Gay Black Male Student Perceptions of Their Experiences in Higher Education

by

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Abstract

Black male graduation rates are among the lowest in colleges and universities nationwide. The added reality of having a gay identity could present even more of a challenge for Black male students. This qualitative phenomenological research study incorporated a positioned-subject approach in order to describe and analyze the lived experiences of gay Black males who graduated from college. Both social and academic experiences of the students were examined, including how they perceived their campus environment. This study revealed that the participants did not disclose their sexual identity until after their sophomore year in college, and the participants who did disclose their identity found comfort about their sexuality through friendship with Black female friends. Other findings included: participants found that their academic environment did not adversely affect their educational pursuits because of their sexual identity or their race; most of the participants reported that they did not have an issue with being a gay Black male on their respective campuses; and most of the participants reported that if they could do it again, they would reveal their sexual identity sooner.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my entire family and friends for their support, love, encouragement, and patience. A special dedication goes to my parents, Marie Mimose Loiseau and Yves Loiseau, who supported me throughout my life and motivated me to finish. My doctoral hooding and commencement one way of demonstrating your support for my graduate education.

To my sister (Daphne Loiseau), I also dedicate this dissertation to you for telling me how proud you were of me throughout my education. I also dedicate this publication to my aunt (Pauline Joseph) for being a second mother to me and always being there in times of happiness and needed care.
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Earning a doctorate degree was, by far, one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences of my educational career. Throughout my education, I was an average student who was told, because of my learning disabilities, that it would be difficult and nearly impossible for me to go to college. At first, those words felt like the truth, and that I would never be successful in life. However, I was determined to prove them wrong and push myself to achieve excellence. Today, I am earning my education doctorate. I am indebted to the experiences gained from Mount Ida College, Suffolk University, and Northeastern University. These institutions have provided me with lifelong educational values that prepared me to be the best in my field. Now as a college administrator, I have become a trusted mentor to many students. I hope that my success will show them that nothing or no one should hold them back from achieving their goals.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Many colleges note diversity and graduation rates as high priorities among their institutional goals (Kezar, 2008). In order to achieve these goals, leaders in higher education increasingly find they must understand the problems and challenges faced by students.

One population at risk is that of Black males. Recent research has revealed that males are not performing academically nearly as well as their female counterparts (Combs et al., 2009). Many male students spend more time addressing and satisfying their social identity needs rather than their academic education (Harris and Struve, 2009). While some male students are able to balance both social and academic needs, others are unable to fit into their new environment and choose to withdraw from college (Hucks, 2011). This is especially true for Black males, who have the highest non-completion rate of degree attainment (Campbell and Campbell, 2007). Black male students are more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to defend their manhood and masculinity as a social identity and evidence toughness in order to be accepted (Harris and Struve, 2009). With their identity thus challenged and questioned, Black males are even
more at risk of dropping out of college (Harris and Struve, 2009).

Within the population of Black males, another subset exists, the gay Black male. Adding gay on top of the challenges mentioned above could contribute to the social identity challenges faced by the subset of gay Black male college students.

The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered (GLBT) lifestyle is very well known in American society; and more students are revealing their sexual identity and coming out, expressing their sexual identity at an earlier age than in the past (D’Augelli and Hershberger, 1993). Despite this, many colleges and universities fail to provide adequate consideration and support for gay students and may be less likely to retain them (Taulke-Johnson, 2008). Where these factors overlap sexuality, race, and gender and where they relate to academic underperformance, further research is needed.

There is little research regarding the experience of gay Black males in higher education. This study researched people who live as Black, gay male college students, and it sought to provide readers an opportunity to better understand this topic. This study examined the experiences and perceptions of openly gay Black male students, as well as gay Black male students who chose to stay “in the closet” for a period of time during their college years, in fear of coming out. Additionally, this research aimed to provide information for practitioners who may seek to develop a supportive environment for gay Black male students. It researched gay Black males’ experiences in college and it examined whether existing research concerning the college experience of gay Black male college-aged students is similar to the actual college experiences, including academic, social, and psychological environments, of this group of research participants.
1.1 Problem of Practice

Gay Black males struggle with their identity because they are less likely to be accepted by straight Black males (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Gay Black males feel isolated by the community at large within colleges and universities (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly, 2013). Because of this, gay Black males are widely misunderstood in the multicultural communities of colleges and universities. While the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) provides data on gay students in high school settings (GLSEN, 2006), there is a lack of data specifically on gay Black male students experiences in higher education. However, GLSEN data pertaining to high school students do provide general demographic information about GLBT individuals and reveal the rate at which they complete high school and enter college (GLSEN, 2006). It is important to note that these GLSEN data are not disaggregated by category of gay students or by racial categories. GLSEN does report that gay students who identify as a person of color are more likely to drop out of college than their Caucasian counterparts (GLSEN, 2006). With this information in mind, there are many gay Black male students who do graduate from college. This study addressed why that is so, as well as their perceptions of their experiences that helped them complete college despite having the possibility of dealing with harassing and toxic environments within their respective colleges. Is it because they were able to connect with a mentor within the college’s multicultural affairs office? Or did they find a community of students who supported them as individuals? Or was it because of the individual students’ strength and tolerance to deal with these issues better than others? Gay Black males who survive high school develop a sense of hope that in college they will no longer have to deal with harassment and continue to become victims of bullying (Majied, 2010). This study examined these questions to identify conclusions and to find out what is
the perception of gay Black males experiences in higher education.

The added stress of not being fully accepted as a gay Black male can lead to a higher risk of withdrawal from college (Majied, 2010). That information is a cause for concern among the gay Black male student population as well as for leaders within colleges and universities (Majied, 2010). The purpose of this study was threefold; first, it sought to provide an understanding of how gay Black males describe their experiences in college and the effect that has on those who consider withdrawing from college. Second, it aimed to provide information for practicing professionals in higher education to help them both understand and support individuals who are gay, Black, and male. Finally, the study sought to shine a light on the challenges of being a gay Black student on a college campus. These challenges include both academic preparedness and the social aspect of being gay, Black, and male.

1.2 Positionality Statement

This topic is of interest to the researcher, who is an educational administrator working with students at the college level. Gay Black male students struggle with “fitting in” on college campuses and look for a supportive environment so that they can be successful and remain at the institution. A review of literature regarding gay Black males indicates that they are searching for a safe haven to keep them from negative experiences involving their peers, professors, and administrators, who often treat them “differently”. Many administrators and professors lack the cultural competence to work effectively with the gay Black male population (Fischer, 2007). This research topic was identified in order to determine whether or not gay Black male students who participated in the study saw themselves at a disadvantage compared to their heterosexual counterparts when it came to educational achievement. The researcher hoped
to gain the perspectives of participants not only about their own experiences, but also regarding support services that have been (or could have been) helpful to them in terms of achieving their own educational goals.

1.3 Summary of the Research and Goals

The college learning environment is a very important factor in student experience and success in obtaining a college degree. Gay Black males need a place to learn and feel safe in their collegiate environment without fear of bullying. This study was seen as being particularly important because it considered the challenges faced by gay Black men. It is hoped that this study offers research-based information that will be useful for college administrators as they work to provide a supportive learning environment for their gay Black male students.

The intellectual goal of this investigation is to explore how gay Black males who attend a college or university describe their experiences while attending their respective college or university.

1.4 Research Question

Gay Black males represent a unique population of students within higher education. As the description suggests, they have three important identities: gay, Black, and male. The primary question guiding this research is: What are the lived experiences of gay Black males in the social and academic settings in higher education from the student perspective?
1.5 Definition of Terms

This study defines several terms taken from the Dictionary of the English Language, including:

1. **GLBT**: Pertaining to Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgender people collectively

2. **Bully**: A blustering, quarrelsome, overbearing person who habitually badgers and intimidates smaller or weaker people.

3. **Out of the closet**: Openly avowing homosexuality.

1.6 Organization

In this chapter, readers have the opportunity to understand the problem of practice, examine the central research question, and review the theoretical framework that was chosen to support the research in this study. In Chapter 2, a literature review provides an overview of what other scholars have written about this topic as well other closely-related topics. Chapter 3 contains an explanation of the methodology of this study and the steps by which the research was conducted and the data were analyzed. Methodology also includes how the participants were selected, how confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and how data were safeguarded. Chapter 4 includes a discussion on what the researcher found by interviewing the participants and analyzing the resulting data. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the research that explains the relationship between the theoretical framework, literature review, and the study’s findings, as well as conclusions.
1.7 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is critical theory. McLaren’s (1998) definition and view on critical theory provides a detailed understanding of why a negative social atmosphere will affect a student’s educational experience throughout his or her educational career. Critical theory offers higher education professionals a lens to "examine and uncover the ideology of their institution and assess who is privileged and who is disadvantaged by the organization's prevailing value system" (Bess and Dee, 2008).

Critical theory was chosen as a theoretical framework for this study because of the need for a clear understanding of why academic socialization is a critical aspect of a student's educational career (McLaren, 1998). McLaren closely studied student behavior during the socialization process as students grow from childhood to adolescence to intellectual adulthood. This theory addresses the social behavior patterns of educators and administrators as it seeks to understand the process by which students gain acceptance in their social community. McLaren's framework provides a specific focus on educational settings and allows people to understand the social dynamics of the classroom, which includes behavior based on social atmosphere. In addition, McLaren (1998) discussed in his theory the need for educators to understand politics, culture, and racial identity. McLaren focused more on understanding the students in the classroom than on teaching teachers how to teach. While his focus was on multicultural and socioeconomic understandings, his conceptual framework can be used to study and explain the issues experienced by gay, Black, males.

To provide a better understanding of critical theory, it is important to look at its history. Critical theory was created by a group of researchers in the early 1960s at the University of Frankfurt to disrupt and challenge the status quo
Critical theory was designed to frame research in such a way that is insightful, informational, and provides critical truth to institutions in their research (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002).

In the 1960s, critical theory was often used by scholars as a way to communicate their philosophies of the culture of that time. It was said that “many academicians who had come of age in the politically-charged atmosphere of the 1960s focused their scholarly attention on critical theory. Frustrated by the forms of domination emerging from a post-Enlightenment culture nurtured by capitalism, these scholars saw in critical theory a method of temporarily freeing academic work from these forms of power” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002, p. 88). Critical theory allows writers to express and readers to understand the social construction of an experience (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002).

For this study, critical theory was chosen for multiple reasons. Critical theory allows researchers to dig deeply into the complexity of the human psyche (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002). It allows researchers to analyze linguistic and discursive power. These authors stated that researchers use critical theory to “study the way language in the form of discourse serves as a form of regulation and domination” (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002, p. 94). Utilizing critical theory allowed the researcher to gain access to the participants thoughts through the use of carefully-constructed, open-ended questions that allowed for the responses to each question to be read and analyzed in a way that provided an understanding of the experiences of gay Black males in higher education.

Utilizing McLaren’s (1998) critical pedagogy provided a way to investigate how gay Black male students perceive their heterosexual counterparts, and why they do not accept them in their social environment in the college setting. The theory helped frame the concept and assisted the researcher with an understanding of the experiences of gay Black males and the importance of
a safe and supportive environment for every student (Gortmaker and Brown, 2006).

1.8 Theoretical Lens

The use of critical theory in this study helped frame both the questions and answers to the research questions discussed in Chapter 1 in order to understand the perceptions of gay Black males regarding their college experience. The following concept map provides a graphic view of how the research in this study was analyzed. The critical theory method helped frame questions in a way that allowed the researcher to understand each participant’s human psyche (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2002). Using the language expressed by the participants during their interviews, the researcher was able to analyze the data reported by the participants in order to address the research question: What are the lived experiences of gay Black males in the social and academic settings in higher education from the student perspective?

Figure 1.1 shows how critical theory helped readers understand students’ perceptions and experiences in their college environment. This map provided an understanding of how a sampling of gay Black males perceived their experiences and lived within their environment, which could in turn provide a supportive environment for gay Black males enrolling in and completing college.

Using critical theory to inform this study provided information about gay Black males’ actual perceptions and experiences in a higher education setting. It provided an understanding of gay Black males’ lived experiences (Husserl, 1970). It is hoped that these research-based findings will benefit higher education professionals who are in a position to provide a safe and supportive environment for gay Black males at their respective college settings.
Figure 1.1: Concept Map
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Gay Black males are less likely than other students to receive a Bachelors degree from an accredited college or university (Dugan and Yurman, 2011). They may experience harassment and isolation while in college (Harris and Struve, 2009) and struggle to fit into the college environment because of their multiple minority identities (Goode-Cross and Good, 2009). Gay Black males often experience homophobic remarks, bullying, violence, and discrimination while they are students in higher education (Dugan and Yurman, 2011). As Black students, they may also encounter racial discrimination, isolation, and segregation (Chang, 2007). Common to male students in college, they are likely to be concerned about issues related to manhood, masculinity, power, and popularity (Harris and Struve, 2009).

While there is little literature or data specifically on the retention rate of gay Black male students on college campuses, GLSENs data provide some limited information on the national trends regarding gay students at the high school
level. However, the GLSEN data do not provide a breakdown by race or ethnicity (GLSEN, 2006). Many Black students who self-identify as gay do not make their homosexual identity known to the public. This makes it challenging for researchers, such as GLSEN, to report these data. While keeping their sexual orientation to themselves, additional concerns may arise, such as depression, lowered self-esteem, and shame when among other gay students (Goode-Cross and Good, 2009). What is difficult for GLBT students may be even more difficult for gay Black males as they encounter multiple stereotypes and multiple cultural norms (Goode-Cross and Good, 2009).

In addition to homophobia in the college setting, Black students may also be dealing with their academic readiness for entering college. For example, the ACT (American College Testing, 2011, April) reported that only four percent of Black students nationwide met the benchmarks for all four subjects on the ACT test. While the percentage of the overall aspiration-attainment for Black students exists because of their willingness to sit for the test, the number of Black students who were academically prepared for college level courses was still low. Black students continued to fall behind as the lowest category of all racial and ethnic groups in terms of college preparation (American College Testing, 2011, April). According to Kuh (2007), students who do not attain grade-level proficiencies in math and reading by the eighth grade are less likely to be college-ready at the end of high school.

This literature review includes three studies that have addressed the topic of gay Black males experiences in higher education. The following titles in the peer-reviewed and research-based literature were identified: *Factors Affecting the College Choice of African American Gay Male Undergraduates: Implications for Retention* (Strayhorn et al., 2008), *Queering masculinity: Manhood and Black Gay Men in College* (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly, 2013), and *Com-
monalities and Differences among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Students: Considerations for Research and Practice (Dugan and Yurman, 2011).

These three studies provide an understanding of the work of other researchers and allow readers to gain a background understanding of the experiences of gay Black males in different collegiate settings.

Strayhorn et al. (2008) conducted a study looking at what African American gay males considered when choosing a college. While that research is closely related to the current study, it examined conditions perceived as critical to their success in higher education (p. 88), as opposed to the college experience itself.

The Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) study called “Queering masculinity: Manhood and Black gay men in college” explored how manhood and masculine-identity beliefs may affect Black gay males academic and social experiences in college. While that research has some similarities to this doctoral research study, the focus of Strayhorn and Tillman’s research was on identity factors affecting gay Black males’ overall experience in college, while this study really focuses on the perceptions gay Black male students have on the experiences that impacted them as college students.

The final area in this review is gay students. Dugan and Yurman Dugan and Yurman (2011) provided research on similarities and differences among lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students. That information provides an understanding of the experiences of gay students on college campuses and on the intersection of engagement and retention of gay students on college campuses. Dugan and Yurman Dugan and Yurman (2011) studied the gay experiences of college students on a national level.

While GLBT student concerns have been an issue for many years, it is only in the last five to six years that GLBT issues have been in the spotlight as more and more GLBT people live out of the closet (Whatling, 2009). People are coming
out and identifying their sexualities at an earlier age (D’Augelli and Hershberger, 1993). This may be happening because of media coverage regarding same sex marriage, a new phenomenon that has transitioned so quickly that educators and administrators are unable to keep up with how the societal changes have affected the student body and how to identify and deal with their concerns (Rankin et al., 2010).

In examining the research findings of other authors, it is interesting to note the similarities in research. Even though the topics vary in academic concerns, some examples of these topics are: what African American males consider when choosing a college; masculinity and its relationship to the gay culture; and Black males and their likenesses. However, having a clear understanding of how gay Black males choose a college serves a purpose in this study, as it provides readers with an understanding of what students are looking for in a college environment.

2.2 Stayhorn, Blackwood, and Devita Study

Stayhorn et al. (2008) sought to identify the decision-making processes of Black gay men at predominantly White institutions, and they identified factors that they perceived as being critical to successful retention in college (p. 90). Two questions helped guide their research: “What factors did African American gay males consider when choosing to attend a predominantly White institution” and “What factors do Black gay males identify as critical to their success in college, as defined by retention” (p. 90).

Looking at college choice, Stayhorn et al. (2008) identified two key findings. First, participants noted that they came to college in order to “come out”, and therefore, they chose a college environment that they thought would allow them space to “come out” and to “live out” (Stayhorn et al., 2008). The authors gave clear examples from their interview subjects about how gay Black males
are looking for safe and secure environments in order to feel successful in their academic setting. This allowed the researchers to understand and share how important it is for higher education institutions to provide a safe and supportive environment in order to recruit and retain Black gay males. The second finding was that participants considered the location of the school when choosing a college (Strayhorn et al., 2008). Many of the participants in the study noted that they wanted to move away from home and become more independent. They felt that if they stayed home, they would have to deal with their familys preconceived notions, negative perceptions, and biases (Strayhorn et al., 2008).

On the retention side, Strayhorn et al. (2008) found that in addition to searching for the right college, their participants identified several critical factors connected to their success in college. First, a supportive relationship with peers and family, self-determination, and independence were important for the participants involved in this study. “Participants consistently identified supportive peer relationships that they believed influenced their success in college. And, almost without exception, participants referred to White gay peers and reported having few Black gay friends. When they did report that they had Black friends, most were Black heterosexual women” (Strayhorn et al., 2008, p. 99). The second key finding was that the “participants perceived themselves as self-determined, motivated, and independent, which in their view affected their ability to succeed in college” (Strayhorn et al., 2008, p. 99).

2.3 Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly Study

Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) conducted a study on Queering masculinity: Manhood and Black gay men in college. Their study also researched gay Black men in college; however, Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) focused on the construction of manhood and masculine identity, as well as how those
affected academic and social experiences in college. They found that participants construct and understand manhood and their masculine identities in one of three ways: “accepting, adhering to, and performing traditionally-masculine norms, intentionally, or subconsciously challenging hegemonic notions of Black masculinity through their behaviors and self-beliefs, and recognizing that their masculine identity is influenced by other social factors and locations” (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly, 2013, p. 83).

Strayhorn and Tillman-Kellys study is similar to and relevant for the present study for several reasons. The authors wanted to analyze Black gay male undergraduates lived experiences in order to uncover the nuances between them and their peers who identify differently in terms of race/ethnicity or sexual orientation (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly, 2013, p. 85). They also investigated how multiple social identities intersect and influence Black gay male undergraduates negotiation and construction of masculine identities. The authors pointed out that their results yielded insights into the way campus or other professionals can work with these students to promote their success in college (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly, 2013, p. 85).

Findings in Strayhorn and Tillman-Kellys study indicated that the role of Black masculinity affected students subsequent performance in the academic environment regarding how their perception of how a male role is supposed to be (Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly, 2013, p. 97). Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly found that the expression of masculinity and identity was an extremely important factor for gay Black men in feeling safe and secure in their educational environment or around other Black men on campus. Some examples of masculine identity behaviors that Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly found that their participants engaged in were masculine activities such as intercollegiate sports, competitive debates, working out in the gym, bragging about having sex with
multiple women, choosing masculine majors such as engineering or programs where students can make money, and using their physical features (e.g., height, weight, masculine tone) to display their manhood. Many of the participants in the Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly study engaged in activities to conceal their sexual identity while asserting their masculine identity; however, these activities also compensated for failing to meet what they perceived to be traditional standards of Black masculinity in their own minds.

Additional findings in the Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) study suggested that their subjects challenged hegemonic masculinity through their behaviors and beliefs and that Black masculinity and manhood were affected by social factors. Their participants alluded to the ways in which their masculine conceptions and ideals about Black masculinity and manhood are influenced by myriad social factors, sociopolitical contexts, and social identities or locations such as race, gender, social class, and religion. They also found that students adapted to their environment in order to fit into the social norms.

2.4 Dugan & Yurman Study

Homophobia is a cultural prejudice in today’s society, and many GLBT groups have formed to fight the prejudices and educate the world about this cultural phenomenon. Dugan and Yurman discussed how some GLBT students see homophobia in their campus environments.

Dugan and Yurman (2011) found that three-fourths of GLBT students labeled their campuses as homophobic, and more than one-third reported experiencing harassment within the past year. While there are a number of institutions that do not have a supportive cultural awareness around the gay community, the ones that do show GLBT students completing their educational aspirations at a higher rate than institutions where the community is not aware and not
supportive (Dugan and Yurman, 2011). However, Dugan and Yurman found no difference based on sexual orientation in terms of retaining students for their educational outcomes. Gay and bisexual men reported “greater degrees of civic empowerment than peers, while gay men reported greater growth than lesbians and heterosexual men in their capacity to apply knowledge across contexts” (Dugan and Yurman, 2011, p. 203). Lesbian and gay students were significantly more involved in political and social activism and reported being mentored by faculty at significantly higher rates than their heterosexual peers (Dugan and Yurman, 2011). This indicates that mentorship by faculty and staff is not only an option for Black students but for GLBT students as well. Harper (2012) found that Black students were more successful in a college community when they were connected with their professors and higher level college administrators, such as deans, vice presidents, and the president. Many Black students, particularly Black male students, tended to struggle in college settings academically when not supported (Harper, 2012).

2.5 Summation

The studies identified for this review of literature focus on gay Black males who have more than one challenge affecting their educational aspirations. Each of these studies revealed a common challenge: fitting into their environment and finding a safe and supportive community to be a part of. All of these studies focus on racial diversity, Black student academic readiness, gender support, and GLBT support, which all are related to this research study. It is important to note that these common themes all state that Black males are less prepared for higher education and that diverse subgroups listed above need to be adequately supported for academic success in college. In this study, readers will gain information about gay Black males and their academic and social experiences in
higher education as shared from their standpoint.
Chapter 3

Research Design & Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This doctoral research study focused on understanding the actual experiences of gay Black males while they were students in higher education. Consequently, the research question guiding the study was: what are the lived experiences of gay Black males in the social and academic settings in higher education from the student perspective?

A qualitative research method was chosen for this study. Specifically, the researcher used a positioned-subject approach to inquiry, which is described in this chapter. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed in order to understand the perspectives held by gay Black males, as well as their recollections of their lived experiences in higher education.
3.2 Research Design and Tradition

A positioned-subject approach focuses inquiry on participants understandings and interpretations of their various experiences, always from their own particular “position” within a given setting (?). This method of research allows for the study of gay Black males and their experiences as they identify their “positions” or “standpoints”. In the positioned-subject approach, understanding is gained directly from the participants. In other words, participants directly relay their view of the social and academic experiences they encountered on their respective campuses. Gay Black male student participants were asked to describe the support they received and support they believed they needed in order to successfully pursue and complete their educational careers.

A positioned-subject approach to inquiry is a type of phenomenological research, designed to understand the lived experiences of the researchers participants. Specifically, a positioned-subject approach to inquiry focuses on the standpoint or position of the participants. In this study, each participant was asked to focus on and respond to each interview questions from their particular position or standpoint as a gay Black male.

The participants for this study were gay Black males who graduated from college; thus, it was a positioned-subject approach to inquiry. It was a suitable research design for this study because it allowed the researcher to gain data that consisted of perceptions and recollections directly from the participants.

Collecting data through the use of a positioned-subject approach to research allowed the researcher to gain the recollections of the experiences of this population of gay Black male graduates while they were on college campuses. The positioned-subject approach research design allowed for a detailed and focused standpoint, as told by each participant as they addressed the research question for this study (Conrad et al., 2001). The basic purpose for using a positioned-
subject approach for this study was to identify information from their own “position” or “standpoint” that could shed light on social and educational college or university experiences and the support perceived as needed by gay Black males in higher education (Conrad et al., 2001).

Evidence shows that individuals with the multiple diverse identities of being gay, Black, and male will be less likely to graduate from college than other categories of students (Goode-Cross and Good, 2009). The positioned-subject approach allowed for a strategy to collect and analyze data surrounding this phenomenon. This design allowed the researcher to gather information from the students’ perspectives and apply it to the problem of practice. Using the positioned-subject approach, participants described their recollections of their lived experiences of the issue being studied; hence, a qualitative study using the positioned-subject approach research design was selected as an ideal choice for this study.

3.3 Phenomenology

“A phenomenological research design is a research study that allows researchers to focus and gather data describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 72). “Phenomenological research gathers individual experiences (data) related to a phenomenon; and, through analysis of those data, the researcher renders a description of the universal essence of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 72).

There are three types of phenomenology; Hermeneutics phenomenology, empirical phenomenology, and transcendental/psychological phenomenology. These types of phenomenology all have approaches under each of their umbrellas that descriptively lay out the details for researchers. A positioned-subject approach to inquiry falls under the Hermeneutics umbrella, which allows researchers to
3.4 Participants

The sample proposed for this inductive inquiry included three gay Black males who graduated from a college, university, or other institution of higher education. The following criteria were used in selecting the sample for the study. Participants must:

1. identify as gay and must be Black males,
2. be over the age of 21 and not older than 35,
3. be willing to describe their social and academic experiences as gay Black males in higher education, and
4. have graduated from the institution where they began.

There was a need to research the issues gay Black males encountered while in college, and the use of participants in a positioned-subject approach study showed the reality of their social and academic experiences on the campus they attended (Phillips-Pula et al., 2011). Recruiting these participants was done through outreach to colleagues of the researcher, who identified students who met the criteria and were willing to participate in the study.

3.5 Data Collection Overview

Collecting data from participants in the study took place during individual personal interviews conducted by the researcher (Seidman, 2006). The interviews were conducted in person at a location of each participants choosing. This was
done to protect the participants’ confidentiality because one-on-one would not allow for any other person to be a part of the meeting and would allow the participant to know that the meeting was confidential. Also, participants chose their location for the interview because it provided a level of comfort for them. Participants names were not identified in any part of the study (nor was their institution). An understanding of this process from the participants was considered to be critical, particularly if the participant was not totally “out” about his sexual orientation.

Collecting data in a positioned-subject approach research study advanced the intellectual and practical goal by providing evidence leading to an understanding of the social and academic experiences of gay Black male students on a college campus. What this research design provided is an understanding from the perspective of each of the students based on their position as a former college student who experienced life as a gay Black male while they were in college. The basic principle of a phenomenological study using the positioned-subject approach to research was applied in order to gain participants’ stories based on their perspectives as gay Black males. All interviews with participants were transcribed in order to include the interview in the study. The names of the participants were changed to keep their personal information anonymous. Findings were then analyzed according to the process outlined in the following section.

3.6 Data Analysis Process Overview

The data analysis process can be the most challenging part of a qualitative design because it is often difficult to explain such processes in a narrative format (Creswell, 2013). The stories of the participants in this study provided meaning that formed an understanding of the research question being studied. Because
the meaning was generated by the intersection of the participants’ lives and the researcher’s interpretations, the primary source of the data for this study was the stories shared by the participants. Conducting an analysis of the data in this phenomenological positioned-subject approach study occurred as follows:

1. Once data were collected, it was important to spend time to organize those data. In the positioned-subject approach, data were separated by files and organized in such a way as to work in order from beginning to end.

2. Once the data were organized, they were read, re-read, and noted in order to determine which coding methods to use in order to allow for the themes to emerge. At that point, a style of coding was selected in order to best ascertain the proper method to record the findings of the study. A holistic coding method was used for the gay Black male study. That method was used because it provided an approach that allowed decoding of multiple data to create emergent themes (Saldana, 2009).

3. Once all data-handling processes and procedures were followed, the next step was data analysis in order to understand how the research question was addressed. Coding practices allowed the researcher to look at the data collection and interpret what the data were “saying”. This process is called first cycle, or initial coding. In first cycle coding, a process was developed in order to analyze all data collected individually in order to fully understand what the participants said in their interviews. For this study, theming the data was a coding function that worked well. The reason for that is based on the way this particular coding function works. Theming the data allowed the researcher to identify similarities within the data and set categories or themes. Saldana (2009) stated that the foundation work will lead to the development of higher-level theoretical constructs when a researcher is able to create themes that are clustered
Saldana (2009) also stated that the coding function aligns well with a positioned-subject approach study because the essence of a theme is to capture the phenomenon one tries to understand. In terms of the current study, themes provide readers with an understanding of the lived experiences of gay Black males in a collegiate setting.

4. Once the first cycle coding was analyzed, the second cycle coding was used to analyze all data collected into one category. The use of axial coding allowed continuation from first cycle coding. The axial coding process went deeper into first cycle coding. That coding function allowed the researcher to categorize each theme into groups that helped address the research question of the study.

5. Once coding was completed, the process of describing the data and explaining the themes was completed. That was an opportunity to describe the academic and personal experiences of gay Black males in the college setting in a collective, integrated way (Creswell, 2013). That process was followed by assigning meaningful names in order to allow the reader to understand how the information from the participants was analyzed.

6. The next step was to develop a textural description of what happened (Creswell, 2013, p. 191). That process allowed for the position or viewpoint of the collective experience and the integrated essence of the findings to emerge.

7. Tables or graphs were designed to explain visually what the data revealed. That allowed for a visual presentation of the data gained from the positioned-subject approach, analyzed through a systematic process.

Creswell (2013) defined different perspectives on data analysis. The positioned-subject approach fits well with this particular study because of the way the data
were analyzed. That approach provided adequate information to support the study. The positioned-subject method was suitable for the current study because it allowed for the emergence of the specific themes sought in this study of gay Black males.

### 3.7 Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

There were many ethical considerations when conducting this research. The confidentiality of the participants was critical for their anonymity and their safety. Many students may not publicly identify as gay due to fear. At the time of this study, all the participants may or may not have been out students. The participants needed to be willing and able to complete the interview process. It was important for the participants to feel comfortable in order for the researcher to receive honest responses. The participants were sent a memo that detailed the steps of the interview process and what was involved. That informational memo provided details that helped build trust among the participants and hopefully motivated them to complete the process. Students were not singled out nor are any names published in this study, in order to preserve their identity and anonymity. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one, which also helped to ensure confidentiality for the participants. The participants were assured that the interview would be in a safe and supportive environment of their choice. There was no risk if an interview was not completed, and the results of each individual interview were not distributed to anyone. Participant names were not published. Only the analyzed collective results were published to provide evidence for this study. Each participant was asked to participate in one interview in this study, which lasted for approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

In order to maintain trustworthiness, the use of peer review allowed for an honest validation process in the study. A peer reviewer was identified to ask
the researcher hard questions about the methods, meaning, and interpretations. The peer reviewer acted as a “devil’s advocate” to ensure the honesty of the study (Creswell, 2013).

The data, including the audio tapes, were retained and stored in a locked cabinet at the researcher’s home, in accordance with Northeastern University’s Institutional Research Board (IRB) policies. Once all study requirements were completed, all procedures and policies required by the university’s IRB were followed.

3.8 Protection of Human Subjects

Participants in this study were not subjected to harm. They were not identified, and their identity was and will be kept anonymous. The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their social and academic experiences as college students. All ethical considerations were adhered to and followed in accordance with the guidelines set forth by the Northeastern University’s IRB.
Chapter 4

Research Findings

This chapter presents the findings of this research study, which were obtained through interviews with participants in the study. The chapter also includes the systematic and thorough analysis of the research data. A phenomenological research design was used for the study, which focused on the lived experiences of the participants and the identification of common themes through the data analysis process (Creswell, 2013). The research used a positioned-subject approach, in which the participants identified and described their “position” or “standpoint” regarding their experiences as gay, Black male students at their respective colleges (Conrad et al., 2001).

The positioned-subject approach of this study was important in shaping the collection of data from the participants who were selected because of their standpoint or position (?). The experiences as perceived by the participants were clearly identified in their respective stories, and there were remarkably common themes across all participants. “Themeing the data” allowed the researcher to identify the common social and academic experiences each participant recalled and described from their time as college students at their respective colleges
Table 4.1: Colleges Participants Attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Selectivity</th>
<th>Private or Public</th>
<th>Male-to-Female Ratio</th>
<th>% of students from MA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Less Selective</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>30:70</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Moderately Selective</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>7:93</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Highly Selective- Ivy League</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>53:47</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Saldana, 2009).

This chapter provides a detailed description of each of the participants as they shared their lived experiences and stories as gay Black male college students. First, a brief overview of the colleges where the participants attended is provided. This is followed by brief descriptions of the participants. Pseudonyms “P1”, “P2” and “P3” were used to keep the participants’ identities confidential. Finally, the analysis and an introduction of the common themes are discussed.

4.1 Overview of Colleges Attended

The researcher identified three gay Black male individuals who agreed to serve as participants in this study. These three participants all attended and graduated from four-year colleges in New England. Table 4.1 contains details of the colleges that each of them attended. The environment of the colleges where the participants enrolled was also included in order to provide a detail added about the participants’ experiences.

These colleges are of very different types, and they serve diverse student needs. The colleges allowed the researcher to look for a way to identify similarities at different types of institutions. On the college’s websites, all have a page on diversity that also highlights GLBT support for students. Each college also has a staff member whose sole responsibility it is to support diverse students at
Table 4.2: Participants’ Familial and Education Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Family Size</th>
<th>High School Type</th>
<th>Location Raised</th>
<th>College GPA</th>
<th>College Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Brockton, MA</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>Psychology &amp; Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Bridgeport, CT</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>Education &amp; Human Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Bronx, NY</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>Music &amp; African Diaspora</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the college, which includes GLBT students as well as Black student support.

4.2 Description of Participants

Each of these students’ lived experiences and stories was unique; in this section, information regarding each participant’s experiences as a college student are presented. All three participants enrolled at a college in New England without having researched the college based on the institution’s GLBT environment. Table 4.2 contains familial and education demographics of each participant including their age, size of their immediate family, the type of high school that each attended (public or private, their hometown, college GPA at the time of interviewing, and intended college major. All participants were referred to the researcher by colleagues in higher education who mentored these students during their college experience.

Each of the colleges has a description of diversity/multicultural affairs on their website as an important component and a culturally-competent environment for their students to experience on their respective campuses.
4.3 Participant One

Participant 1 (P1) is a gay Black male who grew up in the greater Boston area. He grew up with both parents in the household and had a brother and a sister. He attended public schools all his life and was a very good student in high school. P1 described himself stating:

“I am shy at first, but outgoing when I am with friends, as well as outspoken, very insightful, and curious about life.”

P1 chose his college at the last minute. He wanted to attend a large research university in the South but his parents told him that they would not support him if he enrolled at that university. The College he eventually selected gave him the best financial aid package, so he enrolled. P1 did not look for a college that was gay-friendly; his main focus was really to find a four-year college that he could afford and as he put it “getting education, as well as in-field experience”. P1 graduated with a 3.42 cumulative grade point average and double-majored in Psychology and Biology.

“When I started as a freshman, I didn’t really think anything of it. It was a new experience, I had fun, and I met a lot of people, and I enjoyed my freshman year. And then, as I got into deeper into my schooling, I would say my expectation was kind of below, in terms of the amount of guidance I needed to get an aspect of the schooling itself. Like, having someone guide you, and help you make decisions about what to major in, and like what classes to take, and talking to you rather than just telling you. So, people that really helped me my freshman and sophomore year, they were really just telling me the classes that I needed to take, and classes I shouldn’t or should take, not necessarily the classes that interested me. As far as internship
P1 made a lot of friends; it was a new experience, and he really enjoyed his freshman year. He loved that people were so open and friendly. He did not find support from faculty at the College; rather, he relied on an upper class friend who guided him through the best classes to take. He found a lot of support from the Learning Circle, his friends and his admissions counselor. The Learning Circle is a government-funded program at the College that provided a mentor to students who were at risk of not completing their college degree due to various circumstances. After P1 completed the college’s placement exam, the results of his exam placed him in the Learning Circle program. The Learning Circle provided students with an academic coach to help them through college.

During his freshman year, P1 did not discuss his sexuality. He said that the experience of people just getting to know him was great. P1 did not have much expectation when he enrolled at the College because it wasn’t his first choice. P1 explained:

“I would say my expectations were kind of below, in terms of the amount of guidance I needed for myself as well as what I expected from the school.”

However, P1 joined many clubs and organizations, including becoming an orientation leader, peer leader, psychology liaison and class president. He also wanted to play soccer, but decided against it because he “didn’t know how people would perceive me trying such things.” He was attracted to a lot of the guys on the team, and he thought it would be better to not join.
He also had several people he considered as mentors to him, who guided and supported him during his time as a college student. P1 found comfort in the learning program, where he had mentors who supported him and listened to his concerns. He found comfort in the staff members that he was able to relate to and trusted to have support from. While he was in a very diverse environment with many Black and Latino men and Latina women that he got along with at the college, he did not feel comfortable at that time to talk about his sexuality. P1 did not seek out the gay community at the College. It wasn’t something that was important to him at the time. He was primarily focused on fitting in with the community and looking for people who would accept him as a person, not for being gay.

“in regards to the gay community at [the college], I feel as though I didn't really fit into that community at [the college]. I mean, at first, I wasn't out, and then when I came out, it was just very- I don't know my impression of the people that were in the GLBT group which is very out there, and I was an introvert, and they were just very extroverted, and I didn't like that.

P1 did not feel like the students in the GLBT group on campus were people he would spend time with, and he indicated that he did not have anything in common with any of the GLBT groups at the college.

In the summer of his sophomore year, P1 came out. While he did not remember specifics about how he did it, his female friend told him that she supported him and welcomed him with open arms. This gesture gave him comfort and courage to tell his other friends. When he came out to all of his friends in his junior year, he realized how everyone accepted him as a gay Black male and not only as a Black male, and he was able to be himself and not hide the fact that he is a gay Black male. There were no secrets. However,
there was one incident that happened where he was going to a gathering at a friend’s room and the friend told him that he could not stay at the party because that friend was afraid that he would flirt with the guys and make them feel uncomfortable. P1 did not argue but left; the next morning the friend came to him and apologized because all of the other friends told the person who asked P1 to leave that what they did was not right; they demanded that the friend apologize. P1 never interacted with that friend again because of that incident. P1 felt that they weren’t true friends but felt good at the fact that the people at the party stuck up for him.

P1 talked about another incident where some of the athletes would leave the community bathroom when he entered, call him names or give him the cold shoulder; but he had a few female friends who lived on the next floor who made him feel comfortable.

“Living on campus, I feel as though, based on what I have seen and what I went through, made me aware of how politics plays in the world. Some of the white students got away with doing anything, because they knew the right person, rather than some didn’t, because they just didn’t know anyone.

P1 felt that if he could do it all over again he wouldn’t live on campus. While it wasn’t because of the issue of being gay, he felt that because he was a leader on campus he wasn’t able to get more of a social life and have more time hanging out with friends rather than being a role model for the students who were younger than he was.

Through all of this, P1 academically ended up graduating with a 3.42 cumulative grade point average with a double major in Psychology and Biology, and all of the negative experiences did not have a lasting effect on him completing his undergraduate degree. He attributed his success in academics to the support
of the learning circle. He enjoyed his studies at the college and academically, the college met his expectations:

“Academic wise [the college] is a great school. The fact that I was able to get an internship in my sophomore year and work outside while I was learning, I was able to put it in practice, was great, because that has helped me tremendously to get where I am today. Residential-wise it wasn’t the best, based on the amount of my unprofessionalism that happened and that was kind of like where I kind of rubbed people the wrong way. Because I have a voice and tend to speak my mind and [the residence life staff] doesn’t particularly like when you point out their faults.”

Academically, college was a great experience for P1. He did not have any issues or see any prejudices with being a gay Black male in the academic setting. Socially however, amongst his peers, P1 experienced some hard times, not because he was Black or male, but because he was gay.

Socially, P1 was a leader on campus and had many friends who stuck with him through all of the issues he experienced. He was involved in community service activities, orientation leader, peer leader, a psychology liaison, and was class president of his freshman, sophomore, and junior year classes. While he was a leader on campus, not all of his peers accepted him as a gay Black male, but his circle of friends helped enlighten his experience.

“It was enlightening. I wouldn’t say that being a gay Black male hurt my college experience, but I definitely would not say that it enhanced my college experience either. Some of the things that I wanted to try I was a little intimidated, because I didn’t know how people would perceive me trying such things.”
P1 had a good experience as a gay Black male, but he felt that it would have been even better if he did not have to worry about what his peers would think of him.

To summarize, P1, did not experience too many bad experiences that took away from coming out as a gay Black male. There were some tensions he had to endure while at the college, brought about by a small group of people. However, he indicated that this did not faze him in the least when it happened, and he moved on. It seems as though the biggest concern about his college experience did not relate to him being a gay Black male; rather, it had to do with being a leader who was given high expectations by his mentors and the administrators at the college to become a leader and mentor to younger students. This was something he felt he wasn’t ready to do at that time. While he was involved in organizations such as orientation leader, peer leader, class president, and psychology liaison, there was no involvement in any social activism groups or civic engagement organizations.

4.4 Participant Two

Participant 2 (P2) is a gay Black male who grew up in Connecticut and attended a very large high school where he was able to hide among the big group and keep away from what he felt as all the ridicule and bullying that comes with the high school experience. Though he did not have the best experience in high school as a gay Black male student, he did not let these issues discourage him from finishing. P2 described himself as an extrovert who is “a bit bubbly, gregarious, who likes to mix and mingle with people”. He was also “a bit of a doer, like always doing something, never slowing down”.

P2 attended a college in Boston, MA. He chose to enroll at this college because he wanted to become a teacher and he was drawn to the college because
it was a small school, it was in Boston, and he really liked the mission of the college. The most important thing he wanted to know in choosing a college was not social experience, but the quality of education he would receive from the instructors and professors. During his interview, when asked if there were any specific things that were very important for him when choosing a college, P2 said:

“Yeah, and I should mention that it was actually a predominantly woman college, just cause I think, that the nature of the majors there, there were very few males at the college, so, predominantly woman’s college. My choice for going there was because it was- I wanted to be a teacher, and so, in high school, when it was time to make the decisions for college, I was pretty involved in some other things, including performing arts, but realized that teaching was kind of my passion. And so, the school came for a college fair, and I think what drew me to the school was that it was a small school. I came from a pretty large high school, but I wanted to get the small college feel. You know, pretty intimate, be able to explore, but also have the support academic support that I wanted and needed, but then also, it was very focused on what- you know, their mission is about, they what they were selling, they knew the opportunities that they were providing for students, for what I thought, pretty inexpensive compared to other schools I was looking at, for education, and so I jumped right at it. I was really involved in like my guidance counselor’s office. In high school, that’s how I was able to attend the fair when the college came, and you know, I spoke to a few people. It was you know, I’m from Connecticut, so it was here in Boston, so one of the goals that I wanted was to get outside of Connecticut and travel a bit and go to
another state for college, so it met all of the needs, and also a city, so that’s why I kind of chose that school.”

He continued:

“...the college providing the practicum opportunities, field experiences, different ways for me to explore in the actual field, and then obviously have a little bit of some student life on campus, which was important for me as well.”

The fact is that P2 did not consider a social life, being a gay Black male, as he was choosing his college. He said:

“I had never really took the fact that I was going to an all women’s college being a gay male, and what that might look like or what my experiences might be like, that wasn’t the main factor at that point.”

When he arrived at the college, it surely met his expectations and it was exactly what he thought it would be- small classes, the residential experience, and the community. However, after a few months, he quickly started to wonder if this was the best choice for him. He wondered if he really wanted to be at a small college, questioning if it was a good idea to be at an institution that is a primarily female institution, being “one of the only Black males there”, as well as question what type of experience he was going to have at a place like the college. P2 said:

“Maybe with the first few months, realizing what I got myself into, being in a small school and what that looks like and then also realizing that I was the only male there with a lot of women, and also maybe some straight guys, and so I was like, ugh, what does this look like?”
While he was going through all these reservations, he experienced no concerns about being a gay Black male in the first few months of being a student at the college. P2 questioned and thought about leaving the college.

“It was exactly what I expected it to be and I did question leaving after the first year, I thought about what that might look like if I left and whether this was something I wanted to do, and I kind of had to take a few things in my own hand, in terms of really getting involved on campus, and making my own experiences”

P2 became involved in the multicultural group on campus, then he became involved in working at the college’s admissions office. Getting involved in these organizations helped him become a leader among his peers and ultimately allowed him to find mentors and people he could connect with in order to feel more comfortable with the community. P2 became more involved with activities, to the point where he felt extremely supported by everyone from the college professors all the way up to the president of the college. While he was involved in many things on campus, P2 chose not to become involved in any GLBT clubs on campus. Although he was out in high school, P2 did not come out in college. Because he stated that the college and the environment were so new to him, he decided not to come out. This decision wasn’t because he was afraid to, but because he was still adjusting to the new environment. He decided not to join the GLBT group at the college because he did not get the vibe from them and he just did not feel that he really wanted to be a part of that.

“I wasn’t [involved in the GLBT clubs at the college] I think that was definitely something I wasn’t comfortable with initially, so I was out before I got to college and then kind of went back in the closet [when I enrolled at the college]. I didn’t really hide myself, but just didn’t really mention that I was gay.”
P2 did not find his comfort with being a gay Black male initially and was trying to find his place at the college.

In his junior year, P2 finally came out to his friends after a night out that involved drinking.

“I told a really good friend of mine on a cab ride back home, and I was just like I’m gay, and she was very open and responded that she had a friend from high school that she went to the prom with and he was gay.

He continued:

“I feel that people were comfortable with it in my group, but I just never really said anything, but now I did so. I told everyone else in the group.

After he told his friends, he felt a sigh of relief. Coming out to his friends made him feel much better about himself and made him think that he is at a better place with his friends. He no longer felt that he was hiding something from people. He also felt more supported after coming out. At that moment he realized that he was accepted for whom he was and he felt that nobody at the college would judge him.

P2 related his high school experience to his college experience. That experience, he stated retrospectively, contributed to why he waited until his junior year to come out of the closet. Additionally, while he expected to have a good experience from his white student peers, he found that it was the Black community who aided his transition the most. Counterintuitively, he did not find comfort in the GLBT community. P2 was not able to connect with the GLBT group because he did not find anything in common with the group and felt he could not be out as a gay Black male:
"I was like, going crazy. Because I felt like I was living a different two different lives, but not intentionally. I didn’t want it to. I didn’t think it was going to be the way it was, and then, the pressures of school and being accepted. I still had someone who was at home that I was seeing; going home, I was gay, and out, and coming back, I was out, but not really out And so, it really just kind of like spiraled over time, and I didn’t really say anything, and then, I felt like I couldn’t say anything, and then, one of those college moments, out, drunken moments I came out to my friend."

P2 reflected that he could have come out of the closet sooner. When he did come out, the experience allowed him to look at who he was as a person and made him feel comfortable in his own skin to come out to his peers. He stated that,

"Actually, really, I felt just as supported, if not, more supported, after coming out. I think a lot of people assumed already; and so, I think it was just finally out there, and then, I felt comfortable, by my senior year. Interesting enough, they were recruiting a lot more males, and so, there were just- there were- there was a vast, majority of- there wasn’t a vast majority, there were, a few more opportunities for me [as a gay Black male], at the school, and so, I was comfortable and able to actually talk to people, and like, mingle, and get to, potentially date someone, and so- and so, I think it made it more- it made it more accessible for me actually by the end. There were more opportunities at the end, but it was also, it was just like, I was able to be myself."

Because he had such a great experience coming out and feeling supported, he indicated that he was comfortable and eager to find a career in higher education.
Rather than pursue a teaching career, he expressed:

"Yeah, I grew up always wanting to be a teacher. I just really loved my teachers growing up, and always wanted to teach. I was the older cousin and sibling, and so, education kind of was just like the thing, and so I was always playing school, wanted to be a teacher. That was like the career that always came back you know, I went back for other things, but always came back to that, and then, when I made a decision in high school to go to college, it was like, that’s where I realized that’s definitely what I want to do. And then, obviously, it changed within going to college, and studying it, and then finding a new passion in higher education, or being guided to that, totally found that now, definitely I enjoy the classroom, but I don’t know if I want to be in an elementary school every day. Teaching is a lot of work, different work. And so, I still feel like I teach, just in a different way with college students, and so, that’s why I kind of was drawn to that college career choice."

Because of his experience with getting involved in college activities, he was able transfer the skills he learned in his program to becoming a college administrator. With his current role he has the ability to help students grow as individuals by getting involved just like he was in college.

In summary, P2 indicated that he had a great experience as a college student. While he chose to wait until junior year to come out, when he did, it was an important experience for him where he gained more support than he ever expected and ultimately changed his career path into the field of higher education. To see that when he came out he felt more supported by his peers, staff and the college community as a whole than he did when he was in the closet. He stated that he experienced an enhanced community environment after coming
out. When asked if his college experiences have played an important role or part in making him the person that he is today, P2 replied:

"I do think that I was able to come out of my shell a bit more in college, because I do not think I was able to as fully as I wanted to in high school. I was really just trying to push through, however in college, I was able to actually like just be who I was and really explore and grow and not feel like it was a thing to be who I like to be. I do think that I came out of my shell a lot in college."

P2 described his college experience as a great opportunity for him and indicated that now, as a college administrator, he will be able to help students who need the support as gay Black males. P2 had a successful college experience academically because he enjoyed his classes and everything he learned, socially because of the people. He was connected with his peers, and when he came out to them they made him feel welcomed. Finally, because of his connection and relationships he built with the Black women at the college, being a gay Black male at a predominantly female college allowed him to find comfort in his transition to his college.

### 4.5 Participant Three

Participant 3 (P3) was a gay Black male who grew up in New York City in a lower middle class family. He had a few siblings, but really was close to his sister. P3 attended a college in New Hampshire. While P3 experienced some forms of homophobia during high school, it did not impact him during the time when he was searching for colleges. At that time in his life he did not experience any homophobia around him because he was not out to anyone. What he experienced were young men who would say comments like “that is so
gay” or “you’re gay” as a way of saying something was bad or had a negative tone. That was really the extent of P3’s negative experience with homophobia prior to college.

P3 indicated that when he started to think about his sexuality and who he was as a gay Black male, it was in college. He was looking to find his identity in terms of his sexuality. P3 was trying to understand if he was going through a phase when he was having feelings towards men and trying to figure out if he was having these feelings because he couldn’t find the right women. He then began to identify himself as a bisexual. In his mind, and what he learned growing up was that it wasn’t okay to having feelings for men. However, he indicated that eventually he was able to come out to himself and then to others. Because of this, choosing a college and looking for a safe environment in which to be out was not a factor for him.

P3 chose a highly-selective Ivy League institution that was in a very rural town in New England, where he was five hours away from home. It had an environment that lacked diversity, or as he stated “it wasn’t diverse”. However, he chose the Ivy-League college because of a visit he made while in high school. P3 felt a connection with the people there on campus when he stayed overnight. He indicated that it was a vibrant youthful culture; and it provided the world of academia he wanted.

“I mean the level of education and the resources we had available to us were second to none.”

At that moment, P3 realized that the college was the school for him.

P3 did not have an active gay life during his earlier years at the College. He spent most of his time focusing on himself and building on his professional career and being an academic student. Therefore, his experience as a gay Black male in a college setting was not relevant until after he came out in his senior year.
P3 found comfort with the small but very active Black community, more so with the Black women because they provided a familial-like environment similar to what he was used to at home. Even though P3 wasn’t out to the people at the college until his senior year, he felt that he was able to be himself and not have to hide that he was gay, even though he wasn’t out to anyone. P3 indicated that no one should have to hide who they are for fear of being ridiculed. It just wasn’t a topic of discussion that they had during their time at the college. P3 was extremely active in the Black Community clubs and organizations that really allowed him to show his talents as a leader in that community as well as the musical arts community. However, he was not involved in any GLBT clubs or organization on campus while a student there.

"I think generally the idea of the Black community, Black women especially made me feel very comfortable- though- nothing ever- because I was positive, nothing ever came out where- I knew people would probably ask, and ask each other, and friends probably ask, oh, you think P3s gay, or this and that. Oh no, he’s not- he’s just this and that. But- so, what ended up happening was, they just really were able to provide this- I guess sibling-like relationship that I have with some of them, that- being away from my two sisters, I am one of three, was so necessary to me. I mean, I have grown up around my cousins, I’m very close to my cousins and my siblings, and so, they’ve sort of really provided that familial like environment again for me, and I think that maybe- the women that were there. And some of the guys- some of the guys- but some of the guys also who were going through my same experience, but none of us had the courage or confidence to come out- to speak to each other about it, but there was like this- this false- or this- I forget the terminology,
the term they use for it—there was this—this sense that we all knew, but this— we weren’t going to discuss it amongst each other. We all knew that we were but—and so—I think in that, we all were able to sort of be ourselves, without having to be ourselves. Be ourselves without having to claim ourselves.”

P3 described the importance of a mentor whom he found: this was the music director who was responsible for all major shows on campus. P3 majored in Music and minored in African Diaspora, hence why his mentor was a music director, because many of the classes he took and his involvement in the choir and theater were all taught and supervised by this mentor (music director). The mentor was a gay Black male who was a graduate of a military school. The music director shared many stories with P3 and allowed him to “shape my understanding of what my sexuality is and what I want for myself.”

P3 had a passion for music and “knew how I wanted to expand on it”. Majoring in music with a minor in African Diaspora allowed him to learn more about historical patterns in music, religion, and Black America.

P3 felt that he could have done better academically if he did not spend so much time on his identity. Some parts during his college career, he focused on his sexuality and getting to know himself rather than on getting good grades.

“I had so much on my mind as it related to sexuality and who I was, and there was no way I could take that on with classes and everything else that I was interested in. So my academic studies I think were definitely affected by my understanding of sexuality.”

When asked if he could do it all over again, what he would change, P3 said:

“I would come out. I wish I [would have] had the strength and the confidence and the comfortability and the general energy to come
While in today’s society it is more accepted, according to P3, he just didn’t feel like it was something that needed to be talked about in his social environment. However, his experience allowed him to be the person that he is today, so he had no regrets.

In summary, P3 indicated that he had a successful experience at his college. While he did not come out until later in his college career, he found a mentor he was able to relate with because of their shared passion for music. In addition, he found comfort in the Black community from living in an all-Black residence hall, feeling like home with the family, from the Black women at the college. Finally he was able to move through the process of finding himself and realizing who he was as a gay Black male while being a student there; all of this helped shaped who he is today.

4.6 Data Analysis and Themes

This study was driven by one primary research question: *What are the lived experiences of gay Black males in the social and academic settings in higher education from the student’s perspectives?* In order to address this question, the researcher conducted the coding and analysis that were described in Chapter 3. He then identified themes from the participant data. To identify the themes, the researcher took the phenomenological research study approach. A proper coding and analysis of all of the participants data allowed for the following seven themes. These themes all address the research question of this study, and each theme will be discussed in detail.

1. The gay Black males did not actively seek a gay-friendly environment nor a Black-friendly environment when choosing a college to attend.
2. Two of the gay Black males came out of the closet about their sexuality during their sophomore and junior year at their respective colleges, and one came out in his senior year.

3. All three of the gay Black males did not experience any homophobic acts from other members of the college community while as a student before they came out.

4. Gay Black males found comfort and felt accepted by the Black women in their social group.

5. The three gay Black males who had positive or successful college experiences felt that if they could do it over again, they would come out sooner; when they did come out during their junior and senior year, it wasn’t as big of a deal as they thought it would be.

6. There was no concern from two of the gay Black males that their academics were affected because of who they were as a gay Black male.

7. Gay Black males did not find comfort in the GLBT community at their respective colleges, but rather they found comfort in the Black clubs and organizations at the college.

The gay Black males did not actively seek a gay-friendly environment nor a Black-friendly environment when choosing a college to attend. Participants were asked how they chose their particular college. It was noteworthy that none of the participants chose the college based on its support for all of their diverse students. P1 stated, “It was ideal for what I was looking for. It was very small. It was close to the city, and I loved the campus”. P1 wanted to attend a college in the South but his parents did not want him to go that far. Looking at the gay community at the college was not something P1
was thinking about when looking at colleges in which to enroll. Similarly, P2 chose to attend his college because it was small. “I think what drew me to the school was that it was a small school I wanted to get the small college feel, you know, pretty intimate, be able to explore, but also have the academic support that I wanted and needed.” Again, P2 did not look into the gay community within the college, but rather focused on the academic support that he would have as a student at the college.

P3, on the other hand, said “I wasn’t actually out to myself before college”. P3 was looking for a college that would provide the best education. A gay community wasn’t even a thought to him when considering a college.

The participant’s narratives suggest that there were not any advance thoughts in any of their minds to look into support services for a gay-friendly and supportive community. While for some of the participants, academics were a main factor in selecting a college, the social environment of a supportive gay community was not a factor in choosing a college. There were no common themes in how they actually chose their college. It was interesting to note that none of them chose a large research university to attend. The other colleges chosen were small and mid-size.

The gay Black males typically came out of the closet about their sexuality during their junior or senior year at their respective colleges. The three participants discussed their hesitation of coming out to their peers during their first and second year at the college. They did not figure out how to come out to everyone at a good time or try to bring it up in conversation. All participants expressed how difficult it was for them to come out to their peers. P2, however, tried to join the GLBT group on campus but did not feel like he was accepted with that group. He decided to get involved in other organizations to make friends.
One of the participants decided to get a feel for their environment because he came out to everyone during high school. P2 explained that “it was like I was living a different life at school. Back home I was out, but in college I wasn’t. I wanted to learn about this community first.” This was part of the reason why it took two years to feel comfortable enough to come out. Some of the participants thought it was important to learn about their new environment and explore what possibilities they could tap into, such as joining clubs and organizations, making friends, adjusting to a new world that was completely new to them. For example, P1 joined many clubs and organizations before coming out. He was able to make many friends and become well known on campus.

All three Gay Black males did not experience any homophobic acts from other members of the college community while as a student before they came out. All three of the participants mentioned that they did not receive any homophobic remarks or activities while they were students at the college before they came out. One participant experienced a few homophobic instances after coming out. However, there were some issues with being a Black male on campus that really distracted them from school work. In addition, there were some situations where they were the only Black student in class or organizations that made them feel uncomfortable. P3 said “the aspect of diversity of idea, thoughts, and culture didn’t really exist, outside of what I guess minority groups could create on campus for themselves. Faculty and staff weren’t diverse”. They found comfort in Black community organizations that were dominated by Black women leaders.

Gay Black males found comfort and felt accepted by the Black women in their social group. All of the participants noted that they found comfort with and felt safe coming out to Black women. They found commonal-
ities with Black women and found that Black women were more open to their sexuality than any other individuals or groupings at the college. All the participants were able to relate to Black women on their respective campuses. The Black women provided the gay Black male students with a comfort level that would allow them to come out to everyone else. They felt protected by the Black women who were their friends on campus.

The three gay Black males who had positive or successful college experiences felt that if they could do it over again, they would come out sooner; when they did come out during their junior and senior year, it wasn't as big of a deal as they thought it would be. All of the participants during their first year of college had a great experience fitting in at their respective colleges. They did not experience an uncomfortable or hostile environment and made friends very quickly during their freshman year. While some joined clubs and organizations very quickly others joined later in that year. They all believed that it would be different from them in a positive way if they came out during their freshman year because they would not have to feel like they were hiding their sexual identity or feel uncomfortable.

There was no concern from gay Black males that their academic activities were affected because of who they were as a gay Black male. None of the participants had a bad experience in their academic settings. In the classroom, the topic of gay Black males never came up. P2 explained “we [always] talked about children or environments. That could have been a part of environment, but it was necessarily the stuff that [we] were really talking about [such as] child development, or different things like that I don’t even know if the professors even knew whether I was in or out of the closet.” P1 did not feel it was relevant to talk about his sexuality in the classroom. He said “my professors were great there was no point or reason for us to talk about my sexuality in
class”. The participants did not describe a bad experience in their classes that was related to their being gay Black males.

Gay Black males did not find comfort in the GLBT community at their respective colleges, but rather they found comfort in the Black clubs and organizations at the college. All of the participants were not involved in any LGBT clubs or community on campus because they did not feel comfortable. P2 said, “I was at like the first meeting, and it just wasn’t I didn’t get the vibe that I was like, alright. And so, I it just kind of made it feel like, you know what, I’m just going to do my own thing, and not really be a part of that.” There seem to be a level of comfort regarding race more than LGBT for the participants who were looking to find comfort in the LGBT community.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of gay Black male college graduates about their college experiences. Other students may only experience being a Black male, a gay male, or a male in a college setting; however, the participants in this study shared the standpoint of being males and Black and gay. One central research question, which helped guide this study, was: What are the lived experiences of gay Black males in the social and academic settings in higher education from the students perspectives? Three participants from different colleges and universities in New England were selected to participate (see Table 4.2). Each shared their personal life stories and described their lived experiences with the researcher for this qualitative, phenomenological study. A full description of the common themes in this study can be found on Chapter 4.6.

All of the participants were not involved in any LGBT clubs or community on campus because they did not feel comfortable. P2 said, “I was at like the first meeting, and it just wasn’t I didn’t get the vibe that I was like, alright. And so, I it just kind of made it feel like, you know what, Im just going to do
my own thing, and not really be a part of that.” There seem to be a level of comfort regarding race more than LGBT for the participants who were looking to find comfort in the LGBT community.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

It is important to note that each of the participants in this study did not find it important to look into the college or university climate on gay and Black friendly environment before choosing their respective college. Even though some had a bad experience during their high school days, they did not find it important to look in advance at the gay environment or the Black environment within the college community.

Another noteworthy finding was that the students did not come out during their freshman year in college. This was noteworthy because one of the participants was out in high school, but not initially out in college. This wasn’t because they were afraid to come out; rather, it was because they were focusing on finding themselves as individuals first. While each participant had his own unique stories about his experiences as a college student, they all shared one common theme which is that if they could do it over again, they would come out sooner. What is interesting about that statement is that these participants did not have a bad experience related to being gay after they came out during college, but they did experience racial tension as more of a concern than being an out gay Black male.

All of the participants found comfort in the Black women in their social groups. It was interesting to learn that all of the participants described great relationships with Black women. All of the participants came out to their Black women friends. It was also interesting to find that all of the Black women with whom they were connected made them feel comfortable enough to come out to
them and that it enhanced their friendship after they came out to them.

None of the participants mentioned that their academics were affected because they were a gay Black male. Academics were not a problem for any of the participants. All of the participants had strong academic backgrounds and proved to be successful in the classroom, as they all had above a 3.0 grade point average when leaving college. The participants, however, did allow their social lifestyle as a gay Black male to affect their academics.

5.2 Discussion on Findings and the Literature Review

Comparing this study with Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly’s study, one of the participants had similar experiences to their findings related to masculine identity behaviors. Strayhorn and Tillman-Kelly (2013) discovered that Black men typically engaged in masculine activities such as intercollegiate sports, competitive debates, working out at the gym, choosing “historically-masculine” majors such as engineering or programs where salaries tended to be higher upon graduation. In the case of one participant in the current study, biology was his choice in major and he was looking to continue to medical school. He participated in soccer, and he became a leader in many clubs and organizations at the college. It seems as though the biggest concern about his college experience did not relate to his being a gay Black male; rather, it had to do with being a leader who was given high expectations by his mentors and the administrators at the college to become a leader and mentor to younger students. This was something he said he felt he wasn’t ready to do at that time. This is also interesting in light of Dugan and Yurman (2011) research, in which it was found that gay and lesbian students are more likely to be leaders and become more involved in
social activism and civic engagement at a higher rate than their heterosexual counterparts. One of the participants found a mentor among the staff members at the college with whom he felt comfortable, but not a faculty member, as was suggested in Dugan and Yurman’s study.

In the current study, none of the participants looked into the gay community within the college environment in advance of admission. In the Strayhorn et al. (2008) study, participants considered the location of the school when choosing their college. However, in the current study, the participants did not consider the location and they did not seek a gay-friendly environment when they considered enrolling at a college. Academic programs and family issues or involvement played a big role for the participants when deciding which schools to attend. While the Strayhorn et al. (2008) study was nine years ago, the participants in this study were either in college or recently completed college around the same time that the study was published. It is possible that the difference between the current research study and the Strayhorn, Blakewood, and Devita study could have been simply based on location. Most of the participants in this study were originally from the northeast region of the United States, which is in contrast to the Strayhorn, Blakewood, and Devita study in which their participants were from the Midwest and the South (Strayhorn et al., 2008). It is also important to note that the Strayhorn et al. (2008) research study did not use the same methodology as was used in the current study. Strayhorn et al. (2008) used a constructivist epistemological framework for their qualitative research. They employed narrative inquiry and in-depth interviews with seven Black gay men (Strayhorn et al., 2008, p. 90).
5.3 Discussion on Findings and Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that was used in this study was critical theory by Peter McLaren. McLaren’s (1998) theory described student behavior during the socialization process as students grow from childhood to adolescence to intellectual adulthood. McLaren’s theory addressed the social behavior patterns of educators and administrators as it sought to understand the processes by which students gain acceptance in their social community. The theory in this study provides readers with the lived experiences of gay Black males in social and academic settings in college campus environments. The findings from this study acknowledged how some of the participant’s social behaviors affected them and influenced them away from coming out as gay sooner in their college years. They felt the need to hide being a gay male in order to fit in on campus. All of the participants mentioned that if they could change that, they would come out sooner because of the ease of coming out and how much better it was for them when they were out. They wouldn’t feel the need to create another identity, pretend to be someone they were not, or avoid the sexual identity formation process.

5.4 Applying the Lens of Critical Theory

Critical theory (McLaren, 1998) was used to explain the social behavior patterns of participants involved in the study. Accordingly, the theory offered an understanding of why the participants came out as gay later in their college experience, found comfort in their friendship with the Black women at their respective colleges, and found comfort in their environment. Following the concept map shown in Chapter 3, these lenses of critical theory provided a relevant
First, the perception and student experience of gay Black males in their respective colleges provides a view of what the participants experienced. The findings from this study revealed that most participants did not experience any torment or ridicule because they were gay, Black and male. The participants did not experience homophobic activity in their respective colleges. This could be because they were not out as gay Black males during their first two to three years in college. The behavior pattern in this finding could be that because they were not out as gay Black males, their behavior allowed them to fit in with a group of students and create a supportive environment among their peers, faculty, and administrators within the college. All three of the participants found comfort, trust, and friendship specifically with Black women at their respective colleges and all came out with them first before they came out to others in college community.

Second, an understanding of critical theory used as a theoretical framework for this study could provide college faculty and administrators with an understanding of the experiences of gay Black males on college campuses. The participants did not share their status as gay Black males to their faculty or administrators until they felt comfortable enough to do so. Administrators and faculty on college campuses could benefit from learning from the experiences of these gay Black males and the support these students need to provide a level of comfort for gay students in order to build trust and to feel comfortable to come out to others in the college community.

Finally, the critical theory concept map continues with providing a supportive and successful environment for gay Black males. In this study, the participants indicated that if they had to do it all over again, they would come out sooner. Many colleges and universities provide an office of diversity and
inclusion to help students with diverse backgrounds feel like they have a safe place to be themselves. The participants in this study did not find that office to be open to gay students; rather, the office of diversity and inclusion was focused more on being open to Black, Latino and other racial ethnicities.

**Recommendations** Based on the findings in this study, the following recommendations are made for faculty, staff, and administrators when working with gay Black male students. It is important for administrators in charge of the offices such as diversity and inclusion to become aware of the needs of gay Black males, in addition to the needs of individuals of various ethnicities and LGBT students. Additionally, colleges and universities are advised to provide cultural awareness programs that include gay Black males. Such programs would benefit faculty, staff, and administrators, as well as students, to understand how to become more open and to provide an environment for gay Black males that is comfortable, safe, and thoughtful. Dialogue on topics for gay Black males, seminars for faculty and staff, as well as workshops during orientation for students on campus, could provide more opportunities for gay Black males to feel like they can fit in, find acceptance, and be comfortable with their identity, regardless of decisions they make with regard to identifying or not identifying as gay Black males.

### 5.5 Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on gay Black males and provided readers with an understanding of the experiences of three students who were not out at the time when they arrived on their college or university campus. All of the participants described their academic and social experiences, with no witnessing of homophobia on campus. This study did not include any students who came out or were already out from the beginning. Another research study could focus on
students who are already out of the closet as a gay Black males in their freshman year. Similarly, a research study could be conducted with participants who did not come out of the closet during their college years.

It could also be noteworthy to examine research on students who are gay Black males who started college but did not finish. Those students may be in a position to provide information that could be relevant and important to this topic, particularly if their reasons for leaving relate in any way to being gay Black males.

Additionally, a larger study could be conducted with more students and more colleges. In particular, studies could be conducted at larger research universities, institutions in other regions of the country, historically Black colleges and universities, community colleges, and special-focus institutions.

5.6 Conclusion

In this study it was hoped that the voices of gay Black males could be heard. The purpose of this study was to shine light on the experiences of gay Black males. The findings in the study provide readers with an opportunity to gain knowledge on the lived experiences of three gay Black males. The problem of practice was not completely addressed because the participants graduated with above a 3.0 grade point average. Their academics were not affected, and coming out as gay Black male did not affect their educational environment. However, given the small research sample, these findings are rich and allow readers who work with college students to find information that could be helpful to them in their work with gay Black males.

Recommendations include cultural awareness programs for all students, and training for faculty and staff on cultural awareness. It also provides readers with the finding that gay Black males experienced racial tension on their respective
campuses and less tension related to being a gay male. However, the participants in this study did not have to deal with homophobia that they thought was serious enough to affect their academic and social environments based on their grade point average and having completed their degrees at their respective institutions.
References


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