and skills they had.

Hackett and Betz (1989) studied how strongly self- efficacy in mathematics correlated with mathematical performance and with choosing a mathematics-related major. They found that

students who excelled academically generally felt confident about their ability and were more likely to choose a major that required the use of mathematics. The researchers determined that self-efficacy in mathematics inversely correlated with mathematics anxiety in college students. Similarly, Hall and Ponton (2005) examined college students' self-efficacy, indicating that students who were enrolled in higher-level mathematics had higher levels of self-efficacy than college students who were enrolled in lower-level mathematics courses. Thus, students who felt that they were good at mathematics were less likely to express fear of mathematics (Hackett & Betz, 1989).

Wood et al. (2015) examined differences between the personal goals of Black men and other men in community college. The researchers found that Black men with stated personal goals aspire to be community leaders, help others, and have meaning and purpose in their lives (Wood et al., 2015). The researchers argued that Black men were negatively portrayed in the media, for instance as rapists, gangsters, drug dealers, womanizers, and thugs. These caricatures of Black men presented a false and dehumanizing narrative, and in higher education the implications of these perceptions were often subconscious. The authors further asserted that faculty, staff, and peers may have held stigmatized views of Black men that unknowingly communicated that they were not welcome or did not belong on the college campus. Wood et al. (2015) found that Black men were motivated to succeed in college by the desire to create better futures for themselves and their families. Additionally, they had aspirations that included serving as role models to others and making their families proud, as well as their desire to disprove negative perceptions of Black men. The study revealed African American men's need for self-confidence and motivation. Often, African American men battled a stereotype threat complex that portrayed them in a dehumanized manner that invited a conscious and unconscious disregard

for their wellbeing. In this sense, Black men were committed to fighting stereotype threat (Wood et al., 2015).

Li and Lerner (2013) examined the interrelationship between behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of school engagement. The study findings indicated that behavioral and emotional engagement were bidirectionally related. School engagement and the extent to which students were attached to, involved in, and committed to the academic and social activities in school, played a prominent role in preventing academic failure, promoting competence, and influencing a wide range of adolescent outcomes (Li & Lerner, 2013).

Academic achievement and learning outcomes have often been falsely attributed to intellectual focus and classroom engagement (Valiente et al., 2012). Academic achievement involved the academic activities in which students participated and the amount of time they spent in those activities (Li & Lerner, 2013). Thus, behavioral engagement was often influenced by cognitive engagement. This finding was significant as it showed how behaviors in the classroom affect cognitive skills in a learning environment. Post et al. (2014) argued that violence was a key contributor to mental illnesses such as PTSD, and the removal of such challenges was likely to produce improved academic outcomes. If barriers could be removed, or it was acknowledged that they affected the behaviors of African American students, academic success could then be obtained (Li & Lerner, 2013).

Messacar and Oreopoulos (2013) supported Li and Lerner research why they suggested that behavioral engagement tasks, such as class participation, homework, attendance, class preparation, positive conduct, and extra-curricular activities, were associated with favorable academic outcomes. The study also suggested that student attendance increased graduation rates and other long-term academic outcomes. Both studies (Li & Lerner, 2013; Messacar &

Oreopoulos, 2013) reported the detrimental effects of disengagement on classroom achievement, especially with at-risk populations such as African American males.

In a quantitative study on persistence among young Black men in an urban community college, Wood and Williams (2013) found that self-efficacy had a strong positive relationship with persistence. They concluded that having an increased belief in the usefulness of one's education, program, degree, or coursework led the student to enhanced outcomes (Wood & Williams, 2013). Wood and Williams also stated that young Black men with poor self-efficacy believed that their success – both personal and professional – was best obtained outside of the classroom setting. In contrast, Black men with a high degree of self-efficacy often viewed education as a door to opportunities. Some young Black men may have experienced a conflict whereby “their perceptions of the benefits of school conflict with their experiences, perceptions and immediate needs (e.g., food, housing)” (Wood, 2011, p. 2).

Literature Review Summary

This study acknowledges that social and cultural frames of experiences affect young African American men, particularly those raised and living in the inner city. An increased exposure to crime and violence in the inner city traumatizes young Black men, ultimately making them vulnerable to a wide range of mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Such mental illnesses compel these students to engage in coping mechanisms and delinquent conduct such as drug and alcohol use, emotional outbursts, and acting out. However, the objective of this study is not to excuse or justify disruptive behavior in the classroom but to assist educators with understanding the psyche of young African American men and what may drive them to behave the way they do.

Violent activities experienced in the inner city may result in homicides, and in most cases, Black men or young boys are the victims, either directly or indirectly. Although education is the right of every individual, it is evident that some invisible boundaries exist to discriminate against African American men, making teaching and learning difficult. Violence and discrimination lower the self-esteem and self-efficacy of Black men which may result in reduced academic performance.

Chapter 3. Methodology

The research methodology for this study was a qualitative phenomenological approach regarding the perceptions of trauma exposure on African American students' learning outcomes in community college. Phenomenological methodology and Critical Race Theory (CRT) approaches are discussed in-depth in this chapter. The research plan, including the methodology, study participants, procedures, analysis method, and ethical concerns are important parts of the chapter.

Research Questions

This research focused on the perception of Black men on how previous traumatic experiences impacted their academic success. It was my intent was to understand how Black men cope with trauma while attending community college. The data were used to examine central research questions.

1. Have you ever experienced or been exposed to a distressing or a traumatic experience, directly or indirectly, while enrolled in school at any level?
2. What role, if any, have past traumatic experiences played in your college academics?
3. Did you notice any physiological or emotional changes after any of the experiences?
4. Do you think past traumatic experiences affect the way you interact with classmates or professors in the classroom?
5. Do you think stereotyping of Black men can trigger anxiety, anger, or isolation among Black students in college?

Methodology Selection

A qualitative study is appropriate when the research goal is to explain a phenomenon by relying on a person's perception of an experience in a given situation (Stake, 2010). As Creswell

(2003) outlined, a quantitative approach is appropriate for studies in which a researcher seeks to understand relationships among variables. Because the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of trauma exposure on learning outcomes among Black male students, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate.

Phenomenological Theory Methodology

This qualitative study used phenomenological theory, which is designed to illuminate and identify phenomena through the perception of the actors and those who experienced or observed them. This generally translates into gathering deep information and insight through inductive, qualitative methods. It is important to represent phenomena from the perspective of those who were present (Husserl, 1970).

Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based on personal knowledge and subjectivity which emphasizes the importance of individual perspective and interpretation. As such, they are important for understanding subjective experience, gaining insight into participants' motivations or actions, and eschewing taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom. Phenomenological research overlaps somewhat with other essentially qualitative approaches including ethnography, hermeneutics, and symbolic interactionism (Husserl, 1970). Pure phenomenological research is used to describe rather than explain, starting from a perspective that is free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970).

More recent humanist and feminist researchers refute the possibility of starting without preconceptions or bias, and emphasized the importance of making clear how interpretations and meanings have been placed on findings as well as making the researcher visible in the 'frame' of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer. (Lester, 1999, p. 1)

Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences. It is an effective technique to analyze experiences and perceptions. Phenomenology allows the perspective to be the narrative that challenges structural and normative assumptions (Lester, 1999). When phenomenological research includes interpretation, it becomes the foundation or practical theory that informs, supports, or challenges a policy or action. My study used a critical race theory approach to phenomenological theory.

Phenomenological approaches can be applied to single cases or to focused selected samples (Lester, 1999). Single case studies can identify issues to illustrate discrepancies and failures and can draw attention to unique situations that are difficult to discover in a small sample of participants. Multiple-participant research allows researchers to see which factors are recurring among participants and provides a framework where inferences can be applied. During a phenomenological study, it is important to distinguish between statistical and qualitative validity. Phenomenological research can be robust for indicating the presence of factors and their effect in individual cases, but the results are more tentative with regard to how they relate to the population from which the participants or cases were drawn (Lester, 1999).

CRT was used for this study to emphasize factors important to the research and uncover details about the perceptions of trauma exposure on learning outcomes among Black men. It was essential for the researcher to remain keenly aware of subtleties in data to uncover those effects (Charmaz, 2006). The resulting theory is the researcher's interpretation of data, consistent with phenomenological theory (Stake, 2010).

A variety of methods can be used in phenomenological research including interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, focus meetings, and analysis of personal texts. The primary focus is on minimum structure and maximum depth, which can be constrained

by time and opportunity. Therefore, it is important to maintain a balance between a focus on the research issues while avoiding undue influence by the researcher. I made an effort to establish a good rapport and empathy with participants as this is critical for gaining the necessary depth of information. This is particularly important because my study focuses on issues in which participants have a strong personal stake. The interview methods and issues employed in this study were discussed by Gorden (1969), Measor (1985), Oakley (1981), Plummer (1983), and Spradley (1979) .

The Researcher

I have worked in higher education for 22 years and hold a Bachelor of Arts in music and a Master of Science in conflict resolution management. No participants had a direct relationship with me that would represent a conflict of interest (such as a reporting relationship, contract, or any relationship that may have imparted bias on the research study). The researcher has been trained in the skills necessary to carry out the study design and has experience interviewing individuals in an employment context. In addition, I have been trained in listening as part of his certification as a Title VI and Title IX investigator through the National Association for Behavior Intervention and Threat Assessment. Since 2015, I have been responsible for investigation summaries and investigation reports at the Tennessee Board of Regents.

Study Participants

The study sample was drawn from a population of Black men who were either presently attending or had recently graduated from a community college in the United States. Participants included Black men who had a high school diploma or a GED, were full- or part-time students, and were classified as either freshman, sophomores, or have had graduated.

Phenomenological methods included multiple techniques to address the research aim, objectives, and questions. Thomas (2017) pointed out that a systematic theoretical approach helps researchers develop an effective data collection and analysis method that results in the desired outcome. Participants were recruited through my collegiate networks at the Tennessee Board of Regents and other collegiate networks throughout the United States. I corresponded with contacts in my networks using email (Appendix A) and requested leads on Black men who fit the study criteria. I also contacted each community college Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students by phone to request permission to conduct Zoom interviews with study participants. Furthermore, I requested the Community College contacts disseminate the email message (Appendix A) on their websites, in blogs, or by other appropriate mechanism for communication to students. I am not a member of either of these associations.

Interested students were asked by email to respond to a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) to aid in the selection of participants. The participant sampling pool was limited to those participants solicited for this research. A signed informed consent form (Appendix C) was required from each participant prior to taking part in the study. I anticipated that approximately 8-10 students would agree to participate. The final number of participants was 10.

Data Collection

Interviews were used to collect data for the study. The interviewer and the interview questions were the instrument. Notes were used to capture additional thoughts during and following the interviews that were conducted and recorded electronically using Zoom online meeting software. Each interview began with open-ended questions about the participants' traumatic experiences and the influence of these on their learning outcomes. I followed up with more rigorous questions that gathered data with more depth regarding motivation (Charmaz,

2006). I conducted each interview after confirming the participants' written and verbal informed consent. Each interview consisted of a single recorded session transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who signed a non-disclosure form (found in Appendix E) prior to examining the interviews.

Procedure

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was required from East Tennessee State University and community colleges A and B. After approval was formalized, the researcher I contacted individuals within my collegiate networks in Tennessee through email (Appendix A) and by phone to request assistance and permissions. Potential participants were screened using a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) to ensure that each met the study's selection criteria. Based on the responses, five participants were selected from community college A and five from community college B. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher confirmed that the participant was in a room with a closed door and recorded interviews using the Zoom built-in recording option. Interviews were later examined and transcribed.

Phenomenological studies allow for detailed comments about personal situations that do not always lend themselves to generalization. To achieve validity, theories developed from phenomenological findings must be done transparently. It is important that readers can follow findings to theories and see how the researcher arrived at the interpretation. As preliminary themes surfaced during the first five interviews, I opted to add several follow-up questions to subsequent interviews in an effort to explore more on the topics and gaps that emerged.

To assure reliability and validity, interview transcriptions were returned to each participant for review. While each was made aware that he had the right to add, change, or remove any content, this practice was not encouraged. Following each participant's approval,

requested edits were made to the transcripts, this included reporting reflective thoughts shared by participants after the interview. Participants did not participate in writing or editing the final analysis or results because participants did not have access to other interviews. The participants were not equipped to provide insight into how the group of individuals collectively may have had similar or different perspectives.

Memoing (recording reflective notes progressively as researcher learns from data) occurred throughout each interview (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). My notes constant comparative analysis help minimize bias as both are reflective and aid in objectivity (Birks & Mills, 2011). Memos or notes served to remind me of my thoughts or impressions and helped separate opinions that may be imposed on the theory versus allowing the theory to emerge from data (Birks & Mills, 2011). Memos from this study included topics such as thoughts or concerns related to the interview, interpretation of relevant books and papers, reflection on the quality of the process, and thoughts about emerging codes, categories, and theories.

Data Analysis

I coded the transcripts in the same order that the interviews were conducted. This allowed for reflection and editing the interview questions as the study went forward. I used coding to contribute to his understanding of the participants' perspectives and to analyze their experiences. The codes were created based on data as the research progressed (Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). I conducted the coding both manually and through the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

Coding each transcript by breaking it down into meaningful and manageable portions of data, was a critical part of data analysis. In phenomenological theory, coding is essential for

ensuring that analysis of interviews is focused on the participant's experiences in a structured way. Coding also helped prevent overemphasis on the importance of any one aspect early in the study and ensured a thorough analysis of each interview (Charmaz, 2006; Stake, 2010).

Constant comparison is the process of analyzing, reanalyzing, and comparing new data to existing data (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). It was important that I continued to review data from previous interviews as each interview was coded so I could consistently make new connections until saturation occurred. The coding terminology used for this study was adopted from Urquhart and Fernández (2013) who termed the three phases of coding as open, selective, and theoretical.

Open Coding

Open coding refers to the phase during which each line of transcribed interview text is coded (Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). Line-by-line coding is a critical element of phenomenological theory methods (Birks & Mills, 2011; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). As the name implies, line-by-line coding involves coding each line of a transcribed interview by using a few key words to represent the data, as suggested by Charmaz (2006), Birks and Mills (2011), and Urquhart and Fernández (2013). This coding method allows the researcher to perform an in-depth evaluation of each interview; it also instills the discipline of phenomenological theory as it emerges from data. Line-by-line open coding typically results in many open codes (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart & Fernández, 2013).

Selective Coding

Selective coding begins when open coding arrives at a point where there are no new codes or when the only new codes emerging are related to core categories (Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). Generally, *categories* and *constructs* are interchangeable across

phenomenological theory methods (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). Some selective codes may emerge more often than others and sometimes a single selective code becomes the prominent theme or theoretical code (Birks & Mills, 2011; Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). When using selective coding, the researcher identifies emerging categories, but there will likely be fewer new codes in this phase. Urquhart and Fernández (2013) suggested revisiting the selective code categories if too many emerged from open coding. Reinforcing that coding is an iterative process, Urquhart and Fernández (2013) instructed researchers using this approach to review selective codes to determine if the codes best represent the open codes or newly emerging selective codes. Urquhart and Fernández also suggested that looking at the selective code attributes and potential relationships can help researchers distinguish between open, selective, and theoretical codes.

Theoretical Coding

Charmaz (2006) asserted that theoretical sampling begins after categories emerge. However, Birks and Mills (2011) argued that theoretical sampling can begin during open coding, as the data reveal concepts that signal potential theories and explanations of phenomena. Theoretical coding occurs through comparison of the codes and categories that emerged during open and selective coding which allows relationships among the codes or categories to be recognized (Urquhart & Fernández, 2013). The theory or phenomenon emerges from these relationships. All coding is iterative and new codes should constantly be compared to the existing ones to determine whether new categories are emerging and whether or not the categories have reached theoretical saturation. Memos are especially important during the theoretical coding process and must be included in the constant comparative analysis (Urquhart & Fernández, 2013).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are important in establishing trustworthiness. They specified that the way to ensure credibility and transferability is to make certain that those interviewed have an opportunity to discuss the phenomenon the researcher seeks to explore. Therefore, I used vignettes from the interviews to illustrate key themes for this study, that also served to support the study's results (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Another way to establish confirmability is to ensure no researcher bias. It is important to interpret what the data tell the researcher in an unbiased way. Because qualitative research approaches rely on primary data that could raise credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability issues, there is a strong focus on data trustworthiness in this research. I addressed all the above-mentioned reliability aspects to ensure that trustworthiness was achieved.

Credibility

Triangulation ensures that other sources of data were consulted to corroborate the outcomes of interview data. Cross-checking past studies on the effect of trauma on learning outcomes among Black men provided comparative data that improved the trustworthiness of the findings. Moreover, providing participants an opportunity to check their interview transcript further strengthened the credibility of the research process. Participants were given an opportunity to read their responses and change, delete, or add anything missing from the interviews. In addition to triangulation and member checking, the researcher also included prolonged engagement and persistent review of research outcomes to ensure credibility.

Transferability

Transferability requires the researcher to summarize the study's findings and apply study outcomes to other situations and contexts. The researcher has not confirmed that data outcomes collected during this study are transferable. However, the purposeful sampling approach used enhanced the transferability of study findings by maximizing data outcomes to reveal a broad influence on the larger context of learning.

Dependability

Credibility is closely related to dependability, but the latter is more related to reliability than the validity of conducted research (Connelly, 2016). The reliability of information shared by Black male students who have faced traumatizing events is achieved by subjecting shared responses to data audits. Data collected from participants are rich and thick, providing an auditing process to determine if research addresses the participants' situation. Without sufficient context, data reliability regarding participants' current situations could not be validated.

Confirmability

Qualitative research, in most contextual aspects, is conducted in order to replicate or improve earlier work. Confirmability supports a requirement for the identified data categories to reflect consistently on previously completed related work (Connelly, 2016). Each bit of data from an interview transcript in the present study can provide a basis for future tests and replicability when addressing related study problems. Moreover, I justified the outcomes of this study as an independent work that is free of bias or compromise to achieve predetermined objectives.

To be considered trustworthy, research must be accessible (Yin, 2011). Data from this study are accessible for 5 years following the study; all transcripts and recordings will be

disposed of thereafter. Future unavailability of data introduced a possible limitation to this study's future trustworthiness and credibility. Another potential limitation was conducting the interviews using Zoom versus in person. Birks and Mills (2011) noted that the researcher should increase attention to verbal communication to overcome the effect of missing non-verbal cues.

Ethical Concerns

I ensured that ethics remained a top priority throughout the study. Methods outlined in this chapter were paramount in ensuring the study's validity and reliability. The informed consent form that was read to and signed by each participant prior to their interview can be found in Appendix C and risks to study participants were minimal. All participants were over the age of 18 and none demonstrated an impaired mental capacity (as determined by their ability to perform as students in a degree-seeking program); meeting these criteria qualified them as participants in this study. Additionally, all recorded materials will be erased 5 years after final approval by ETSU.

Ethical guidelines established by ETSU's IRB were followed throughout the research process to ensure maximum safety and minimal risk for study participants. Before conducting interviews, informed consent detailing the purpose of the study, research method, recording instruments, and study goals was shared with each participant. Consent emphasized the right of participants to refuse to answer questions, to withdraw from the study voluntarily, and to retract any responses they considered unhelpful or confidential.

Privacy and confidentiality were assured through the use of pseudonyms chosen for participants. Before and during interviews, the purpose of the study and individual consent were reaffirmed; participants were given an opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy and possible changes. Identifying characteristics other than race, gender, age, and

college major were carefully monitored and screened to protect each participant's identity. Reaffirmed consent provided a mutually beneficial situation for both the researcher and participants (Pietilä et al., 2015). During interviews, I used many opportunities to engage participants with questions so as to avoid a predetermined outcome of the sessions.

Because the participants were Black men formally or currently enrolled in community colleges, I assured their protection and assured that their participation in the study would not affect their academic standing. I used pseudonyms to identify each participant, with the names running from participant 1 to participant 10. I also guaranteed the security and protection of data by ensuring that only authorized individuals were allowed to view the interview transcripts and that all project information was stored in a password-secured laptop.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the research method used to answer the research question and sub-questions. I offered a discussion of the procedure, study participants, data collection, and interview questions, to outline the details of how the study was conducted and who participated. A phenomenological theory methodology was used to develop a theory on how trauma exposure affects the learning outcomes of Black men in community college. All study participants contributed to this study by sharing their experiences. The goal of Chapter 4 is to provide study results and demonstrate that the methodology described in Chapter 3 was followed.

Chapter 4. Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how previous traumatic experiences of Black men affected their academic and social experiences while attending a community college. The study was guided by five research questions, and the data-gathering process was comprised of interviews with research participants. After each interview was transcribed, I used member checking to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. The participants responses informed the following analysis, which allowed me to identify emergent themes from the data that addressed the research questions.

Data Collection

In-depth, one-on-one interviews were the means of collecting the data for this study. Ten Black men participated in these interviews, each of which took place during an eight-day period using Zoom, a virtual meeting platform. A predetermined interview protocol (see Appendix A) determined the interview questions asked. Follow-up questions or questions for further elaboration were possible depending on each participant's responses to the questions. Zoom created an initial transcription of each interview which I then edited for accuracy. Each participant reviewed and approved their interview transcript. After participant approval was granted, I searched each transcript for key themes.

Participant Profiles

Of the 10 Black men who participated in the study interviews, eight were enrolled in a community college at the time the study took place, while the other two had graduated. There were students from five different community colleges across the U.S. who participated in the study. The community colleges they attended were public, state-supported schools with varying

student population sizes. I assigned each interviewee a pseudonym which was used throughout the study to protect the participants' identities.

Details about each study participant follows:

Chris is an 18-year-old Black man who is attending a community college with a medium-sized student population. He is the first in his family to go to college, classifying him as a first-generation student. Chris chose to attend community college so that he would be close to home which would allow him to help his family. In the interview, he stated that while in high school, he had focused on working and making money. Because of this, he was not as active in high school as he wished he had been. Chris's goal in attending the local community college was to major in business, reflecting his dreams of one day opening his own business.

Tim is a 19-year-old Black man attending a community college that, as in Chris's case, had a medium-sized student population. Tim will be a first-generation college graduate. Tim selected his community college because it was close to home and he had friends who also attended there. Tim's mother had studied in college but did not graduate. Although he had been a recognized athlete in high school, Tim decided to focus on the pre-engineering pathway at the local community college instead of pursuing sports.

John, a 19-year-old Black man, is in his second semester as a freshman attending a community college with a medium-sized student population. He would have been a third-semester student but chose to sit out in Spring 2021 because of COVID-19. John is not a first-generation student. His father had attended college, and although John's father did not graduate, he pushed John to take advantage of a state incentive grant that has paid his tuition and fees. John is pursuing a business degree with plans to own his own clothing store.

James is a 20-year-old Black man and a first-generation college student. He is in his fourth-semester as a community college student. He is a graphic art major at a community college with a population of nearly 7,000. According to James, neither of his parents had completed high school. James' decision to choose college was influenced by church members.

Kevin, a 25-year-old Black man, is in his sophomore year at a community college with an enrollment of roughly 8,500 students. Kevin hoped to be the first in his family to finish college. He planned to earn his 2-year degree in exercise science. He then plans to transfer to the local 4-year university to complete his bachelor's degree.

Tyler, a 25-year-old Black man, graduated from a technical community college that has approximately 8,500 students enrolled. Similar to Kevin, Tyler was a star football player in high school with dreams of going on to the National Football League. Tyler decided to use his state grants and Federal Pell Grant to attend the local community college, Tyler graduated debt-free.

Coby, a 34-year-old Black man, was a first-generation college graduate. Coby had a desire to attend a HBCU because several of his friends had enrolled in HBCUs. However, because Coby had neither the financial resources nor scholastic achievements that would have afforded him that opportunity, he attended an inner-city community college in a large metropolitan area. Unfortunately, Coby experienced a series of tragedies while attending college. He also had a traumatic experience with a faculty member that forced him to withdraw from college for several years. During this time Coby reported having to help take care of his siblings while his mother was working. Coby talked about having found a mentor who worked at his community college who was very instrumental in helping him navigate the collegiate process. Coby graduated from the community college with a major in education and went on to complete his bachelor's degree.

Jeremy is a 23-year-old sophomore at his local community college with a population of nearly 8,500 students. He was the first in his family on track to complete college. Jeremy's father had earned his GED and then started college but never finished. He played sports while in high school, which became a coping mechanism and a social outlet for him.

Cooper, a 25-year-old Black man, is a sophomore at a local community college with a medium-sized student population. Cooper was raised by grandparents who were not college graduates. Cooper's mother was in prison, and his father was unknown. His high school college counselor was instrumental in assisting him with the college enrollment process. Cooper relocated to the mid-South, hoping for a better experience and to get away from bad influences. Cooper is one semester away from completing his associate's degree.

The final participant, Jason is a freshman. Both of his parents graduated from college. Jason attended a private high school where he was an upcoming football star until an experience took place that made him walk away from the sport. Jason came to a community college as a result of the Tennessee Promise scholarship but his goal is to transfer to a university nearer home.

Interview Results

This chapter includes direct quotes from the interviewees and rich descriptions to support the evidence for emerging themes and categories for each of the study's research questions. The research questions were centered on the participants' experience with a distressing or traumatic experience prior to or during their community college enrollment. Specifically, the purpose of these questions was to provide a dialogue about experiences that affected each interviewee academically and socially. The following section explores the key themes that

emerged in answering this research question. A small concern that arose was the unspoken theme of silence, meaning an unwillingness to disclose their thoughts fully.

Research Question 1

Have you ever experienced or been exposed to a distressing or a traumatic experience, directly or indirectly, while enrolled in school at any level?

Death of a Loved One

The unexpected death of a loved one is common to everyone regardless of race and ethnicity. However, in Black culture, where family often is the nucleus, family members such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles often serve as either primary or co-guardians. Several of the interviewees talked about losing a close family member. For example, Kevin remembered:

In 2018, my aunt who was like a second mom to me passed away at the end of the school year. It was during finals, I could not think, sleep, and well, it was just challenging to say the least.

Tyler also reported experiencing a death in the family, saying, “I lost my grandmother right before the pandemic.” Coby also responded affirmatively to this question, reporting, “Yes, I had multiple deaths in my family during a short span while at college.”

Racial Trauma

Unfortunately, Black people have always lived with the fear that at any point in time either they or one of their family members could be the victim of a negative interaction with law enforcement (Reid, 2013). Recent events that have been highlighted in the news may not be simply isolated incidents to members of a Black community. As the struggle for equality continues, carefully considering the effects of these repeated images and videos have on their

mental health is critically important for Black people (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.; Reid, 2013). On this topic, Tyler disclosed:

Watching and seeing the injustice of police brutality made me go into a deep depression. There were days I could not get out of bed, let alone trying to attend school. My head for doing school was just not there.

John echoed this theme, saying,

[The year] 2020 was challenging for me; the George Floyd event and all of the social injustice sent me into a deep place. It was everywhere on the news, on Instagram and social media.

Jeremy also shared the impact that the images had upon him with the words: “I felt like I had to hide my identity as a black man to live.”

Traumatic images can cause triggers, anxiety, and undue stress (Daniels, 2016). In dealing with stress, Tyler sought counseling at the school he attended. According to Tyler, “I had a lot of issues. My depression hit really hard after the George Floyd murder.” Several of the participants spoke about the impact of trauma by social outlets. In contrast, Cooper disclosed an on-campus experience that affected him:

I was driving kind of driving a little bit fast. The school cops stopped me, . . . and I thought the situation ended that night, but as I kept going to school, I notice the police kept following me to class. I would be watched even though I was working on campus.

Community Violence and Trauma

Morenoff et al. (2001) defined community violence as a social occurrence that negatively affects youth from low-income neighborhoods (p. xx). According to Patton and Johnson (2010), the consequences associated with community violence exposure are well-

researched and documented. These analogies are consistent with the experiences that many of the participants addressed during their interview. For instance, Tim recounted, “A year ago, I lost my cousin to violence. He was gunned down right down from our house. We grew up in the same household, so we were more brothers than cousins.”

James had a similar story to tell: “Two years ago, while my mom was at the house, our house was shot up. Bullets everywhere. Thankfully, my mom and I survived. I was scared and angry.”

Some psychologists have emphasized the adverse developmental stages linked to community violence (Patton, 1990). For example, Gorman-Smith and Tolan (1998) linked witnessing or becoming a victim of community violence to a high risk for depression, PTSD, anxiety, aggression, drug abuse, and reduced self-esteem. They also reported that chronic and severe exposure to community violence has also been connected to coping strategies such as hyper-vigilance and heightened arousal states.

Code of Silence

Burdick-Will (2013) suggested there is a code of silence in the African American culture whereby people do not always speak up or ask for help when they experience traumatic events such as rape, abuse, or violence. Ward et al. (2013) supported this premise by documenting that African Americans often do not speak out after experiencing trauma. The silence often leads to mental illnesses such as depression, PTSD, and other conditions that are either unknown or misunderstood (National Institutes of Health, 2007). The National Institutes of Health (NIH) pointed out that African Americans consider mental illness highly stigmatizing and rarely seek treatment, which creates challenges in the home and in the classroom.

This premise was supported by my participants' answers to follow-up questions regarding counseling. Chris stated, "In my family, we don't disclose our issues to individuals outside of the family." Tim also voiced apprehension to counseling: "We were taught in my family [that] to get help for emotions was a sign of weakness." John added, "I tend not to share things with outsiders. Plus, I don't think a counselor could relate to my world." Jeremy admitted, "It may[be] would help to talk to someone, but I feel the best thing for me is just keeping to myself'

The research of Liebschutz et al. (2010) described this code of silence as street culture – a dominant culture of suspicion regarding authorities and health care professionals. Tyler expressed, "I went to the counseling center at the school, but I did not feel comfortable with sharing my experiences. I mean, there was no one who looked like me." Kevin shared Tyler's sentiment:

At first, I did look out for someone to talk to, but I didn't want to get anyone in trouble, so after going for about two visits, I stopped . . . counselors are not sensitive to my culture. They don't know the things that we deal with.

There were others who sought counseling through their pastors and local churches. Cooper stated, "It helped talking to my pastor. He was able to relate to me because he was from the same area as I was from." James also received help from his church saying, "My pastor and church family became my safe zone to talk through things."

Research Question 2

What role, if any, have past traumatic experiences played in your college academics?

Disengagement

Black students often start college with a lack of trust, purpose, or sense of belonging at their institutions. For Black males who have been exposed to trauma, the trust gap is even greater. The individual's ability to trust affects all areas of life, including relationships. In 2005, Schumm reported a connection between interpersonal loss and the long-term effects of PTSD on relationships. Schumm noted that exposure to traumatizing events was detrimental to students because it resulted in disengagement. Schumm's research helped identify how PTSD could cause disengagement regardless of gender and described the result in terms of a loss of social capital and becoming socially withdrawn. In the interviews for my study, some of the students described how their engagement had been affected by their traumatic experiences. For example, according to Chris:

I became antisocial and started to become more antisocial, staying to myself even more than I was before. It was hard to build relationships with classmates and even with instructors . . . I mean, I show up and do my work and leave . . . I don't like working in groups or being called on in class. That's not my thing.

Tim described himself as "no longer a people person. I walk into class and don't want to talk to anybody." He also spoke about the effect on ways he chose to interact with his classmates, adding:

I mean, they think something is wrong with me because I don't talk much . . . I am careful when I respond and what discussions I have with people, even in the classroom setting . . . I would catch myself like daydreaming.

Jason admitted that he had dozens of friends prior to his traumatic incident, but now he is guarded and stays away from commenting on controversial things such as social injustice in class. In his words, “I [would] rather have a conversation on a new game or Jordans than to say something about how I feel, particularly to classmates that don’t know me and who don’t know what it is to be a Black male.”

Virtual Classroom

Other interviewees reported a desire for classroom engagement. However, COVID changed the learning environment for all students. It is not the intent here to argue that COVID had a greater effect than other elements on the learning environment. Instead, the point is that COVID exacerbated social interactions that some of the participants desired and had eagerly anticipated. According to Kevin, interaction with classmates and instructors made him want to return to college. He specified:

I had a great professor who worked with me during my time of need. I probably would have given up, but he stayed engaged with me, even after the end of the semester. He allowed me to take an incomplete in his class so I could finish.

Meanwhile, Jeremy mentioned how the lack of classroom engagement affected his focus in school, saying, “The virtual schedule was not good for me. It was challenging not to interact with classmates.”

Research Question 3

Did you notice any physiological or emotional changes after any of the experiences?

At-risk Behaviors

Research has shown that changes in social norms and reaction to triggers are common after traumatic experiences (El-Bassel et al., 2011; Remien et al., 2019). According to Remien et

al. (2019), victims of traumatic experiences can be subject to reckless behaviors without regard to consequences. When asked about physiological or emotional changes, Tim responded by saying,

I became a little reckless I was getting into things or doing things that I am not proud of . . . I wanted to be left alone and looked for anything that could help me escape the moment or life. Every time I went home, I was scared that could possibly happen again.

Kevin had a similar response:

Well, yeah, I mean, when you lose a love one, that's something that you don't just recover from. As it relates to psychological changes, I would say it became harder to finish things . . . It affected me like to the point where I don't speak on things that I can't control.

Impact of Trauma on Mindset

Opara et al. (2020) explained that learners who have been exposed to traumatic events and environments tend to have difficulty concentrating on their studies because their brains are frightened, making it challenging for them to accommodate new concepts and ideas. John's thoughts reflected this view, "Yes, I battled with anxiety. That was something that I was not use to. I didn't know that was anxiety at the time . . . I worried a lot. I felt vulnerable; I still do."

Continuing, he grew emotional, saying:

Well, yeah, I mean, when you lose a love one, that's something that you don't just recover from. As it relates to psychological changes, I would say it became harder to finish things. I mean, sometimes, I would be in class and felt like I didn't have financial support to be in school. So, I started working two to three jobs. I mean, my aunt is gone. She was also a supporter for me, so I had to do what I had to do.

Tyler talked about similar struggles:

Yes, so much, I had to go through therapy. Most of my family was in Michigan, so I didn't have a large support base here in Tennessee. There would be days that I would just stay in a dark room with no appetite. My anxiety was off the roof. I did not have the energy for anything. My confidence was gone. I can't explain [why] I doubted myself, my abilities, even my intellect. I felt inadequate, and I felt like college was the last place I needed to be.

Cooper, whose traumatic experience took place on a community college campus, recalled how it affected his schedule in terms of when he felt he should take classes. He described his thoughts saying, "Yeah, I just didn't feel safe on campus. If it's daytime, cool, because I know there's more teachers around, and everything like that. But having late classes, I wasn't comfortable."

Jason also outlined how his trauma had affected his engagement with classmates, saying, "It affected me like to the point where I don't speak on things that I can't control. I am careful when I respond and what discussions I have with people, even in the classroom setting."

However, not all participants shared the same belief. For example, when asked whether he had been affected by trauma, Jeremy stated, "Not really. I have always been a humble guy." In contrast, James reflected, "I did not have any issues, I guess if any, [it] was the anger I had for my brother for putting me and mom in that situation."

Meanwhile, Tyler shared how trauma had affected his determination and motivation to stay in school. He recounted:

I was in English class, and the teacher had us read a paragraph. I couldn't really read good . . . it was like, I don't want to be made fun of. I don't want to be looked at as someone that's unintelligent.

Research Question 4

Do you think past traumatic experiences affect the way you interact with classmates or professors in the classroom?

Mistrust/Vulnerability

Liebschutz et al's (2010) study documented the vulnerable mindset of black males that causes them to struggle in any environment that challenges them to accept help. In a similar study, Wood and Turner (2011) examined reasons Black men refused to contact teachers, engage in small group discussions or activities, attend faculty office hours, or provide answers during classroom discussions. The authors noted that their participants indicated a desire to engage fully but were apprehensive due to fear of being perceived as unintelligent.

In the interviews and the analysis that followed them, the effect that spoken words, as well as experiences, have had on the students emerged. For example, Chris said, "I have been excluded by certain activities in a school by a White person in authority that angered me. As a result, I always stay to myself."

Other participants echoed a theme of mistrust in their responses. Tim shared the following insight about himself saying, "I am not a people person in class. I am quiet. I am more closed off. I don't expect to go into a class to meet new friends and get out."

James admitted to a lack of trust and the perception of risk it brought to his everyday interactions:

I feel vulnerable that my close circle is not the same. Yes, we face barriers. People look at us as a down race. Because they see other Black people killing us or killing ourselves that they don't see us moving beyond that. It did trigger anger for me when I was stereotyped. I was called a thug, unprofessional, just because I have dreads in my hair. I got angry and cut them off because I did not want to hear that anymore. I am not saying I cut my hair to please someone, but I did it so I would look professional in a professional setting. I don't feel invisible on campus because I stand up for myself. We are watched more than others because people think that we are going to cause trouble. And, too, it can be based upon who we hang around. People judge you by the crowd you are with.

Jason mentioned that he was always cautious about saying something that could make him appear stupid. He also described how he "felt judged on grammar and dialect whenever he spoke."

John did not talk about a traumatic experience that happened to him on campus; however, he mentioned taking precautionary measures by not engaging in class. He went on to specify the impact on his studies and relationships by observing, "I can't say it really has not affected me in interactions with faculty or classmates. I have not been marginalized while in school. I try not to get too close to students, just to be safe."

Cooper echoed some of the same sentiments: "I am cautious even when going to my professor's office. People look at us [Black men] wondering different things. You never know what they are thinking about you." Kevin reported feeling triggered by his surroundings. He specified:

Sometimes being in certain buildings or classes can trigger a memory for me. I have learned how to deal with past trauma so that it will not mess me up . . . I did take out a period of time, so I didn't return immediately. It was harder to focus in the end. I was trying to focus after death of a family member, and I was working two different jobs, and dealing with the death of a family member was not the best experience. It has triggered my confidence in the classroom. I try not to let it bother me where it separates from being what I need to be in the classroom.

Support Base

Each of the participants talked about the importance of support in helping them cope with the aftereffects of trauma. Tyler shared how class interaction and his association with a school organization helped him with his interaction:

I enjoyed talking to classmates and professors, so the virtual classroom was hard for me. I was glad to find Black staff that I could relate to. They were able to take me under their wings. Anytime I felt marginalized or unwelcomed, they were there . . . when you don't have that type of support, you can lose a piece of you.

Coby found a mentor in one of his teachers. He described her vividly:

. . . she saw right through me. She knew that, I was somebody trying to put on this front, trying to be a class clown, but she saw right through that. She said "I see, I see it in your writing. I see it in the way you talk." She said, "I can help you with this. If you let me. But if you are going to continue to act like you don't need help, then I'm done."

Research Question 5

Do you think stereotyping of Black men can trigger anxiety, anger, or isolation among Black students in college?

Threat of Stereotyping

There are certain classroom activities (e.g., oral presentations, tests, classroom discussions) that reinforce negative perceptions. Students may experience anxiety that exerts a negative effect on their academic performance (Aronson et al., 1999). Stereotype threat is a social, psychological predicament that arise from widely-known negative stereotypes about a person's group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). As a result of the stereotype, "anything one does or any of one's features that conform to it make the stereotype more plausible as a self-characterization in the eyes of others, and perhaps even in one's own eyes" (Steele & Aronson, 1995 p. 6). For my study, the term *stereotype threat* indicates a negative perception toward people of African descent due to the color of their skin.

Although *stereotyping* is not a word new to academia, this term has given clarity to many inner-city sociological behaviors. Upon hearing the above definition, the participants shared their impressions of anger, resentment, and discontent regarding current behavior within their institutions that they labeled being stereotyped. Chris even related excessive outreach to Black men as being a part of the ongoing stereotype threat:

They need to get rid of the mindset that we are seen as inferior and that we need their help . . . The only thing that some people see when they see me is a Black guy who is poor and who needs some assistance.

With these observations, Chris expressed his sentiments that colleges should be taking care in their outreach to marginalized students that they are not responding as a result of stereotyping a group of students.

In contrast, Tim believed that stereotypes are often unintended in nature. He noted:

It is not something that people knowing[ly] do. When we have [a] conversation about sensitive comments, people make comments about things that they don't fully understand. It's not that they do it intentionally, but they have no idea of the struggles that Black men go through.

John's thinking was similar. He shared the following thoughts about stereotyping:

It is something that people do unconsciously. Some people say things not realizing or experiencing the struggles of Black men. They make statements before really understanding or being sensitive to what we go through.

In higher education, stereotype threat occurs when negative stereotypes about groups are reinforced, either intentionally or unintentionally. As a result, receiving their education in stereotype-laden classroom environments, young Black men may exhibit disidentification, which is a psychological disengagement from academic matters and pursuits, as a protective mechanism against racism and being stereotyped (Aronson et al., 1999).

For example, James indicated:

We face barriers, and some people look at us as a down race. Because they see other Black people killing us or killing ourselves, they don't see us moving beyond that . . . I was called a thug, unprofessional, just because I have dreads in my hair . . . I did not want to hear that anymore . . . so I cut them off.

While discussing stereotyping, Keven expressed concern about how society has promoted a negative view regarding certain looks for Black males. Some of the specific details he mentioned included the following:

Stereotyping is often a trigger for Black men. If you look at the Black men at school, you see a lot of Black guys with braids. The media has told you that these students are not smart or [they are] thugs. But some still do [wear this hairstyle] at my community college because of appearance. The media is doing a better job of changing how stereotypes of Black men [are perceived]. You can have braids and still be smart. Once you get to know that student, you will find out that they are good people. Give us a chance, and don't judge us at first riff.

You can tell . . . at my community college, they are trying to have culturally sensitive events to try and change the stereotypes that we have about the cultures. This is better than just wanting to call the police on us. I felt better at the community college than I did at the university that I transferred to after graduating from the community college because the services help me to get on plan to help graduate and stay in school.

Tyler also shared his thoughts on stereotyping saying, "I did have to take some time off. I felt like I was not good enough. Maybe I should try something else . . . it comes with the role of being a Black man in America." Tyler also described how stereotypes often manifest itself within classroom settings:

I was in a class and the teacher was talking about athletic build, and she singled me out. And another time we were talking about single parenting, she never asked me if I was from a single parenting home, but she looked right at me and said,

“Right, Tyler?” I didn’t want to say anything because I am trying to pass this class.

Tyler voiced frustration and a sense of powerlessness when he admitted:

My main goal on campus is go through school without upsetting White people because it is an area they control. He felt strongly that regardless of support measures towards people, black men are still targeted at his institution . . . Black men are watched more closely on campus – not just Black men but all Black people.

Coby’s experiences with stereotyping paralleled those of the other interviewees. He talked about how he rejected societal stereotypes about Black men:

I had issues going on at home, meanwhile, trying to balance the professor’s judgment and ridicule of me in class. I felt the impact of these stereotypes even more my second semester in college, where that particular instructor pull me to the side and said, “Look, like I understand that you’re here, but I’m going to be completely honest with you . . . You know . . . maybe college isn’t for you. You know, you’re not passing the class. And you know you’re struggling . . . big time,” and he just said, “man maybe you, maybe you should find another route, maybe another journey because you know, maybe, because college is not for you.” And so [I] didn’t realize the professor wasn’t helping me; instead, he was pushing me out. Because of this professor I took off from school for about 4 or 5 years.

On the other hand, Jeremy did not seem to have been affected as much as the other interviewees by stereotyping, as his response showed:

I guess it's two sides to it for me. Me being a Black man hasn't had – maybe the same effects others have experienced . . . I've never directly experienced prejudice or any explicit bias, based on my identity. If I had been discriminated against before having been in college, then it could have more of an impact for me . . . but I could understand [how] it is for other people.

Jason talked about how he had to maintain firm boundaries in the face of others' stereotyping behavior:

I will give you an example: The other week, I was walking into my class, and two White girls asked, could they touch my hair? I was like, No, I am good. I wanted to ask, could I touch theirs, but if I did, I knew I would be in someone's office.

The interviewees shared various traumatic life experiences. These experiences ranged from physical threats, to social injustices, to other life struggles that have affected their social and academic lives. Their traumatic experiences changed their behavior, triggered apprehension, and caused fear that made them apprehensive and cautious in places where, at one time, they had felt secure. A difficulty during the interview process was getting the majority of participants to be more open and descriptive. However, the reactions of this study's participants were similar to other related studies (Jacobs, 2017; Liebschutz et al., 2010; Reid, 2013).

Chapter 5. Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how previous traumatic experiences of Black men affected their academic and social experiences while attending a community college. Previous chapters outlined the problem this study sought to explore, addressed the research questions that led the study, provided the significance of the study, defined the key terms used, addressed the limitations and delimitations of the study, reviewed pertinent literature, and discussed the qualitative methodology used in the study. My role as the researcher, the population, data collection methods, data analysis methods, credibility, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of the study were also discussed. In Chapter 4, I identified key themes that addressed the five research questions. In this chapter, I will discuss the major findings, draw conclusions, and relate the findings to the literature highlighted in Chapter 2. Finally, I will suggest recommendations for practice and for further research.

Discussion

Trauma can have a devastating effect on a person's physiology, emotions, impulse control, self-image, relationships with others, and their ability to think, learn, and concentrate (Irving & Hudley, 2008). In low-income communities, trauma is linked to many problems, including addiction, chronic illness, depression, anxiety, self-harming behaviors, and reactive aggression. Brandford (2020) pointed out that dysfunction and distress can be reduced by increasing awareness and offering support to victims of traumatic experiences.

Educators hope their students will transition to higher levels of learning with excitement and enjoyment, but this is not always the case. McGruder-Johnson et al. (2000) argued that most Black students have traumatic experiences in one way or another. The effects of trauma often prevent students from being able to learn in the classroom, and students find it challenging to

process the effects of trauma and prolonged stress. This in turn affects their cognitive abilities (Foa & Kozak, 1986). Consequently, Black students may be forced to suspend their regular academic goals to manage stress and trauma.

Black school children are vulnerable to trauma because they may not have adequate prior experiences to know how to handle those sorts of situations (Helms, 2003). While in school, Black students may be affected by experiences they have had because of the color of their skin. They may be forced to drop out, or when they transition to a higher level of education their performance may not be comparable to students from other races. My study explored the effect of exposure to trauma on Black men's college experiences at community colleges. The questions addressed were designed to explore the lived experiences of Black men in the classroom and the effect trauma had on their college experiences.

Conclusions

This phenomenological study was completed by conducting one-on-one interviews with Black men. My analysis of each interview resulted in identifying key themes that were present in all of the interviews. These themes provided key responses to the five research questions that guided the study. The findings of this study could inform future practices for higher education faculty and administrators on how to support and increase retention and graduation rates for Black men. The findings could also lead to further research on support-based initiatives for Black men and their academic success.

When asked about being exposed to a distressing or a traumatic experience, there were diverse responses to this question. Prior to conducting the interviews I anticipated hearing dramatic stories, stories that could easily be identified as the reason for the participants' trauma. However, I was surprised when three of the participants spoke about the deaths of loved ones.

While the majority of the students experienced some form of violence, racial profiling, and microaggressions, there were others who experienced traumatic events that were natural occurrences in everyday life.

In Banyard and Cantor's (2004) study, trauma is defined as a "range of events that overwhelm an individual's coping capacities and involves threats of serious injury or death to self or someone close to the individual (p. 207)." Trauma has a lasting effect on an individual's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual functioning.

Death, loss, and grief are natural parts of life. But when death arrives suddenly and unexpectedly, the grief of the loss can be overwhelming and traumatic (Daniels, 2016). Several of the interviewees described the loss of a loved one as a traumatic experience from which they are still recovering. Keven recalls how, "In 2018, my aunt, who was like a second mom to me, passed away at the end of the school year. It was during finals. I could not think, sleep, and, well, it was just challenging, to say the least."

In a related study, Schumm (2005) documented the connection between interpersonal loss and long-term effects on student engagement. According to Schumm, exposure to traumatizing events was detrimental to students because it resulted in disengagement. Schumm concluded that interpersonal loss caused disengagement, which resulted in the loss of social capital and becoming socially withdrawn (Schumm, 2005). The findings were consistent with responses made by Tyler and Coby; both identified the unexpected deaths of family members as the reason for their academic struggles.

Several of the participants experienced direct and indirect trauma that was racial in nature. There were two concepts that arose from this theme. The first is the lasting effects that images, videos, and social dialogue cause; experiences that all took place at the participants'

community colleges. The second theme that arose was racial trauma. On this topic, Tyler disclosed that, “Watching and seeing the injustice of police brutality made me go into a deep depression. There were days I could not get out bed, let alone trying to attend school. My head for doing school was just not there.” This was a theme that was echoed by John and Jeremy. All three emphasized that the social unrest during the summer of 2020 caused triggers and phobias that were reactions to these events being displayed on social media and on television. These reactions are supported by Daniels’ (2016) research, as he argued that traumatic stressors are often triggered by continual reminders in the media of perceived threats. Social and mainstream media, such as television, present painful reminders and have the potential to trigger strong emotions. Although most African Americans watching these incidents on television or social media are not traumatized, some viewers may develop phobias and a self-consciousness that results in disengagement.

This phenomenon could be observed in one of the participant’s interactions with police. Cooper disclosed:

I was driving, kind of driving a little bit fast. The school cops stopped me . . . and I thought the situation ended that night, but as I kept going to school, I notice the police keep following me to class. I would be watched even though I was working on campus.

Another theme that was described was the effect violence or perceived dangerous events had on causing trauma. The concept of community violence is defined as witnessing, hearing, or participating in violent events in a school or neighborhood (Patton & Johnson, 2010; Patton et al., 2012). One of the participants, Tim, has experienced trauma due to the combination of community violence and the death of a loved one, as one of his close relatives was shot near his residence. Community violence is usually experienced passively, as another participant, James,

recalls, he was sitting in the living room with his mother when suddenly bullets were going through the house.

Unfortunately, these are often ongoing and normal occurrences in the inner city. Patton and Johnson (2010) found that exposure to community violence has been linked to negative outcomes for minority youth in poor urban communities. Patton and Johnson also asserted that previous research primarily quantified the direct adverse effects of individual exposure to community violence on a person's psychosocial function. Although studies have failed to show the effects on cognitive performance, research has demonstrated that direct and indirect exposure to community violence harm social mechanisms (Patton & Johnson, 2010). Williams and Kniffley (2020) more recently supported the finding that community violence results in mental trauma, noting that exposure to violence has been shown to affect developmental outcomes such as academic achievement.

Morenoff et al. (2001) demonstrated that violence affects individuals and also the communities where they live. Their study claimed that those who have been exposed to violence lose their social capital, with trust and respect being replaced by power and control. These social norms are often carried into other social settings, such as the church or workplace, as community violence victims search for surroundings that are safer than environments characterized by violence or crime, leading to these norms being entrenched throughout every facet of the community. Schwartz et al. (2005) examined 184 African American outpatients in a neighborhood mental health facility to determine the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the researchers argue that PTSD is a common but under-recognized and undertreated source of mental illness in the urban community. These studies provide insight on how a traumatic experience, whether direct or indirect, can have long term effects.

One of the biggest concerns I had prior to the interviews was whether the participants would speak to me without knowing me. I could tell, at times, that it was uncomfortable for some of the participants to speak because of the nature of the responses I received from the first question. In that event, I followed up by asking if they sought or received any help. Several of the responses reflect their hesitancy:

- “In my family, we don't disclose our issues to individuals outside of the family.”
- Tim also voiced apprehension to counseling: “We were taught in my family [that] to get help for emotions was a sign of weakness.”
- “I tend not to share things with outsiders. Plus, I don't think a counselor could relate to my world.”
- “It may[be] would help to talk to someone, but I feel the best thing for me is just keeping to myself.”

Liebschutz et al. (2010) described this code of silence as street culture, a dominant culture of suspicion for authorities and healthcare professionals. Tyler expressed, “I went to the counseling center at the school, but I did not feel comfortable with sharing my experiences. I mean, there was no one who looked like me.”

Ferreira (2012) acknowledged that silence is viewed as strength and to break the silence is to go against an unwritten code. There is a code of silence in the African American culture, whereby people do not always speak up when they experience traumatic events such as rape, abuse, or violence. As a result, mental illnesses resembling PTSD and others are either ignored or misdiagnosed. For many of these young men, counseling is needed. The effects of the trauma experienced was obvious throughout the sharing of the participants stories. The literature review

supports my findings, as the majority of these students did not seek help, even though it appeared that they desired to speak with someone.

It seemed evident that in cases where interventions were presented, they were presented before the prerequisite to treatment – trust. This premise is supported by Cooley-Strickland et al. (2011) who argued that a lack of cultural understanding can lead to inaccurate diagnoses and inappropriate interventions, which may increase mistrust of the mental health system (Baker & Bell, 1999). Many African Americans forgo treatment because of having to receive mental health services from clinicians who do not understand their experience. Kevin spoke of this when he stated:

At first, I did look out for someone to talk to but I didn't want to get anyone in trouble so, after going for about two visits, I stopped . . . Counselors are not sensitive to my culture. They don't know the things that we deal with.

Ward et al. (2013) also described a code of silence within the African American community, in which people do not speak out when traumatic events, such as rape, abuse, or violence are experienced. The silence can lead to mental illnesses, such as depression, PTSD, and other conditions that are either misdiagnosed or misunderstood (National Institutes of Health, 2007). The National Institutes of Health (2007) pointed out that African Americans consider mental illness highly stigmatizing and rarely seek treatment.

Another observation I made was that the participants who sought help did so at their local church. The Black church is a source of resources for the Black community largely because there is a level of trust or an established relationship that provides support.

I also asked about past traumatic experiences and what role they played in participants' college academics and disengagement was mentioned several times. Disengagement is not an

issue that is particular to any race or gender. The reason why it is a concern for Blacks is because Black males still have the lowest rates of retention and graduation, and many of these participants expressed a low desire for interaction, particularly in the classroom.

Class participation is still a popular grading item for college courses. Often disengagement and disconnection in the classroom are seen as disruptive behavior. Some participants did not understand the need to interact in the classroom. Their fear of being misunderstood or perceived as unintelligent influenced their actions and behaviors. This instructional method places many Black men at a disadvantage, particularly when a faculty member requires engagement in class. This is a premise that is supported by McGaha-Garnett's (2013) research. This also demonstrates that the purpose of the classroom is often lost to the student after a traumatic experience.

This is also problematic because if the purpose of being in the classroom is not apparent then there is a higher chance of disengagement and isolation. Additionally, Black men may have struggled as children between learning and entertaining, and children who suffer from PTSD often seek attention through emotional outbursts (Loeb et al., 2011).

As a result, if receiving their education in stereotype-laden classroom environments, young Black men may exhibit disidentification, a psychological disengagement from academic matters and pursuits as a protective mechanism against racism and stereotypes. The students sometimes begin to reject association with academia due to stereotyping. Scholars, such as Aronson et al. (1999), have discussed the academic disengagement that occurs as a result of stereotyping and negative perceptions of Black men.

COVID-19 impacted the teaching and learning environment for all community college students. College campuses were closed and the traditional classroom setting changed to a virtual

platform. While I was expecting most of the problems to come from issues of accessibility, it was interesting to note some participants identified missing the interaction with students and faculty as the primary source of their difficulties. As one of the respondents stated, “The virtual schedule was not good for me. It was challenging not to interact with classmates.” I was taken aback that some students missed the interaction with the faculty, as the teaching environment can be difficult. However, there is an invisible respect present, Tim mentioned:

I had a great professor who worked with me during my time of need. I probably would have given up, but he stayed engaged with me, even after the end of the semester. He allowed me to take an incomplete in his class so I could finish.

Participants were asked about physiological or emotional changes after traumatizing experiences. Some of the participants expressed that shortly after their traumatic experiences they indulged in behaviors that could have led to deeper issues although none of the participants ever disclosed what action or conduct took place. Only Tim admitted that it was something that he knew he should not do. As I was looking for patterns it also became clear that at-risk behavior is behavior that enhances the risk of self-induced harm and it also becomes an issue of wellness.

Resolve and determination are key factors in academic achievement. A theme that kept resurfacing was the effect that trauma had on mental focus. For the purposes of this research, I have placed these behaviors under the terms of *self-efficacy* and *motivation*. Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s judgment of his or her capabilities to perform given actions. (Schunk, 1991). Albert Bandura defined self-efficacy as a person’s belief in his or her capability to successfully perform a particular task (Heslin & Klehe, 2006). Together with the goals that people set, self-efficacy is one of the most powerful motivational predictors for how well someone performs at almost any endeavor. A person’s self-efficacy is a strong determinant of their effort, persistence,

and strategizing, as well as their subsequent training and job performance (Heslin & Klehe, 2006).

Accumulated research supports positive links between students' academic efficacy and their achievement (Artino, 2012). Specifically, evidence has shown that students with high self-efficacy in various academic domains chose to engage in tasks that fostered the development of their knowledge, skills, and abilities in those areas; exerted effort in the face of difficulty; and persisted longer at challenging tasks (Artino, 2012). It is important to understand the dynamics of confidence and academic abilities when completing academic tasks as shown by Bates et al. (2011), who found a positive connection between self-efficacy and academic preparedness. Bates et al. observed that as students' self-efficacy increased, their anxiety about mathematics decreased. Using focus groups, Ihekweba (2001) found that Black men and women perceived that confidence in their academic performance potential was a critical facilitator of persistence. Wood (2011) noted that students perceived a lack of confidence in their academic abilities as a hindrance to their achievements and persistence in community college. Wood also found that high self-efficacy allowed participants to embrace academic challenges, particularly when faculty doubted their abilities. Participants' confidence in their ability to perform academically allowed these challenges to serve as motivators or as opportunities to prove themselves. Wood concluded that self-efficacy aids young Black men in achieving their educational goals.

When asked about how past traumatic experiences affect the way participants interacted with classmates or professors in the classroom, the following themes emerged: mistrust, vulnerability, and support base. The interviewees indicated a theme of mistrust of institutions – especially those that can be associated with historical discrimination and oppression. While this fact should not be generalized to all Black men, this was the belief of the majority of the

interviewees. In a similar study, Wood and Turner (2011) examined why Black men refuse to contact teachers, engage in small group discussions or activities, attend faculty office hours, or provide answers during classroom discussions. The authors noted that the participants indicated a desire to engage fully but were apprehensive due to fear of being perceived as unintelligent. Trust must be established with these young men before there is effective engagement. Often, students are given assignments and are asked to meet expectations without the significance of established relationships. I compare this with the other theme of a support base. One of the reasons that some of the participants felt safe with speaking to their pastor or members of their church was because a relationship was already established. Often, services from other sources are offered to these men without establishing true relationships.

Liebschutz et al. (2010) described the challenges of providing Black victims of violence with support and care. A similar qualitative method was used in which semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 Black men who were the victims of gunshot and stab wounds. Researchers found a distinct lack of engagement with social services that provided support (Liebschutz et al., 2010). Additionally, all the interviewees in my study demonstrated a dominant culture of suspicion regarding authorities and healthcare professionals. They felt the mistrust was justified by close police supervision while receiving medical care for injuries. Participants noted that healthcare personnel allowed police to question them while receiving treatment, which made some victims feel as though they were considered perpetrators or guilty and, as such, it heightened their vulnerability and lack of trust. Liebschutz et al. (2010) attested to the vulnerable mindset that African American males struggle with in any environment that challenges them to accept help. According to Liebschutz et al. (2010):

The predominant factors affecting the success of Black males are psychological in nature, resulting directly from barriers, negative messages, and stressors in and out of the college environment. These environmental challenges impact students' motivation, focus on academic endeavors, and academic confidence. (p. 1)

Finally, I asked about stereotyping of Black men and if it could trigger anxiety, anger, or isolation among Black students in college. All of the interviewees mentioned stereotyping; it was embedded into the discussion to the degree that it was a part of their cautiousness. While there were two participants who were not as vocal, in the end they did attest to the fact that they actively had to work against stereotypes by having to prove themselves in certain situations. Appearance, pronunciation, and articulation among others were areas where the interviewees felt the pressure of not being perceived by negative perceptions. These responses are consistent with other studies regarding stereotype threat (Jacobs, 2017; Liebschutz et al., 2010; Reid, 2013).

Stereotype threat can lead to social and educational inequality for ethnic minorities. According to Steele (1997), stereotype threat is the state of being at risk of confirming, as a self-feature or trait, an adverse stereotype about a person's social group. Shelvin et al. (2014) explained that when someone is perceived in terms of membership to a salient group, there is an increased likelihood that performance will be undermined because of concerns about confirming negative group stereotypes. In this sense, stereotype threat can adversely affect performance and failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Aronson et al. (1999) researched the traumatizing effects of racism, often in the language of stereotype threat. In higher education, stereotype threat occurs when negative stereotypes about groups are evident. Students in situations that can reinforce negative perceptions, for example, standardized tests or classroom discussions, may experience traumatic anxiety that has

a negative effect on their academic performance (Aronson et al., 1999). As a result, receiving their education in stereotype-laden classroom environments, young Black men may exhibit disidentification as a protective mechanism against racism and stereotypes.

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore how previous traumatic experiences of Black men affected their academic and social experiences while attending a community college. While there is not a one-size-fits-all formula, awareness is a step in the right direction. A paradigm shift has to be created, particularly in institutions of higher learning. Institutions have to embrace Black men as brothers, sons, fathers and most importantly as people. Trust has to be established with these students. Ultimately, the first step to building trust with Black students is letting them know that, they matter, and they belong.

Recommendations for Practice

As a result of this study the following recommendations are made:

- Institutions should research strategies to build and sustain strong relationships with Black men.
- Additional orientation sessions for first generation marginalized students (To help this group of students in understanding the potential and purpose of student services and resources available to them);
- Institutions should develop partnerships with community organizations such as 100 Black Men, Black Fraternities, Black churches, and other non-profit organizations to create mentorship programs for Black men;
- Curriculum development that integrates tutoring services and classroom curriculum; and
- Intentionally target universities with diverse populations when advertising faculty positions.

Recommendations for Further Research

The following recommendations for further research are made:

- A study that explores the perceptions between the Black Church, Black students, and academic success;
- A study on the relationship between life coaches and academic success for Black students;
- A quantitative study on the relationship between co-curricular courses and academic completion for Black Males;
- The relationship between community policing and academic retention in the inner city;
- A study explaining identification: the intersectionality of black men and sexuality on academic achievement.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

PART I - INITIAL/FIRST CONTACT

Instructions: Contact will be made with each of the participants by email, telephone, or messaging on social media. The initial contact will be as follows.

Dear (name): My name is Willie Thomas, and I am working on a dissertation on the perceptions of trauma exposure on learning outcomes among Black men in college. I would be honored if you would agree to an interview to discuss your experiences of being a Black man attending a community college. I am particularly interested in participants who have undergone a traumatic experience such as violent acts, micro-aggression and racism, cyber bullying, or low self-esteem due to culture-related extreme expectations. The interview session will be confidential and your name will not be mentioned in the report. The interview may be conducted and recorded through Zoom©, over the phone, or through other methods that are convenient for you. Please let me know if you are interested in being interviewed.

Upon agreement to take part in the interview, arrangements will be made to schedule the interview at a time and through a method convenient for the participant.

PART II: THE INTERVIEW MEETING

Instructions: Upon convening the interview meeting, each participant will be read the following statement:

Good morning (afternoon, etc.). Thank you for coming. This interview involves questions about the perceptions of trauma exposure on learning outcomes among Black men in college. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the effect of trauma exposure on learning outcomes. There are no right-or-wrong answers and you may decline to answer any question or refuse to take part in this interview. I want you to be comfortable and say what you really think and feel.

Recording Instructions:

If it is okay with you, I will record this Zoom interview. The purpose of recording during the interview is so I can record the details of our exchange while also carrying on an attentive conversation with you. Because of the small number of participants and the specific events discussed, I cannot guarantee your comments will remain confidential; however, you will have the opportunity to read over all statements and views attributed to you before the final dissertation is published.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Date: _____

Pseudonym: _____

Background/Demographic Questionnaire

1. Tell me a bit about your family background.
2. Are you still enrolled, and if so, what is your enrollment status?
3. What was or will be the date of your graduation?
4. Why did you choose this community college?

Interview Questions

- (Q1). Have you ever experienced or been exposed to a distressing or a traumatic experience, directly or indirectly, while enrolled in school at any level?**
- (Q2). What role, if any have past traumatic experiences played in your college academics? How did that experience affect your learning outcomes in the classroom?**
- (Q3). Did you notice any physiological or emotional changes after any of the experiences?**
- (Q4). Do you think past traumatic experiences affect the way you interact with classmates or professors in the classroom?**
- (Q5). Do you think stereotype threats trigger anxiety, anger, and isolation among Black students in college?**

Statement to be read following interview:

Thank you for taking part in this interview. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

DQ1: Is there any other information you think it would be useful for me to know?

Disclaimer: Interviews will be semi-structured, meaning these questions may not be asked verbatim and conversations will be allowed to flow in a friendly style. The investigator will be led by the participant into areas that may not be shown here, but that will remain within bounds of minimal risk.

VITA

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