ABSTRACT


The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore how native Black American Ph.D. students narrated their stress and coping, as current research concentrates primarily on undergraduate student populations, and existing literature on Black American graduate students narrowly addresses practices and successes among females (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Felder, 2010; Taylor & Antony, 2000). The focus on native Black American Ph.D. students was due to their severe statistical underrepresentation across all doctoral disciplines of study and the nonexistent research exploring their lives as doctoral students (NCSES Survey of Earned Doctorates: FY 2016, 2017). In analyzing the narratives of native Black American Ph.D. students, the goal of this study was to better understand their stress and how they coped in historically White postsecondary environments. Additionally, this study provided an opportunity to draw from a public health education model to examine an issue within higher education.

Narrative analysis was used to inform the study, and participants were required to self-identify as native Black American, self-identify as male, be enrolled in at least the third year of their Ph.D. program, and be enrolled full-time at a Historically White Institution in the United States. Data was collected via Zoom to capture the narratives of native Black American males from across the United States. Collins Airhihenbuwa’s PEN-3 model (Airhihenbuwa, 1990) was used to inform the data analysis.

Findings from this study indicated that native Black American males described their stress and coping experiences through three overarching themes: Chosen Family, Strategic Social Capital, and “Shine, Brothers, Shine.” Participants in this study articulated the need to identify
and sustain a network of support prior to and during the start of their academic program. Furthermore, developing relationships with both advisors and mentors aided students in their ability to cope with the stressors associated with being Black in the academy. The academy also was a topic that became fairly nuanced as participants distinguished between both “Skin Folk” and “Kin Folk” in their journeys. As related to the Strategic Social Capital theme, many participants articulated the importance of naming sacrifices that are mandatory to ensure success, as well as specific methods that can be employed to yield positive outcomes for mental health and wellness. Lastly, “Shine, Brothers, Shine” narrowed in on remembrance of self throughout the doctoral process, recognizing there is room to grow throughout your tenure, and acknowledging that a Ph.D. is much larger than an individual accomplishment. The study concludes with a discussion of the findings as related to existing literature, as well as theoretical implications, and relevant recommendations for academic and practitioner-based research.
Notes of native Sons: Stress and Coping Storytelling Among native Black American Male Ph.D. Students at Historically White Institutions

by

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To Michael, Steven, Justin, Al, Christian, James, Uncle Dennis, Little Steven, Little Michael, Robert, TJ, Chase, and to every Black man in this world who has needed a voice.

“One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa. This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met. It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today.”

Notes of a native Son (1955)

By: James Baldwin
BIOGRAPHY

A native of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Chelsea is a first-generation college student committed to impacting the fields of higher education and public health. She is a 2011 graduate of The Pennsylvania State University, where she majored in Biobehavioral Health and minored in Health Policy & Administration. During her tenure in Happy Valley, some highlights of her experience were serving as a Resident Assistant for two sororities on campus, being selected as a member of the Women's Leadership Initiative, serving as an On-Site Coordinator for the LeaderShape Institute, working alongside the Vice President for Student Affairs Office on alcohol-related issues, and completing her service to Fraternity and Sorority Life as President of the National Panhellenic Council. Following Penn State, Chelsea pursued her Masters in Public Health in Social and Behavioral Sciences from Yale University and graduated in 2014. While at Yale, she worked in the Yale College Dean’s Office, focusing her attention on alcohol/other drug issues, as well as issues on gender and sexual assault.

Chelsea’s passion for both public health and higher education took her to Columbia University, where she directed the Summer Public Health Scholars Program in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She’s in the process of completing her Ph.D. from NC State University in Educational Research and Policy Analysis, in which her work was informed by Dr. Collins Aihihenbuwa's PEN-3 cultural model. Her tenure at NC State has allowed her to engage with students in various environments from South Africa to Silicon Valley with Duke University. Her graduate assistant work entailed working with the Leadership and Civic Engagement Office, coupled with serving as a Resident Director for Fraternity and Sorority Life. Chelsea also managed to serve on the board of the Triangle Yale Club as well as an Alumni Interviewer for Yale while she was living in North Carolina. Chelsea is currently
serving as a Visiting Administrative Fellow at Harvard University, where her work focuses on
diversity and inclusion strategic planning for Harvard's College of Education.
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“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here.”

II Corinthians: 5:17

I’d like to first acknowledge Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior, for carrying me when I thought my wings were broken, and for loving me through every season of this journey. I had no idea that I needed you, but You found me. And for that, I owe You my life.

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To my Black Doctoral student community: May our education continue to be an act of resistance.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.

James Baldwin

The historical context of Black Americans in higher education in the United States is both complex and challenging. Various historical mile markers concerning the prohibition of higher education and efforts to end racial segregation have created a legacy outlining sophisticated forms of discrimination (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2008). Over 60 years have passed since Brown vs. Board of Education, yet Black American students continue to experience differential trajectories in higher education linked to their racial group membership (Harper, 2013; Robertson & Mason, 2008; Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). Furthermore, the racial group membership of Black American students enrolled in postsecondary education institutions creates additional challenges involving academic performance, first generation adaptation, and persistence (Greer, 2008; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Black American students frequently report feelings of isolation within their classroom settings, leaving room for poor academic performance, thus producing challenges involving persistence, and subsequently, retention at their current institutions. Additionally, as Black American students experience these events, challenges involving their status as first-generation students begin to arise, such as familial support, financial stability, and self-esteem. Such challenges manifest themselves in various forms of stress. What’s more, the overall graduate student experience is filled with many layers of stress that impact students differentially. The combination of such obstacles creates space for mental health barriers among Black American students. Previous research by Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) explored how these experiences are unique to
minoritized communities. They explained that the role strains of students of color constitutes a generalized pathway of influences that contributes to maladjustment for students. As minoritized students frequently experience lack of belonging, their adjustment into collegiate communities is often infringed upon. Those experiences are conceptualized as minority status stresses (MSS). Recent research on MSS exposed the unique stressors experienced by underrepresented students, which typically encompass experiences with racism and discrimination, insensitive comments, and question of belonging on a college campus (McClain, Beasley, Jones, Awosogba, Jackson, & Cokley, 2016). However, researchers have agreed that while there is a growing body of research that examines mental health among college students, Cokley, Hall-Clark, and Hicks (2011) argued that minimal research explicitly focuses on Black American college students and Black American graduate students as well as their counternarratives and success stories. Counternarratives are defined as stories of people whose narratives are infrequently shared (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Previous literature reviews disclosed that research focusing on the psychological health of Black American college students ignored cultural factors outside of racial and ethnic identity that may influence mental health functioning (Cokley & Vandiver, 2011; Gloria & Castellanos, 2003). Furthermore, many studies investigating collegiate populations consistently fail to address the storied experiences, particularly those involving stress and coping, of students of color beyond the undergraduate level. Black American doctoral students continue to be underrepresented in the general doctoral student population and face further issues of both social and academic belonging (Ellis, 2001). Gardner (2008) expanded on this research and highlighted the disparate experiences for women, students of color, students with families, part-time students, and older students. These populations are particularly at risk due to a need for double
socialization in which students are required to be fully acclimated and immersed into their role as graduate students and eventually into their profession (Golde, 1998). However, while graduate student socialization was formally researched in various contexts, Black American doctoral student stress and coping experiences have been minimally researched, particularly among Black American male doctoral students, who are a highly vulnerable population.

**Stress in the United States**

Aldwin (2007) describes stress as the quality of experience, produced through a person-environment transaction, that, through either over-arousal or under-arousal, results in psychological or physiological distress. Within recent years, stress differences across diverse populations and demographic characteristics have been explored. Cohen and Janicki-Deverts (2012) noted that psychological stress contributes to poorer health practices, increased disease risk, accelerated disease progression, greater symptom reporting, frequent healthcare service utilization, and an increase in mortality. Their study revealed that psychological stress increased gradiently with decreasing levels of income and education. Additionally, their evidence was consistent with Adler, Boyce, Chesney, Cohen, Folkman, Kahn, and Syme’s (1994) work, which revealed an association between increasing socioeconomic status and decreasing risk for morbidity and premature mortality, both of which are of concern for Black Americans.

In November of 2017, the American Psychological Association released a report on the state of stress in the United States. The top five common sources of stress were the future of the United States, money, work, the current political climate, and violence and crime. In looking at race/ethnicity divides, Hispanic adults experienced an average stress level of 5.2, Black adults an average of 5.0, and White adults an average of 4.7. Approximately 74% of persons felt they have someone they can rely on for emotional support, and 57% said they spend time with friends and
family to manage their stress. In terms of coping with these stressors, 47% of persons listen to music, 46% exercise or walk, 29% pray, and 12% meditate or do yoga, which paints a quick picture of what coping looks like in the United States.

**The Black American Community**

In looking at the data, 13.2% of the United States population identified themselves as Black or African American in 2014 (US Census, 2014). That number equates to over 6.8 million people. Sixteen percent of those Black American adults suffered from a diagnosable mental illness within the past year (SAMHSA, 2015), which is more than the populations of Chicago, Houston, and Philadelphia combined (USDHHS, 2016). Black American adults are also 20% more likely to report serious psychological stress as compared to White adults, and Black Americans living below the federal poverty level are three times as likely to report serious psychological distress compared to those living above the federal poverty level. Furthermore, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, this population is more likely to experience feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness as compared to their White counterparts. Lastly, Black Americans of all ages are more likely to be victims of serious violent crimes compared to non-Hispanic Whites, putting them at risk for multiple mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and schizophrenia (USDHHS, 2016).

The American Psychological Association also explored health disparities related to stress in the Black American community. They noted that the overall health of underrepresented racial and ethnic persons is worse than the overall health of White Americans. Many of these disparities are rooted in economic determinants, geography and neighborhood, education, environment, lower-quality care, inadequate access to care, inability to navigate the system, and provider bias. In examining the role of both social and biological stress on health more closely,
there is a clear link between socioeconomic status and ethnic disparities and health. Furthermore, perceived discrimination was found to be a key contributor to stress-related health disparities among underrepresented racial and ethnic persons, and Black Americans are impacted considerably by hypertension, diabetes, and changes in mental health status due to chronic stress resulting from perceived discrimination (APA, 2018; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson (2003) conducted a review on community samples and determined that discrimination and racism are highly associated with poor health status overall; this association was observed most definitively in the case of mental health as compared to physical health. The acceptance of negative cultural stereotypes can also lead to unfavorable self-evaluations that have harmful effects on psychological well-being and overall chronic-disease development (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Building on the generalized negative implications of stereotyping, larger societal issues involving race are noted by Williams et al. as contributors to what is defined as macro-stressors, or systems-related stressors. Examples of such issues are highly publicized race-related traumatic events as well as the effects of historical trauma associated with an individual’s racial/ethnic group that can be transferred across generations. This is critical considering the narrative of historically marginalized doctoral students at historically White institutions (HWIs).

**Black American Student Underrepresentation**

The Georgetown University “Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2010” report predicted that by 2020, 65% of jobs in the United States will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). With Black Americans representing an estimated 22% of the impoverished population in the United States (Census, 2017), research continuously emphasizes postsecondary education as an
instrument of reducing poverty within this demographic (Hout, 2012; Tilak, 2002). Yet when examining these findings in real time, underrepresentation within White-dominated postsecondary environments creates challenges in persistence and retention and additional psychological barriers for Black American students and students of color (Adams, 2011). Moreover, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health (2016) revealed that Black Americans are 10% more likely to report suffering from serious psychological distress than non-Hispanic Whites, which is a vital piece to this narrative considering that Black American doctoral students are a part of the larger general population. In addition, 6.6% of the total population of Black Americans over the age of 18 received prescription medications for mental health treatment or counseling in 2014 compared to 15.7% of non-Hispanic Whites (SAMHSA, 2015), demonstrating a strong need for psychological support within the Black American community.

Stress-causing experiences at the graduate level are tied to academic pressures, finances, career planning, and graduate assistant responsibilities (Goplerud, 1980; Kreger, 1995; Mazzola, 2011). A 2009 study also revealed that Black American doctoral students are frequently stressed and anxious during their journey through graduate school (Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2009). While many experienced intermittent self-doubt as a normal, internalized oppressive response to everyday micro-aggressions of racism (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Solórzano, 2000), they consistently reported beginning their graduate program with self-confidence and having the intention of succeeding beyond the hindrance of stressors. This demonstrates an added layer of resilience that accompanies that narrative, with resilience being defined by Morales and Trotman (2011) as “the process and results that are part of the life story of an individual who has been academically successful, despite obstacles.”
Over the past decade, universities have enhanced their policies and programming focused on the mental and physical health of their underrepresented student populations (Bugbee, Caldeira, Soong, Vincent, & Arria, 2016; Perron, Grahovac, Uppal, Granillo, Shutter, & Porter, 2011). While additional resources and campaigns are aimed at combating public health issues on college campuses, such as stress-focused coping, the primary target population of these efforts is typically undergraduates, and only recently have these efforts explicitly targeted underrepresented populations (Croom, Lewis, Marchell, Lesser, Reyna, Kubicki-Bedford, & Staiano-Coico, 2009; Ford & Torok, 2008; Griner & Smith, 2006; Mori, 2000; Oswalt, 2011; White, Park, Israel, & Cordero, 2009). There are various coping mechanisms to consider when examining the experiences of Black American doctoral students, such as faith, campus resources, faculty support, and peer support (Johnson-Bailey, 2008; Joseph, 2007); and first-generation college students who are now doctoral students also have an additional setback to overcome while matriculating (Adams, 2011). These intricacies of stress and coping contribute to a Black American doctoral student’s ability to complete their degree program. However, there is no research that explicitly explores this topic to date.

**Black American Males**

In Arias’ 2014 study, the author revealed that Black American males are statistically disadvantaged in a number of areas of life in the United States. Research on the Black American male was conducted in 2012 and 2013 to better pinpoint health outcomes among this population. Researchers found the average life expectancy of Black American males to be 70.7 years, compared to 76.3 years for White males and 78.7 years for Hispanic males. Black American males are also less likely to have health insurance. In fact, 28.8% of this population is uninsured, compared to 15.7% of White males and 22.4% of males overall in the United States. Lastly,
compared to White males, Black American males are 30% more likely to die from heart disease, 60% more likely to die from stroke, and 200% more likely to die from diabetes or prostate cancer (Arias, 2014).

Black Americans males are also frequently born into poverty and less likely move up the economic ladder as compared to Whites due to educational inequalities, neighborhood effects, workplace discrimination, access to credit, and rates of incarceration (Winship, Reeves, & Guyot, 2018). A recent report from the Equality of Opportunity Project highlighted that race gaps within intergenerational mobility largely reflect the poor outcomes for Black American males (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2018). Their findings indicate that Black American males born to low-income parents have a stronger likelihood of ending up with a low individual income as compared to Black American females, White females, and White males. Thus, their likelihood of attaining educational and economic mobility is hindered from the time they are born.

Further adding to the vulnerability of the Black American male, the “school-to-prison pipeline” contributes to Black youth being increasingly portrayed as dangerous, undisciplined, and requiring surveillance (Meiners, 2007). As a result, many schools across the United States have begun practicing over-policing and zero-tolerance policies, which allow school security and campus police to punish students for minor infractions (Advancement Project, 2000); this relationship between increased policing and zero tolerance among youth in America is frequently yoked to the belief that Black and Brown bodies require surveillance and control in underserved urban public educational systems (Polakow, 2000). Such practices and beliefs notably contribute to the severe overrepresentation of poor youth of color in detention centers, jails, and prisons, further denying marginalized communities’ access to educational institutions and the skills
required to navigate the American workforce (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). This creates an even larger barrier to Black American males’ access to postsecondary education.

**native Black American Male Ph.D. Students.** Black American male doctoral students more specifically are statistically disadvantaged even further in postsecondary education environments. Out of the total persons who received doctorates in 2017, Black male doctoral students who were US citizens represented 1.6% (NCES, 2017). Figure 1.1 provides a visual of doctoral degree attainment by race/ethnic background and sex in the United States in 2017. When marrying the aforementioned stressors like imposter syndrome and self-doubt to loneliness, discrimination, and indifference/insensitivity, which are frequently experienced by this population (Johnson-Bailey, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2009), it is evident that researchers must explore factors impacting stress and coping and how they may exhibit themselves within statistically underrepresented populations as a means to balance odds stacked against them further.

The term “native” was used in this study to disaggregate between native Americans/native Indians/Indigenous Americans and Black men of African descent whose families have lived in the United States for at least two generations. Modeled off of Griffin, de Pilar, McIntosh, and Griffin’s (2012) research on Black immigrant students and Black native students, I chose to identify the population as native Black with a lower case ‘n,’ since utilizing the term “native Black” American could be interpreted as a man who is of mixed native American/native Indian/Indigenous and African ancestry.
Figure 1.1:


Furthermore, the previous data aggregated Blackness in their statistics on doctoral student degree earnings. Black/African American was delineated by US Citizenship, Temporary Visa Holder, or Unknown Citizenship (NCES, 2017). The data fail to capture the full diaspora of Blackness, which continues to be a challenging topic area to dissect. The diasporic experience of a Black person was first articulated by Paul Gilroy in his internationally acclaimed book, *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy, 1993). Gilroy explored the political, social, cultural, and economic relations among the triangular systems of Africa, the Americans, and Europe that influenced Black culture. While critics have noted his narrow focus on the African American diaspora, inconsistencies in his claims leave room for scholarship development into the nuances of Blackness in the 21st century (Chrisman, 2018; Zeleza, 2005). Explicitly focusing on native
Black American males touches on one facet of the diaspora that has yet to be explored in this context. Within this study, native was defined as having both parents and grandparents both born in the United States, modeled off of Griffin, de Pilar, McIntosh, and Griffin’s 2012 study on Black Native students.

**Stress and the Graduate School Experience**

The Ph.D. academic journey varies across departments, programs, and universities throughout the world. However, in general, the process typically consists of program-specific coursework, comprehensive/preliminary examinations, dissertation committee formation, dissertation proposal defense, independent studying and subsequent writing of dissertation, and a dissertation defense. Intertwined throughout this process are various prerequisites at different universities, such as required research project completions, yearly student reviews, preliminary examinations, oral examinations, and teaching assistant requirements (Boston University, 2018; Iowa State University School of Education, 2018; University Purdue University, 2018; Stanford Biosciences, 2018). Graduate students are therefore uniquely prone to experiencing stressful challenges compared to undergraduates, as these students enter their new environments with pre-existing expectations of inherent self-direction and the ability to create original, high-quality work within their field placed on them (Egan, 1989). Subsequently, overcoming feelings of incompetence, disbelief of earned admission, living in poverty, completing vast amounts of reading and research, and the overall feelings of regret of beginning a graduate program also permeates the lives of graduate students (Golde, 1998). These emotions consequently lead to increases in imposter syndrome, isolation, and further psychological roadblocks (Gardner, 2011; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Quarterman, 2008; Sammons, 2008), such that assumptions of independence are typically not consistent with earlier educational experiences,
and readiness for an increased level of independence may not be openly admitted by the graduate students. Seeking or asking for additional help can then potentially be interpreted by students as an ineptitude to live up to expectations, and once expectations are established, varying degrees of abstraction in which ideas are formulated leave graduate students incapable of constructing questions that could provide clarification. This then makes the graduate student believe that difficulties in material comprehension result from their own inadequacies, leading to continued self-doubt, negative re-evaluations of self-worth, and lowered self-esteem (Egan, 1989).

A more recent study conducted by Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, and Gisle (2017) discovered that one in two Ph.D. students suffers from psychological distress, which is defined as the general concept of maladaptive psychological functioning in the face of stressful life events (Ridner, 2004). Psychological distress is typically characterized by perceived inability to cope effectively, change in emotional status, discomfort, communication of discomfort, and harm. Additionally, Levecque et al. (2017) found that one in three Ph.D. students (32%) is at risk for a common psychiatric disorder. A study by the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS) and APA’s Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance also discovered that approximately 70% of graduate students reported impairment of daily normative functioning caused by at least one stressful event involving finances, academics, relationships, or health (El-Ghoroury, 2011). Stress influencers, or stressors, are higher among Ph.D. students than among the college-educated general population according to Levecque et al. (2017). These data urge researchers to further explore promising mechanisms of support during doctoral students’ rigorous academic trajectory while aiming to clearly identify and advance university practices that address graduate students’ disproportionate levels of stress.
Additional research suggests that mental health problems are both numerous and increasing among students enrolled at institutions of higher education (US Department of Education, 2005). In 1998, the American Psychological Association conducted a study and found that 93% of college students seeking treatment through campus counseling services were diagnosed with at least one mental health disorder; in 2009, that percentage increased to 96%. Within the same time frame, the majority of students were diagnosed with mood disorders, anxiety disorders, adjustment disorders, or problems related to impaired daily functioning (American Psychological Association, 2010, Mental Illness). The National Survey of Counseling Center Directors (Gallagher, 2011) more recently discovered results that align with previous findings. In the study, 91% of counseling center directors reported the number of students enrolled with severe psychological problems continued to rise. Specifically, 37.4% of students seeking campus counseling had severe psychological problems; approximately 5.9% of that percentage had disorders that were so severe that they were incapable of remaining in school or could only continue with extensive psychological/psychiatric assistance (Gallagher, 2011).

**Coping**

Graduate students cope with the barriers they face in a variety of ways. As noted by Nelson, Dell, Oliver, Koch, and Buckler (2001), positive coping strategies include seeking social suppression of competing activities, religious coping, positive reinterpretation and growth, restraint coping, acceptance, and humor. Contrarily, negative coping strategies typically include denial, mental or behavioral disengagement, and alcohol/drug use. While evaluating these options, graduate students are then forced to develop, enhance, or moderate coping mechanisms (Myers, Sweeney, Popick, Wesley, Borfeld & Fingerhut, 2012) that can either aid or detract from
their experiences as doctoral students (Irani, Wilson, Slough, & Rieger, 2014; Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009) and their ability to persist through the program (Pontius & Harper, 2006).

My research will explore and highlight the stress and coping needs of native Black American male Ph.D. students as a means of creating more supportive learning environments in the academy. Graduate education, in particular, is vital to Black Americans in a society where degree attainment is the new required standard for careers that solidify middle class status (Bowen & Bok, 2016; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, Gurin, 2002; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). Previous research demonstrated that among Asian American, Black, and Latino undergraduate students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI), stress was directly correlated with one’s ethnic identity, further impacting college persistence (Wei, Ku, & Laio, 2011). Dyrbye, Thomas, and Eacker (2007) conducted a large-scale study examining well-being as it relates to race and ethnicity among 3,080 medical students. Their findings revealed that underrepresented students reported added stressors that negatively impacted their medical school experience, including racial discrimination, racial prejudice, feelings of isolation, and varying cultural expectations (Myers et al., 2012). As such knowledge is transferable among advanced degree students, increased support mechanisms at the individual and community levels must be in place in order to best handle the stress associated with doctoral programs and to reduce accompanying stressors that are aroused during this period of time.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore how native Black American Ph.D. students narrated their stress and coping, as current research concentrates primarily on undergraduate student populations, and existing literature on Black American graduate students narrowly addresses practices and successes among females (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Felder,
2010; Taylor & Antony, 2000). The focus on native Black American Ph.D. students was due to their severe statistical underrepresentation across all doctoral disciplines of study and the nonexistent research exploring their lives as a doctoral students (NCSES Survey of Earned Doctorates: FY 2016, 2017). In analyzing the narratives of native Black American Ph.D. students, the goal of this study was to better understand their stress and how they coped in historically White postsecondary environments. Additionally, this study provided an opportunity to draw from a public health education model to examine an issue within higher education. In order to carry out this research project, my study was guided by three primary research questions:

- How do native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress experiences at historically White institutions?
- What factors shape native Black American male Ph.D. students’ ability to cope with stress?
- What are the storied experiences of native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions?

**Theoretical Significance**

To better understand how stress is exhibited within this population, I used a new approach of framing the issue through the lens of a public health conceptual model. Traditionally, when looking at the experiences of underrepresented and marginalized populations, researchers within student affairs and higher education utilize theories and frameworks such as Sense of Belonging and Intersectionality to inform their work (Museus & Griffin, 2011; Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). While these theories and frameworks are helpful in navigating student decision-making and adaptability to their new and
current environments, they frequently fail to address the holistic perspectives of the students being studied. Stress itself is embedded within human nature (Aldwin, 2007), and adapting a culturally competent public health model to this higher education issue aided in understanding the essence of native Black American male Ph.D. students’ experiences with stress and coping. At the very core of the human being is its health (Ickovicks & Park, 1998); to examine a student’s stress and coping behaviors, the natural approach was to disaggregate those issues through a health framework and subsequently adapt the findings to various fields.

Airhihenbuwa (1990) developed the PEN-3 model as a way of focusing on cultural appropriateness within the expansion of health education programs in developing nations. The PEN-3 model (1990) consists of three dimensions of health benefits that are interrelated and interdependent. The three dimensions are cultural identity, cultural empowerment, and relationships and expectations, as seen in Figure 1.2 (Airhihenbuwa & Websiter, 2004).
Within each domain, there are three elements. The cultural identity (CI) domain consists of person, extended family, and neighborhood (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). The relationships & expectations (RE) domain consists of perceptions, enablers, and nurturers. The cultural empowerment (CE) domain consists of positive, existential, and negative. The CI domain is historically used within public health to inform interventions among marginalized populations. Previous studies used the PEN-3 model in numerous ways within public health to explain an issue or to better construct an intervention (Airhihenbuwa, Okoror, Shefer, Brown, Iwelunmor, Smith, & Shisana, 2009.; Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004; Cowdery, Parker, & Thompson, 2010; Kannan, Webster, Sparks, Acker, Greene-Moton, Tropiano, & Turner, 2009; Melancon, Oomen-Early, & del Rincon, 2009; Scarinci, Bandura, Hidalgo, & Cherrington, 2012; Yick & Oomen-Early, 2009). However, no studies to date have used the PEN-3 model within the context of higher education, stress, or concerning native Black American students.
Methodological Overview

Narrative research is a type of inquiry derived from the humanities in which the researcher explores the lives of individuals and asks those chosen individuals to provide stories about their experiences (Delamont, 2012); it is a form of inquiry that attempts to understand how students make sense of those experiences in thinking critically through their reflections (Hendry, 2010; Riley & Hawe, 2005). Allowing participants to share their stories empowered them with the opportunity to voice and share their values concerning stress and coping as a native Black American male Ph.D. student. This approach was most appropriate for this study because it enabled students to determine which experiences were proven valuable to them as doctoral students. Nine currently enrolled native Black American Ph.D. students were selected to participate. Participants were required to be in at least the second year of their doctoral program. However, one participant in this study was within his first year, and the rationale for this will be discussed in Chapter III. Participants were also required to attend a historically White institution (HWI). HWIs were chosen to contextualize the history of each institution’s foundation of exclusion of all identities outside that of White males: historically White institutions in the United States were not created by Black people, nor were they created with Black students in mind. However, all participants attended institutions that were both historically White as well as predominantly White in 2019. Once IRB approval was received, students were recruited through advertisements, notices, and social media and were required to sign a consent form prior to their participation (Creswell, 2014).

Once all participants were identified, each was individually interviewed and also participated in a focus group. Two focus groups were conducted to break apart the large number of people video-chatting online; one group consisted of five participants and another consisted of
four. A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A) and a semi-structured focus group protocol (Appendix B) that aligned with Airhihenbuwa’s PEN-3 model (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004) were used. The first interview protocol contained questions that aligned with subjective appraisals of stress, which are often more effective in predicting health outcomes, individual characteristics and contextual factors that relate to stress and coping, and the PEN-3 model. The focus group protocol focused on the collective narrative and shared experiences of the participants as they narrated continued facets of stress and coping. The interviews and focus groups occurred via Zoom video conferencing software and were recorded via a voice recorder and Zoom video recording to ensure all data were captured, including verbal reactions, facial expressions, and other non-verbal language. Video conferencing was the most valuable method for data collection since participants were enrolled at institutions in nearly every region of the United States. Additionally, as the primary researcher, I took notes in a journal throughout each interview and focus group session.

Once all data were transcribed using Rev.com Transcription services, I utilized memoing, open coding, a priori, and thematic coding to bring together the interview and journal data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Patton, 1990). Upon completion of the participant profiles, I conducted member-checking with the participants (Creswell, 2014). NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis software facilitated tracking codes and themes, which then allowed me to connect those themes and codes to the conceptual model.

**Contributions of the Study**

This study contributed to both literature and practice by addressing a large gap in the research on stress and coping behaviors of native Black American male Ph.D. students. While stress and coping are increasingly becoming topics of concern at universities, it is important
going forward to understand the unique perspectives, experiences, and coping mechanisms for native Black American male Ph.D. students, as they continue to be an underrepresented population at colleges and universities across the country. Studying stress and coping among this population can potentially aid in native Black American male PhD students’ persistence, sense of belonging, and other areas of their graduate experience. Contributing positively to these aforementioned factors enable a native Black American male Ph.D. student to complete his degree, which can add to his upward mobility, financial stability, and civic engagement. On the opposite side of the spectrum, ignoring such issues or applying an inappropriate framework for examining stress and coping in this population could prove to be detrimental in interpreting outcomes among the native Black American male Ph.D. student population. This could potentially lead to continued isolation of the student, withdrawal from a graduate program, or exacerbation of psychological health issues because of native Black American male PhD students’ stress and coping behaviors.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Within this chapter, a review of the literature is conducted to more intimately unpack the stress-related experiences and coping mechanisms of currently enrolled native Black American male Ph.D. students attending historically White institutions (HWIs) in the United States. Figure 2.1 below provides a depiction of the organizational structure of this literature review. The literature review is divided into seven overarching sections with an introduction to the PEN-3 model, two sections addressing stress and coping, and the remaining four sections organized in accordance with PEN-3 model as a framework for understanding stress and coping within this population. The PEN-3 model, developed by Collins Airhihenbuwa in 1989, was created to place culture at the forefront of health promotion. I will first explain the cultural identity (CI) domain through the lenses of the person, extended family, and neighborhood. I will then deconstruct relationships & expectations (RE) and cultural empowerment (CE). Lastly, I will use knowledge from all three domains to further explore how each of these domains come together in relation to native Black American male Ph.D. students. Previous use of this model was applied to child survival interventions in Nigeria (Airhihenbuwa, 1993,1995), health intervention research related to cancer (Gwede & McDermott, 1992), and HIV/AIDS interventions in Zimbabwe (Airhihenbuwa et al., 2009; Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004; Cowdery et al., 2010; Kannan et al., 2009; Melancon, Oomen-Early, & del Rincon, 2009; Scarinci et al., 2012; Yick & Oomen-Early, 2009). The goal of using this model was two-fold: 1) to bridge the gap of public health issues on college campuses within the context of higher education; and 2) to offer practical recommendations from the PEN-3 model to plan culturally relevant and sensitive stress-prevention, education, and services targeted to the native Black American male Ph.D. student community.
Figure 2.1:

*Overview of the Literature Review.*

**PEN-3 Model Overview**

The PEN-3 model is composed of three interrelated and interdependent primary domains, each containing three elements. The three overarching domains are cultural identity (CI), relationships & expectations (RE), and cultural empowerment (CE) (Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Yick & Early, 2008). CI focuses on the persons, extended family, and neighborhoods that should be addressed within health education. Individuals who are within each of these categories should be educated and empowered to make informed health decisions in accordance to their roles in the family and community. RE identifies the population’s perceptions of health information and the factors that endorse and cultivate health behaviors. CE is composed of the positive, existential, and negative dimensions of a person’s culture that can be used to motivate individuals to espouse healthy behaviors.

Furthermore, I am modifying the PEN-3 model and removing the existential element of the CE domain. Existential is the element that focuses on values and beliefs that are practiced in the culture but do not pose a threat to health (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). However, behaviors and experiences associated with stress among native Black American male Ph.D. students automatically yield either or positive negative consequences. It is difficult to pinpoint experiences that do not have any implications when speaking exclusively on the topic of stress. Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, and Mullan (1981) note that people usually confront stress and
stress-provoking conditions with an assortment of behaviors, perceptions, and cognitions that are frequently capable of altering difficult conditions or of mediating their impact. Due to the nature of stress, it is nearly impossible to identify a behavior that neither positively nor negatively impacts stress levels and subsequent coping (Abouserie, 1994; Brougham, 2009; Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999).

**Stress**

The term “stress” has been historically observed and researched in multiple disciplines throughout history. Fields such as physiology, biology, chemistry, psychological sciences, and even anthropology have explored stress in an array of topic areas. However, the dynamic nature of stress previously aroused concern among researchers. Kasl (1984) articulated concerns of promulgating the term to the point of losing its usefulness across bodies of research. While the understanding and definitions of stress have evolved over the past few decades, it is vital to keep in mind that stress involves multiple layers, which will be explained. More recently, Wheaton, Young, Montzer, and Stuart-Lahman (2013, pg. 300) defined stress as conditions of threat, challenge, demands, or structural constraints that, by the very fact of their occurrence or existence, call into question the operating integrity of the organism. To further deconstruct what stress “looks” like, Mason (1975) described stress in three different ways.

**Stress as an Internal State**

Stress can first refer to the internal state of an organism, occasionally referred to as the “strain,” which concerns the physiological, emotional, and cellular reactions. Physiologically, stress has the potential to impact the function of the peripheral and central nervous systems neuroendocrine system, and immune system (Aldwin, 2007). Emotional reactions typically encompass navigation of feelings such as anxiety, anger, and sadness. Additional reactions like
shame, guilt, and boredom are also frequently considered emotional reactions (Lazarus, 1991). Though these are physiological and emotional reactions to stress, humans often exhibit physical symptoms of stress such as sweaty palms or a dry mouth, which are peripheral nervous system reactions. Feelings such as a racing heart or having “butterflies” in your stomach indicate an autonomic nervous system reaction. Both systems are regulated by the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems in tandem with the endocrine system. Additionally, contracting the common cold or developing a rash during a stressful period of time both indicate immune system disturbances, which are also ordinary responses to stress (Aldwin, 2007). Each of these examples unite the understanding that humans are inherently made to physiologically respond to stress within every system in the body. In the life of a native Black American male Ph.D. student, events such as a proposal/dissertation defense, proposal deadlines, or even vital meetings with advisors and faculty could cause feelings of anxiety or physical symptoms such as increased sweating or a racing heart.

**Stress as an External State**

Stress can also refer to an external event or “stressor,” which is characteristic of an interaction with the environment (Mason, 1975). Early research in this area encompassed events such as major trauma, major life events, and noxious environmental characteristics. Relating to the physical stressors experienced by humans, these events can be divided into immediate bodily harm, such as speeding cars, tornadoes, or fires; the alternative side to physical stressors are that of aversive environmental conditions, such as pollutants and noise (Aldwin, 2007). Within the context of higher education, stressors that could cause immediate bodily harm include on-campus shootings, hurricane threats at coastal colleges and universities, and biking through an urban campus that does not have biking lanes. Aversive environmental conditions for native
Black American male Ph.D. students could include exposure to chemicals in a laboratory environment and living next to a building that may be undergoing vast reconstruction.

Furthermore, in looking at the daily lives of native Black American male Ph.D. students, this population has the potential to experience the effects of external sociocultural stressors more frequently during their time as a student. Pearlin (1989) argued that stress emerges as a function of the dispersion of social resources coupled with an individual’s status and roles. Therefore, lacking social resources heightens the likelihood of a stressful life event or heightens its stressfulness at the occurrence. Pearlin (1989) further depicts the issue of a primary life event consequently leading to a secondary stressor. Aldwin (2007) expands on this by providing an example of a student possessing little to no disposable income but simultaneously requiring a vehicle for transportation during their enrollment. This predicament forces a student to purchase an older car with higher mileage, which requires more maintenance and repairs. That additional financial obligation then opens the door to added stressors around financial management including paying for rent, food, and other daily needs for survival. Likewise, these responsibilities go hand-in-hand with what Pearlin (1989) calls social role strain, in which he describes in four different domains: 1) role strain, which involves overload, or having too much to do; 2) interpersonal strain within roles (arguments with a spouse, child, or co-worker); 3) role captivity, such as being unable to quit a job due to financial obligations or role restructuring (becoming a caretaker for an aging parent); and 4) ambient strains, such as living in an impoverished or violent neighborhood and informal or elective roles that involve arguments with friends or fellow members of a social organization. In examining these domains and their outcomes, it is important to bear in mind both the personal and the social contexts. Not all role
departures or restructurings are deemed stressful. In fact, departures from some roles can be highly positive, which segues into the need for evaluation in both the social and personal context.

External stressors also encompass elements of temporality. Previous animal research demonstrated that the physiological effects of stress differ depending on whether the stressor is short-term, chronic, or intermittent (Dienstbier, 1989). For example, experiencing events causing low-level chronic stress forces the researcher to examine the length of exposure and its subsequent effects. Temporal patterning can then have complex ramifications for both coping behavior and the outcome of the stressor. In the life of a Black doctoral student, preparing for a comprehensive exam and composing a dissertation both invite stress into the life of the student, but both have different lengths of exposure and intensities.

**Stress as a Transaction**

The last way that Mason (1975) depicts stress is as an experience that arises from a transaction between the person and the environment. There is an inherent need to differentiate between people’s respective perceptions or appraisals of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, receiving a “Conditional Pass” on a proposal defense for one doctoral student in the psychology department may erect a different reaction compared to a doctoral student in the Department of Chemical Engineering. Within this process, the foundation of stressors thrives in the marriage of demands and individual resources. Lazarus refers to the perception of stress as the “appraisal.”

**Appraisals**

The appraisal consists of the person determining if the stressor is taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their current state of well-being (Folkman, Lazarus, Guren, & DeLongis, 1986). Appraisal is heavily dependent on scope of the environmental demand and the
amount of resources that an individual has available to cope with that demand (Aldwin, 2007, pg. 32). A student first acknowledges the problem at hand and then determines what, if any, resources will be required to cope with that problem. Stress then arises when there is an imbalance between the requirements of the environmental situation and the student’s ability to cope with the problem.

Over time, various additions to types of appraisal have been made. In 1984, Lazarus and Folkman created a theory in which the five types of appraisals were named: harm, threat, loss, challenge, or benign (Aldwin, 2007). Challenging the standard one-stressor, one-appraisal, one-emotion model, Smith and Lazarus (1993) argued the limitations of this concept to capture the intricacies of daily life. Their study demonstrated a strong correlation among anger, guilt, and fear/anxiety as three core appraisals among humans. Following these suggestions, Aldwin, Sutton, Chiara, and Spiro (1996) also included three additional appraisals to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) original five, which were annoyances, concerns over others’ problems, and being at a loss for what to do next. In their research on older men, Aldwin et al. found that at least two appraisals were typically used at a time. The last appraisal of concern is that of the problem’s severity, relating to Folkman and Lazarus’s (1980) term of “secondary” appraisal. (Aldwin, 2007).

For example, researchers have explored a number of ways in which appraisal is used. A recent study conceptualized and measured African American women’s levels of stress (Woods-Giscombe & Lobel, 2008). As this population experiences disproportionately high rates of health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disease, and adverse health outcomes (Office of Women’s Health, 2006), increased examination of the root causes and challenges of coping has recently taken place. Woods-Giscombe and Lobel (2008) were able to statistically
pinpoint African American women’s perceptions or appraisals of stressful conditions through race-related, gender-related, and generic stress. Their findings revealed that African American women’ stress, coping, and cognitive appraisal responses exist in a unique sociocultural and historical context that substantially influences how stress impacts health outcomes within this population (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

The Current State of Stress Research

Stress has been studied extensively in a number of disciplines over the past 50 years. However, it will be important to bear in mind what stress means contemporarily in the United States. Wheaton et al. (2013) recently explored chronic stress over the past decade and were able to coalesce their findings into three major concepts. The first is that researchers have placed a high priority on studying chronic stress and its relationship with diverse coping mechanisms. Examples of these include the role of positive emotions (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007; Ong, Bergeman, & Bisconti, 2004), emotional disclosure (Schüler, Job, Fröhlich, & Brandstätter, 2009), and time-of-day preference (Buschkens, Graham, & Cottrell, 2010) in diluting the effects of stressors. Second, research is strongly shifting attention towards the relationship between neurological functioning and chronic stressors, occasionally combining the two (Wheaton et al., 2013). The last concept focuses on inequalities in exposure and vulnerability to chronic stressors relating to an assortment of sources, such as neighborhood context (Hill, Ross, & Angel, 2005; Wheaton & Clarke, 2003), racial discrimination (Taylor & Turner, 2002), gender (McDonough & Walters, 2001), and socioeconomic status (Mossakowski, 2008).

Interestingly enough, very few academic research articles within the past decade studied the internal, external, and transactional layers of chronic stress or its affiliated language
(Wheaton et al., 2013). However, in recent trends, chronic stress is not typically examined in isolation as was done previously. Meta-analyses in Wheaton et al.’s (2013) study revealed an emphasis of chronic stress in conjunction with additional life-changing or traumatic events. Relatively few explored the combined role of chronic stress with relation to context (Hill et al., 2005, Wheaton & Clarke, 2003; Wheaton et al., 2013). Through the study of chronic stress, researchers have discovered its importance in life events. Wheaton et al. (2013) suggest chronic stress serves as the invisible glue of stressful experiences, allowing for a method of framing and opening the door to understand “meaning” of stressful events at their occurrence (Wheaton, 1990; Wheaton et al., 2013).

Furthermore, three overarching chronic stressors in the 21st century can be divided into three new lenses (Wheaton et al., 2013). These stressors are: 1) work-family conflict; 2) discrimination; and 3) electronic connectedness. The work-to-family and family-to-work conflict was researched extensively in its detrimental impact on health outcomes (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Glavin, Schieman, & Ried, 2011). These conflicts have been generally defined by researchers as some combination of time-based, strain-based, or behavioral-based conflict throughout work and family role sets (Greenhaus & Beautell, 1985). Discrimination, on the other hand, has been the focal point of literature regarding gender, race/ethnicity, and work, all the while becoming more explicitly woven into stress literature within recent years. Particular attention has been dedicated to the health repercussions of discrimination (Taylor & Turner, 2002; Mossakowski, 2008; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Lastly, electronic connectedness has also received growing interest among researchers. Chronic stress is first tied to connectedness through the lack of control over privacy and unintended disbursement of personal information; the issue is not necessarily tied to granting permission to others to access
your personal information, but more about having access to too much information about others (Wheaton et al., 2013). The skeleton of connectedness also adds pressure in relationships that have the ability to ride through cycles of ins and outs with diverse people within varying social networks. This exposes relationships to chronic stressors such as rejection, disloyalty, and dishonesty. Chronic stress also infiltrates connectedness through the work-to-family spillover, evidenced by the dependence on a cellular device (Wheaton et al., 2013).

**Coping**

United States culture has recently created an obsession around stress and coping, according to Aldwin (2007). Examples of this can be found in the media, self-help books, online news outlets, and social media. Experts, both informal and formal, have capitalized on the trend to coach and support people through the numerous stressors of life (Aldwin, 2007). Particularly in the academy, research around stress and coping has soared. Since Hamburg, Coehlo, and Adams’s (1974) book titled *Coping and Adaptation: Steps towards a Synthesis of Biological and Social Perspectives*, well over 38,000 articles have been published on coping (Aldwin, 2007). The articles range from discussing general findings on the structure of coping to specific findings on how people typically cope with varying stressors. While multiple definitions of coping have been created over time, Aldwin (2007) explains a person’s ability to cope as: “to be or prove oneself a match for” or “to contend successfully with.” Furthermore, as a means of accounting for the discrepancy in students’ reactions to negative threatening events, Lazarus (1966) proposed a process in which their perceived aptitude to cope with those events holds a central role. Students, in particular, typically cope with negative events in three stages: 1) primary appraisal of the situation or realizing the threat; 2) secondary appraisal or bringing to mind the potential responses that can be employed; and 3) coping or the discharge of coping responses
(Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Furthermore, this process can be divided into two strategies of coping, which are problem-focused coping (PFC) and emotion-focused coping (EFC). PFC involves the thoughts, actions, and strategies focused on removing or diminishing a stressful event and/or its impact and typically occurs when people have confidence in their ability to alter their current predicament. On the other hand, EFC involves the thoughts, actions, and strategies involving the management and reduction of distressing emotions tied to a threatening event. It is utilized when a person believes a stressor must be endured (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000).

Coping can then manifest itself in many ways, be it through social support or religiosity. Students then have the potential to utilize different methods of coping depending on various intrinsic characteristics, the present environment, and other facets of their daily lives (Aldwin, 2007). For native Black American male Ph.D. students, proactive and anticipatory coping mechanisms throughout their doctoral program are critical (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). More specifically, proactive coping consists of efforts utilized in advance of a potentially stressful event as a way to prevent it or modify its impact before it occurs (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). Anticipatory coping then involves the preparation for the stressful consequences of an upcoming event whose occurrence is likely or certain (Breznitz, 1983; Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Coping efficacy is also dependent on the person, the type of threat, the stage of the stressful encounter, and the outcome modality, and each of these are subjective to individual well-being, social functioning, or somatic health. Therefore, with the primary focus being change over time in accordance with diverse life circumstances, process formulation is intrinsically contextual (Lazarus, 1999).
Cultural Identity: Person

Throughout history, Black American students in the United States experienced increased inclusion within higher education but continue to be underrepresented as students, faculty, and administration within these environments (Bowen & Bok, 2016; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008). This underrepresentation contributes to several accounts of Black American students continuing to experience additional stressors, such as loneliness, discrimination, and even isolation within institutions of higher learning (Greer & Brown, 2011; Negga et al., 2007; Welle & Graf, 2011). Many of those differential experiences led to the gradual call for diverse and inclusive administrative practices on college campuses (Winkle-Wagner & Locks, 2013). In fact, diverse elements of higher education culture such as participation in various student organizations and activities and interactions with peers and faculty are known to influence grade point averages more heavily with Black American students as compared to White American students (Nettles, 1988). White Americans are frequently compared to Black Americans in education research because the majority of Black American students are consistently enrolling at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and have been since the 1970s (Bowen & Bok, 1998; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009; Nettles, 1988). Moreover, racial divides on these campuses can potentially increase adverse outcomes for students in various ways. Campuses that are notorious for racial insensitivity or hostility towards marginalized populations can be psychologically harmful to students (Allen, 1985; Fleming, 1984; Chao, Mallinckrodt, & Wei 2012). Such environments can potentially increase student withdrawal and self-doubt and lower self-esteem (Allen, 1985; Fleming, 1984; Webster, 1977; Willie, 1991). These outcomes have in turn demonstrated negative effects on the retention of Black American students but minimal impact on White

Furthermore, Fox (2008) suggests that graduate students often lack the ability to balance healthy personal lives, resulting from the majority of their attention and time being dedicated to academic work; hobbies, interests, and other extracurricular activities in their lives often fall to the wayside. He also suggests that graduate students are frequently detached from cultural and social activities that are targeted to undergraduate populations on campus. Couple the identity of being Black American and a graduate student, there is a clear case to further explore how both identities merge to form native Black American male Ph.D. students who embrace various stress-related coping mechanism through graduate school.

**Racial Discrimination**

Racial discrimination in the Black American community is widely documented across disciplines throughout the 20th and the 21st centuries. Literary moguls such as Du Bois (1898), Fanon (1963, 1967), Feagin (2001), and Coates (2015) all speak to a common theme over the past century: experiences of racism demand a substantial psychological toll on the mental health and wellness of people. Jones (1972, 1997) and Neville and Pieterse (2009) define racism as an ideology of racial superiority succeeded by discriminatory and prejudicial behavior within three domains: individual, institutional, and cultural. Discrimination is then defined as the negative actions and behaviors that are directed at a person or group due to their marginalized social status (Jones & Carter, 1996). For the majority of marginalized groups in the United States, inequality or unfair treatment characterizes their experiences; perceived racism then has room to arise on multiple levels (interpersonal, institutional, cultural) and can be appraised as stressful (Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012). A Black American can then report exposure (frequency) to
racism and/or racial discrimination, the extent to which the event is appraised as stressful, or both (Carter, 2007). A recent meta-analysis revealed consistent findings that the mental health of Black Americans is negatively affected by exposure to racism, and the greater the exposure to and appraised stressfulness of racist events or experiences, the stronger the probability of reporting mental distress (Pieterse et al., 2012).

**Socioeconomic Status**

Alongside racism and discrimination, socioeconomic status is one of the more notable and robust factors impacting health outcomes, whether measured by income, education, or occupation or measured during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood (Geronimus, 2000; LaVeist, 2005). Resulting from the resource inequities created via racial residential segregation, Blacks in the United States have worse outcomes compared to White Americans in the areas of employment, criminal justice, economic resources, and education, each of which are vital determinants of health (Airhihenbuwa & Liburd, 2006; Williams & Collins, 2004). This results in Black Americans living in impoverished environments with fewer economic opportunities (Utsey, 1997); past research has confirmed that resources, opportunities, and environmental differences by race have vital mental health repercussions (Kessler, McGonagle, Zhao, Nelson, Hughes, & Eshleman, 1994; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Both Burke (1984) and Utsey (1997) reported that over time, prejudice and discrimination can engender rage, anger, frustration, bitterness, resentment, grief, despair, or any combination of those emotions. The results morph into the onset of grief-related illness among Black Americans. Adding onto this sequence, Black American adults have a tendency to conceal emotional health status, a behavior that holds positively associated indications of compromised mental health, such as depression,
poor self-esteem, and lower levels of perceived social support (Cramer & Barry, 1999; Ichiyama, Colbert, Laramore, Heim, Carone, & Schmidt, 1993; Larson & Chastain, 1990).

Transferring this knowledge into the exploration of Black American collegiate communities, there is consistent evidence of the deleterious effects of stress associated with racism, discrimination, and socioeconomic status on students’ mental health. As graduate students of color are also very few in number, many students frequently experience being “the only one” or being “the one of a handful” in their program (Gay, 2004). These students often spend their time physically isolated and confront exclusion from the primary experiences of being a graduate student. Gay (2004) explains that physical isolation can have potentially personal and professional negative effects. From the personal lens, it is challenging not to have academic peers who share your experiential lens or come from the same ethnic and/or racial backgrounds. Compounding that issue, it is also difficult to operate in a learning environment that narrowly, if at all, depicts your culture and/or ethnicity (Gay, 2004). This practice transfers into faculty makeup, where there are few professors of color to whom student are exposed (Gay, 2004; Tuitt, 2012). Epps (1989) eloquently articulated this topic, explaining that “there is a tendency for minority faculty to be located on the periphery rather than in the mainstream of teaching and research” (p. 25), and “no matter how committed these individuals may be, there simply are not enough of them to meet the needs of all current and potential students” (p.25), should it even be their sole obligation to do so. This type of isolation detracts from the emotional and intellectual energy that should fuel academic endeavors. In 1976, Duncan conducted a study with 467 students of color who participated in the University of California, Berkeley Minority Survey. The research involved African, Mexican, native American, and Asian American graduate students enrolled at Berkeley at the time. Approximately 65% of the participants
reported they rarely or never socialized with other graduate students in their departments. They also experienced feelings of loneliness and depression more regularly than their White counterparts. Fisher (1994) expanded this research, revealing that stress substantially impacts many of the cognitive activities involved in the acquisition, manipulation, and consolidation of memory, all of which influence concentration, focus, judgement, attention to detail, transfer of knowledge, and error frequency.

The physical environment in which native Black American male Ph.D. students are located also plays a role in their adaptation. Many of the larger universities in the United States are not located in the most ethnically, culturally, or linguistically diverse areas (Gay, 2004). This gap forces a student to depend on campus resources for both social and academic support (Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991). Furthermore, students are encouraged to invest time in establishing connections with the local community, which also requires effort and financial flexibility (Gay, 2004). This inherently adds an additional layer of stress into the socioeconomic stressor category. Black American students are often met with institutions that have historically lacked in culturally sensitive programming and the ability to create icons and symbols that are inclusive of multicultural identities, especially at HWIs in predominantly White geographical locations of the United States (Gay, 2004; Turner & Myers, 2000). These experiences and issues influence stress, appraisal, and subsequently, coping.

native Black American Male Ph.D. Students

The Black American community as a whole is at risk for negative psychological outcomes that are often left untreated. As stated previously, perceptions of racism, if left untreated, are inversely associated with psychological well-being and positively associated with psychological stress (Pieterse et al., 2012). However, when narrowing in on the lives of native
Black American male Ph.D. students, there is a unique concoction of stress and coping research that comprise both their marginalized and at-risk identities, but only up to the undergraduate experience. There is no research to date that addresses stress and coping among native Black American males explicitly at the doctoral level.

Griffin et al. acknowledge this gap in their 2012 study on how habitus shapes the college choice process for Black immigrant students. Their findings add to the literature on Black immigrant students’ strong influence by culture, prestige, and the value their families and parents place on education. Many of these differences in values, attitudes and behaviors among Black immigrant students are rooted in reward systems, socialization, and educational mobility (Model, 2008). However, Massey (2006) adds to this research, articulating how the college admission process is closely aligned with their parents’ affluence and level of academic preparation as opposed to any values system held by the student. Comparably, concepts such as the values, attitudes, and parental influence of native Black American students have yet to be unpacked. And when the literature does address the narratives of native Black American students, it is, evidenced in the aforementioned, in relation or comparison to immigrant Black populations. Bennett and Lutz (2009) emphasize the need to disassociate from the overemphasis of oppositional culture in student educational outcomes. Rather than utilizing Blackness comparatively, a shift towards a narrative of inclusive intentionality through the diaspora of Blackness conceptualized by Gilroy (1993) is more relevant.

Ameliorating any barriers to success for native populations at large contributes to the increased economic mobility of native Black populations. In 2010, a study using data from the Current Population Survey and the 2000 Census was published on the immigrant background and its implications on improving racial disadvantage. While still at a disadvantage in America
resulting from their Blackness, the study indicated that the schooling and wages of second-generation African Americans consistently surpassed those of third and higher generations of African Americans. Second-generation African Americans do as well as their White American counterparts related to schooling. Interestingly, second-generation African American women generally earned wages that are comparable to White women; however, second-generation African American men earned wages that were on average approximately 16% less than White men (Sakamoto, Woo, & Kim, 2010). As upward mobility through education is a path for many native Black American males, considering the holistic narrative of this population is critical for developing intentional systems of support.

**Racial Microaggressions and Racial Battle Fatigue**

Native Black American male Ph.D. students are forced to carry two negative social identities that become blatantly evident at HWIs: being Black American and being a Black American male (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Yet as Prillerman, Myers, and Smedley (1989) noted, attrition of Black American males at HWIs ought not be misunderstood as an individual failure to cope with stress or as being academically unprepared. Pierce (1974) notes that in diagnosing and analyzing racial discrimination, solely examining the gross and obvious will do a disservice to the those experiencing maltreatment; he rather emphasized the importance of examining microaggressions’ roles in the evolution of racism. He went on to state that racial assaults “may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence” (Pierce, 1975). Smith (2005) found that microaggressions can include racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatment, stigmatization, hyper-surveillance, contentious classrooms, and even personal threats or assaults on a person’s well-being. This leaves many
native Black American male Ph.D. students at risk of perceiving their environments as highly stressful and exhausting, detracting from their locus of control and comfort and evoking feelings of loss, ambiguity, strain, frustration, and injustice (Brown, Williams, Jackson, Neighbors, Torres, & Sellers, 1999). Black American males also tend to be the primary target of verbal abuse and racially motivated hate crimes (Smith et al., 2007). These roadblocks add to native Black American male Ph.D. students’ need to confront negative stereotypes about their intellect (Brown & Dobbin, 2004) and to excel academically regardless of racially biased course content and racially insensitive instructors (Smith et al., 2004).

**Cultural Identity: Extended Family**

Approximately 20 years of research has found that Black American males are at a strong disadvantage when it comes to having appropriate role models beginning in their adolescence (Cuuyet, 1997; Garibaldi, 1992; Scott, Taylor, & Palmer, 2013). Lack of positive role modeling during this time can contribute to a number of deleterious short-term and long-term outcomes for Black American males. Irving and Hudley (2008) found that lack of positive role modeling during childhood can incite feelings of mistrust and lack of belonging within educational settings, which can further deter Black American males from pursuing higher education.

However, for those who do surpass the numerous societal barriers in place, the socialization process for native Black American male Ph.D. students is critical in their persistence at HWIs. Smith and colleagues (2007) explored the socialization of Black American doctoral students and found mentorship to be a critical piece in their degree completion. More specifically, faculty members not acknowledging Black American students outside of the classroom continues to highlight the sophisticated system of exclusion that negatively affects the development of positive student-faculty relationships; these exclusionary relationships can
further isolate native Black American male Ph.D. students and students of color more generally. The authors point out that this type of inconsistency sheds light on the larger issue of faculty being generally disconnected from the student experience.

Furthermore, faculty diversity also played a significant role in the socialization of Black American doctoral students. While the numbers may have been small at the institution and program the authors examined, faculty of color provided comfort to students on some level. When these faculty were able to provide brief, authentic encounters with Black American doctoral students, the students received those experiences as helpful. As conversations and relationships developed between faculty with Black American doctoral students, barriers resulting from their isolation and marginalization at PWIs were able to be transcended (Gasman, Gerstl-Pepin, Aderson-Thompkins, Rasheed, & Hathaway, 2004; Smith et al., 2007).

The nature of the doctoral cohort also plays a role in the socialization of doctoral students. While models vary significantly depending on the institution, types of cohorts that typically form are open cohorts, closed cohorts, naturally emerging cohorts, and leader-scholar communities (Wolfe, Nelson, & Seamster, 2018). Their study of the success of doctoral cohorts found the organic formation of doctoral cohorts to be fruitful in nature. The dynamic of an organically formed cohort allows for both the individuals and the group to decide on materialization at their own timing discretion. Such groups are centered on the practicality and application to their current predicament like willingness and investment as opposed to gender or discipline. However, regardless of the cohort type, each can be beneficial subjective to the student’s experiences.
**Cultural Identity: Neighborhood**

In this study, the environment in which native Black American male Ph.D. students are located reflect both historically White institutions. Attendance at a historically White institution was mandatory for participation. Both historically White institutions are notorious for battling various issues involving campus climate and racial tensions. Additionally, the surrounding communities in which universities are located become pivotal to graduate students as they consider livability in different cities, regions, and towns (Allen, 1985; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Guidffrida & Douthit, 2010; Woldoff et al., 2011). The American Council on Education recently released a report on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education. Figure 2.2 provides a visual for full-time faculty by race/ethnicity for the Fall of 2016 (USDE, 2016). Figure 2.3 depicts the distribution of college presidents by race/ethnicity in 2016 (Gagliardi, Espinosa, Turk, & Taylor, 2017). Figure 2.4 depicts college and university administrators by race/ethnicity in 2017 (Bichsel, Pritchard, Li, & McChesney, 2018).
Figure 2.2:

Total Full-Time Faculty by Race/Ethnicity: Fall 2016.

Figure 2.3:

Distribution of College Presidents by Race/Ethnicity: 2016.
Figure 2.4:

*College and University Administrators by Position and Race/Ethnicity: 2017.*

Through each of these figures, it is evident that White faculty and administrators continue to dominate postsecondary institutions, making it even more critical to explore how students are growing in spaces where their leadership fails to reflect their identities.

**Relationships & Expectations: Perceptions**

Within the RE domain, “perceptions” focuses on the beliefs and values held by people about a particular condition (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). From a public health lens, “perceptions” uncovers thoughts and beliefs regarding specific health behaviors. For example, within a community that is religiously conservative, teenage pregnancy may be strongly frowned upon. The researcher then must take into consideration what modes of safe sexual activity to promote and which birth control methods may be preferable or more widely accepted.
Transferring this knowledge into higher education, perceptions for students around mental health can differ across various contexts, including age, year, race, ethnicity, and religion.

With doctoral students, stress is a common experience, and perceptions of stress can vary drastically from person to person (Adams, 2011; Schwartz-Mette, 2009). Prior research demonstrated that people, and specifically students, acknowledge and cope with their stress differently depending on a multitude of factors (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). One way students tend to cope is through reflection on past experiences, as they often have more knowledge in being able to address it or avoid stress depending on the circumstance (Pau, Croucher, Sohanpal, Muirhead, & Seymour, 2004). However, while there is a great deal of existing research on alternative coping mechanisms that undergraduates typically employ to combat stress (Kohler Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchart, 2009; Schwartz-Mette, 2009; Wichianson, Bughi, Unger, Spruijt-Metz, & Nguyen-Rodriguez, 2009), there is little to no research on native Black American male Ph.D. students’ coping mechanisms or on their beliefs and values concerning stress.

**Relationships & Expectations: Enablers**

Enablers are resources that either promote or hinder a student’s effort in changing their behavior (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). Within public health, enablers are often community-based organizations, churches, and community health workers (Kannan et al., 2009). However, when looking at native Black American male Ph.D. students, enablers are typically found on the student’s university or college campus. Resources that are intended to aid students such as counseling/health and wellness centers, graduate student support groups, and student organizations have the potential to enable native Black American male Ph.D. students in managing their stress and coping mechanisms (Hayes, Youn, Castonguay, Locke, McAleavey, &
Nordberg, 2011). However, they also can potentially detract from a student’s ability to manage their stress. Particularly in a HWI, issues concerning diverse understandings, knowledge, and approaches and lack of culturally sensitive resources for marginalized and underrepresented populations have arisen among counselors and therapists on campus (Constantine, 2002; Constantine, Chen, & Ceesay, 1997).

**Relationships & Expectations: Nurturers**

The last element of the RE domain is “nurturers,” which focuses on the role of family and friends in creating positive and negative changes. Within a public health context, nurturers typically consist of people closest to the person who have the ability to influence behavior change (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). Translating this into higher education, family and home environments are of particular importance when considering native Black American male Ph.D. students and their adaptation to college campuses (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008). Previous research has also highlighted several stress-related factors of the family that influence Black American students’ persistence and trajectory at postsecondary institutions.

The first factor is privacy of the home. Researchers historically note a culture of “keeping it in the family,” collectivism, and interdependence with Black American students (Chiang, Hunter, & Yeh, 2004; Daly, Jennings, Beckett, & Leashore, 2005). This continues to be an element to address, as this population may be covertly discouraged from seeking on-campus resources that may potentially expose personal issues with which they are coping. Examples of such help-seeking behaviors are utilizing on-campus counselors or attending support groups for Black males. While these topics of collectivism and interdependence may not be explicitly researched within the native Black American male Ph.D. student population, they are important
to note as students continue to carry pieces of their cultural identities with them through graduate school.

There is also an additional layer of first-generation identity, with which many Black American students are confronted in postsecondary education. Even as first-generation graduate students, native Black American male Ph.D. students enter their new environments oftentimes with only non-familial mentors or peers who have traveled their academic paths previously (Allen, 2004). The barrier of not having extended family who have shared experiences may leave native Black American male Ph.D. students without the empathetic kinship. However, having additional support from the extended family yielded positive outcomes for Black American doctoral students and graduate students overall (Johnson-Bailey, 2009; Roberts & Plakhotnik, 2009).

**Cultural Empowerment**

CE consists of the affirmation of the possibilities of culture, which can range from positive to negative (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). The inception of culture as a form of empowerment is derived from the belief that culture represents the continuum of good, indifferent, and bad pieces of culture. The overarching goal of the CE domain is to ensure that research is addressed with not only the bad in mind, but also the good. It also ensures that all the unique or different aspects of culture are acknowledged. Thus, the positive aspects of behavior and culture must be identified as the first priority (Airhihenbuwa, 1999). Within public health, cultural empowerment seeks to point out different pieces of culture that can influence beliefs about a behavior. For example, in an inner-city, low-income community where a farmer’s market is inaccessible, purchasing meals from corner stores and bodegas may be common and widely accepted. This can be seen as a negative for a researcher who is trying to encourage a community
to make healthier food choices. Translating this into higher education, eating late-night fast food in the student union may be a common practice on campus, but is seen as negative to the researcher because of its subsequent implications on the health and wellness of the student.

**Cultural Empowerment: Positive**

The focus on the “positive” element of the CE domain is identifying positive attributes rather than solely the negative ones (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). Within the context of native Black American male Ph.D. students’ experiences, there are a number of different factors that could aid in positive stress and coping. One such example is counseling centers hiring staff who are explicitly devoted to graduate student stress management. Another example could be academic advisors engaging in intentional conversations with their native Black American male Ph.D. students on stress and coping throughout their time in graduate school.

As related to the ethnic culture of native Black American male Ph.D. students, there is the potential for positive cultural empowerment outside of the university context, such as activities with a Greek-affiliated organization, church membership, and exercise groups. Engaging with groups, people, and resources outside of the university can also produce positive outcomes for students coping with stress-related issues (Hyun et al., 2006; Johnson-Bailey et al., 2008, 2009; Oswalt & Riddick, 2007), and such outside resources can positively influence a native Black American male Ph.D. students’ trajectory.

**Cultural Empowerment: Negative**

The last element of the CE domain is “negative,” which describes behaviors that are harmful to the health of the doctoral student (Abernathy, Magat, Houston, Arnold, Bjorck, & Gorsuch, 2005). Negative behaviors can manifest themselves in income/wealth of individuals and communities, the position of women in society relative to decisions about sexuality, and the
spiritual contexts of the health behavior in question. Within public health, examples of negative behaviors are social arrangements that endorse inequity, such as racism and differential housing (Airhihenbuwa & Webster, 2004). Negative behaviors in higher education have been frequently addressed among underrepresented undergraduate populations, such as binge drinking, drug use, and partying (Arbona, 2014; Tate et al., 2015; Wei et al., 2011), but very few studies have addressed them among doctoral students. Negative stressors such as racism and discrimination could potentially lead to depression, anxiety, substance use/abuse, eating disorders, and other psychological disorders among this population (Wichianson et al., 2009).

**Tying the PEN-3 Model Together**

Evidenced throughout this literature review, native Black American male Ph.D. students have a unique vantage point during their time as graduate students. While colleges and universities are addressing issues with their marginalized, underrepresented, and at-risk populations, the fact remains that native Black American male Ph.D. students are a vulnerable population, particularly at PWIs.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore how native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress and coping experiences. The target population was Ph.D. doctoral students specifically. Through analyzing the narratives of native Black American male Ph.D. students, the goal of this study was to better understand the experiences and circumstances that shape their stress and coping. In order to carry out this research project, my study was guided by three primary research questions:

- How do native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress experiences at historically White institutions?
- What factors shape native Black American male Ph.D. students’ ability to cope with stress?
- What are the storied experiences of native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions?

This chapter details the research methodology employed and discusses the following elements of the overall research: (a) research design; (b) methods of data generation and analysis; and (c) ethical consideration.

**Narrative Inquiry**

This qualitative narrative study aimed to gather and understand the perspectives of currently enrolled native Black American male Ph.D. students at HWIs. Narrative inquiry has the potential to be written, spoken, or visualized. Also known as storytelling, Riessman (2008) emphasizes that narrative inquiry has effects on social interaction in ways that other modes of communication are limited. Mishler (1986) also states that narratives can be defined as stories containing culturally derived plots that are central in constructing meaning through experiences.
Stories are thus capable of creating a social reality through the lens of the participant by using or illustrating the person’s messages of power, rank, and ways of acting that are established among people (Chinn, 1995). On the other hand, stories that are frequently dictated by or about less powerful individuals are infrequently granted legitimacy by the dominant culture (Dant, 1991; Gree, 1996); stories thus aid in understanding the multidimensional meanings of society, culture, human actions, and life (Kim, 2016). The researcher is then responsible for obtaining the most authentic information and continues to tell, relive, and retell the stories and experiences that compose the participants’ lives, both individually and socially. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquiry is simply “stories lived and told.” In gathering the actual stories of native Black American male Ph.D. students, this research was not limited to specific questions or a narrow focus on one area of a student’s narrative. Rather, the student was empowered with the ability to construct their own tale and contemplate experiences of their own choosing.

**Researcher as Instrument**

Embedded within its nature, qualitative research accounts for the distinguished authority of a researcher’s perspective and fundamental assumptions within every aspect of the research process ranging from the site selection and participant criteria to the analysis and interpretation of findings (Creswell, 2013). The researcher’s personal lens and subsequent assumptions are molded by their individual narrative. In preparation for this study, I began the process of reflecting on my own narrative and assumptions. I will now share my lens and tools of preparation and the life experiences to which they are married. The purpose of this overview is to articulate the pieces of my own narrative that shaped my work as a narrative methodologist, the rationale behind my research question, and the reason I found narrative methodology to be the most appropriate and appealing for my study.
Origins of Subjectivity

As a currently enrolled Black American doctoral student currently studying at a HWI, I’ve had an inherent vested interest in this area since I submitted my application during the Fall of 2014. Having attended two HWIs prior to my enrollment, I have been groomed in the culture of predominantly White academia since the age of 18. My experiences through my undergraduate and Master’s education highlighted many themes of importance for marginalized, underrepresented, and at-risk populations. However, one of the most salient was the need to care for our mental health. As I have advanced academically, the evidence is becoming clearer both anecdotally and within research that Black American doctoral students, and males specifically, are a highly vulnerable population in many facets of their experiences within postsecondary institutions.

In recent years, there is a shift towards diversity, equity, and inclusion practices that are tailored to populations such as mine. However, many of these efforts have been targeted towards undergraduate students. Through my experiences at a HWI for my Master’s, working at a predominantly White medical school, enrolling in a large land-grant HWI for my Ph.D., serving on the board of the Graduate Student Association, and now in completing a fellowship at another Ivy League institution, the evidence in my experiences is overwhelmingly clear: our narratives are missing. That is why I believe choosing more simplistic research questions, and subsequently opening the door to further inquiry and programmatic development, will better serve practitioners and scholars moving forward.

Additionally, I find it particularly important as a Black female Ph.D. to bring the concept of me-search to life. I identify with each element of the study requirements, except for that of being male. I also come from a family of predominantly men, which inherently set the pace for
Speaking, researching, and elevating the voices of men in my community from the time I began to explore the intersections of public health and higher education in the United States. And while there is an explicit narrative of the Black man in America, that narrative frequently neglects opportunities to explore and elevate the vibrancy and promise in their experiences.

Through storytelling, I essentially laid the groundwork for research that simply did not exist. My hope is that my research will enable a larger body of research to focus in on the themes, common issues, and gaps within the Black doctoral experience and hopefully for all students of color.

**Population and Sample Selection**

The focal population for this study was currently enrolled native Black American male Ph.D. students. Students needed to self-identify as Black American and have U.S. citizenship or permanent residency status. Eligibility for this study also required that participants be enrolled full time in a Ph.D. program at a HWI within the United States and hold at least third-year standing. However, one male who was a first-year student participated after verbally communicating that he met study criteria but indicated on his consent form that he was a first-year. Following his interview, I chose to keep his narrative in the study since he began taking classes in his program and building a relationship with his current advisor two years prior to full-time matriculation and his level of awareness around stress and coping was distinctly matured.

Furthermore, native Black American male Ph.D. students are already severely underrepresented regardless of the discipline; as such, there was no limitations on specific disciplines or professional fields. The purpose of this study was to solely look at stress and coping through the lens of the doctoral student, not through their programmatic trajectory.
Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that qualitative research is generally grounded in smaller samples with a focus on their context, as they are typically studied more in-depth. The aim of such studies is usually more purposive, and the sample sizes evolve once the field-work begins. Through network recruiting (Bernard, 2013), I disseminated the study information through various colleagues in my network, online group chats, and peers. Students interested in the study were instructed to reach out to me directly if they met the aforementioned requirements. Students who met the requirements were informed that the primary instrument was a semi-structured interview followed by a focus group, each consuming no more than 90 minutes respectively. Both the interviews and the focus groups were conducted and recorded via Zoom video software. The interviewing process continued until saturation was reached (Creswell, 2014). Each participant had the opportunity to choose an alias and sign an agreement of confidentiality and consent ensuring that no information would be traced back to their identities. The consent forms for both the interviews and the focus groups can be found in Appendix C and Appendix D, respectively. Participants completed these forms via Qualtrics. All participants who completed both the individual interviewing process and the focus group were compensated with a $40 Amazon gift card.

**Data Collection**

The methods of data collection for this research were online interviews and focus groups. As stated by Delamont (2012), interviewing provides tangible, workable data within a field that frequently feels abstract and difficult to pin down. Additionally, interviewing provides the researcher the opportunity to create and capture in-depth insights, which is seldom achieved through surveys, observations, or quantitative means. Interviewing is therefore a method of finding out what we do not know and are incapable of knowing otherwise. The use of recordings
is often employed as a way to systematically process the data and gain a deeper understanding of
the insights shared within the dialogue (Delamont, 2012). Interviewing is critical to qualitative
data collection and a suitable option for this particular study, as it was the most authentic way to
narrate the experiences of native Black American male Ph.D. students. Patton’s (1990) interview
principles and skills were also utilized, with specific emphasis on being clear, listening, probing
as appropriate, balancing empathy and neutrality, preparing for the unexpected, and maintaining
a consistent presence throughout each interview. The first interview and focus group protocols
can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively.

During the interview, each participant constructed an autobiographical timeline. Derived
from Neimeyer’s (2001) meaning-reconstruction interview framework, this method focused on
the student’s overall story, facilitated by an exercise of creating an autobiographical timeline of
one’s life. Past utilization of this method demonstrated advantages in facilitating exploration of
how participants make sense of their own experiences (Lee, Blyth, & Chan, 2012). The
horizontal timeline used can be found in Appendix E. The worksheet was provided via shared
screen with a horizontal line from birth to present and an accompanying vertical axis indicating
the subjective appraisal of well-being at each point in life. I explained that peaks indicated highs
in their lives and valleys represented lows. Each participant was able to freely draw the line to
reflect their subjective appraisal of stress in their own personal notebook, presented it on the
screen for my observation and note-taking, and then they narrated the full timeline. During this
writing process, I asked open-ended questions relevant to the drawings, such as “Can you tell me
more about this point in your life?” and “How do you make sense of this time?”

Following the first interview, a focus group was conducted the next week as a means of
delving into further information that may have been left out on the part of the participant and
gaining additional insight into the collective narrative experiences of native Black American male Ph.D. students. The focus groups were designed to provide a male space mirroring that of Sista Circle methodology in which there is emphasis on communication dynamics and group empowerment maintains centrality. The researcher also serves as a participant in Sista Circle methodology, but I was unable to contribute due to participant sex-identity requirements (Johnson, 2015; Wilson, 2018).

After each interview was transcribed, each participant had the opportunity to review, make edits/changes, and approve of their interview transcripts and participant profiles; this is also known as member-checking, which facilitates deeper accuracy of the narrative accounts (Creswell, 2014).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis typically begins early on in a qualitative research study (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Within this study, it was important to conduct interim analyses throughout the interviews to assess whether further interviews or additional methods of data collection (e.g., observations, alternative document analyses were necessary (Miles, Hubermann, & Saldana, 2013). As each interview was recorded, note-taking supplemented what was not captured through video or audio. Within notetaking, the use of memoing was vital in constructing patterns, recording ideas, and reflecting on the data.

After the interviews and focus groups, the recordings were sent to Rev.com for transcription; the transcribers were not aware of the details of the participants or the context of the study (Patton, 1990). This ensured that the data were transcribed as accurately as possible from an unbiased perspective. Following the transcription of the interviews, open coding and pattern and thematic coding were used (Delamount, 2012; Patton, 1990). Bogdan and Biklen
(2007) stated that coding categories can come to the researcher during the data collection phase, which helped finalize categories and themes in conjunction with NVivo software to assist with organizing the data. Within this study, I was looking specifically for data relating back to Airhihenbuwa’s PEN-3 model, such as identity, perceptions, enablers, and nurturers (Airhihenbuwa, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1999; Cowdery et al., 2010; Kannan et al., 2009; Scarinci et al., 2012; Yick & Oomen-Early, 2009).

I completed this coding process by reading through each transcript and selecting ideas or concepts that appeared to be critical to the participants’ stories, then color coded them via a computer. Following this process, I sorted through both the open and thematic codes and created combined categories that were similar to one another to make a list of pattern codes. The majority of this work was conducted via NVivo software and Microsoft Excel. The utilization of data analysis software helped support the coding of large amounts of data in a systematic way (Gibbs, 2014).

**Ethical Issues**

The first ethical issue of concern was ensuring that participant data could not and would not be traced back to each student. Throughout this process, identifiers related to the participants were removed, and each participant received a pseudonym of their choosing to maintain confidentiality. Additionally, the records of this study were kept private, and it is not be possible to identify the participants as students at their respective universities. As the primary researcher, I kept all records of notes, transcriptions, journal entries, and any additional information in a locked file on a computer, and only I had access to the records. Once the information was recorded and transcribed, I destroyed the audio files one month following the taping. The
secondary transcribers automatically agreed to a non-disclosure agreement via Rev.com, preventing them from sharing any data or information with anyone other than myself.

Participants were also informed multiple times that their participation in this study was voluntary. I in no way coerced them to participate or used unethical behavior as a means of gaining consent. Each participant signed a consent form prior to each interview acknowledging their understanding of this and other details of the study.

**Study Approval**

The study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina State University as means of ensuring that participants’ rights were both honored and protected through this process. No data were collected in the study until approval was received. The IRB proposal included the consent form that contained details regarding the purpose of the study, the identity of the researcher, and her sponsoring postsecondary institution; benefits and potential risks to the prospective participant; expectations of participation; voluntary nature of participation; assurance of anonymity and confidentiality; and persons to contact if any issues arose (Creswell, 2014).
CHAPTER IV: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore how native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress and coping experiences. The target population was Ph.D. doctoral students specifically. Participants were selected via criterion sampling. The requirements were as follows:

- Self-identify as native Black American (Black/African American parents and grandparents born in the United States)
- Self-identify as male
- At least third-year standing in an accredited Ph.D. program in the United States
- Enrolled full-time as a Ph.D. program at a historically White institution in the United States

The three core research questions guiding this study were:

- How do native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress experiences at historically White institutions?
- What factors shape native Black American male Ph.D. students’ ability to cope with stress?
- What are the storied experiences of native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions?

Within this chapter, demographic information and participant profiles are summarized for the nine participants in this study. This chapter will synopsize their lived experiences as native Black American male Ph.D. students currently enrolled at historically White institutions. Autobiographical data were collected via an autobiographical timeline, which aided participants in narrating their life stories.
Table 4.1:

Participant Background Information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender Pronouns</th>
<th>Institution Size</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Undergraduate Institution Type</th>
<th>Ph.D. Focus Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~35,000</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>Student Affairs Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~33,000</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>Strategic Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasir</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~35,000</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~35,000</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rico</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~22,000</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>Counseling/Student Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~35,000</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~13,000</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>HWI</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~24,000</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>Public Administration and Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrell</td>
<td>He/Him/His</td>
<td>~20,000</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>Educational Leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HWI = Historically White Institution

HBCU = Historically Black College/University

HSI = Hispanic Serving Institution
Table 4.2:

*Familial Highest Level of Degree Attainment.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Mother/Female Guardian</th>
<th>Maternal Grandmother</th>
<th>Maternal Grandfather</th>
<th>Father/Male Guardian</th>
<th>Paternal Grandmother</th>
<th>Paternal Grandfather</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>Associate's</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>Master's</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Professional Degree (M.D. in Spring 2018)</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasir</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rico</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrell</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>No diploma/degree</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>Bachelor's</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unsure

No Diploma/Degree

High School Diploma/GED

Associate’s

Some College

Bachelor’s

Master’s

Graduate/Professional Degree
Lastly, Table 4.3 below provides the focus group breakdowns for the participants. Focus groups were assigned based on student availability and to ensure there was no overlap among participants who may know each other due to geographical location or discipline.

Table 4.3:

*Focus Group Assignments.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group #1</th>
<th>Focus Group #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>Kyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rico</td>
<td>Terrell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shawn</td>
<td>Roosevelt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasir</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Jalen’s Story**

Jalen is originally from Texas and attended college near his hometown. He moved to the Southeast region of the United States to begin working prior to his enrollment in his doctoral program. He is currently a third-year Ph.D. student studying student affairs administration, and he also attended historically White institutions for both his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees. When describing his upbringing, Jalen recalled moving a fair amount during his elementary school years and did not experience an increase in stress or anxiety until middle school. During that time, his sister, who is 12 years his junior, was born, and his family dynamics began to shift. Jalen’s college choice was strongly influenced by his mother, who preferred he attended a predominantly White institution (PWI) within close proximity to his hometown. Having been raised in predominantly Black neighborhoods and graduated from a high school that was 95% Black, the PWI experience brought a momentous culture shock to his life.
And then when I went to college, my first year, the Black population was only 5% of the school. So just a drastic change. It was private, PWI it to the max (laughing), and very affluent. And so I got a scholarship to go there. I would identify especially at that time as upper-low income, maybe. So just walking out and seeing cars, Ferraris in the parking lot, like, and me not even having a car at the time [...] you know so? (laughing) So just a culture shock not only in reflecting, but it was a culture shock in race and class there. So there’s a lot of, you know, stress, anxiety stuff there. I’m first generation. So no one really talked to about it—not understanding the college process—just a lot of changes.

Despite this shock, Jalen thrived during his undergraduate experience, having served as a resident advisor, president of his fraternity, and as an orientation leader. Prior to applying to Ph.D. programs, Jalen worked within student affairs and began his program as a part-time student. Jalen possessed a true attitude of positivity with regard to his doctoral experience. He consistently smiled and laughed and was generally very light-hearted throughout his interview.

I’m one of those, I guess, rare cases. Where I have really enjoyed being a doc student.

While he faced the challenges of competition and demand within his program, Jalen took more of an optimistic approach at this stage. In his cohort of Ph.D. students, he is one of five Black students (four males and one female) in a cohort of over 10 students. Describing his current program as the “Blackest academic experience,” Jalen experienced a number of ups and downs with finding support both within and outside of his community.

It’s been really good in those ways to see other Black, brilliant Black folks who were just doing it, you know? And so I've enjoyed that piece of it.
Jalen also took the initiative in a number of areas in his life to acknowledge, adjust, and better care for himself during tumultuous times. Following the election of the 45th President of the United States, he found himself needing to balance the pressures of being a Black man in America, working for a racist supervisor, and maintaining his academic presence in the classroom. Additionally, he began to experience a demand for more sophisticated levels of social consciousness concerning race, privilege, and oppression that were not necessarily required of him during his time in undergrad. However, his partner, therapy, and creating a first-generation Ph.D. community group all served as meaningful stress relievers during such times.

While Jalen’s journey is not yet complete, he took pride in recognizing that his journey can potentially set the pace for more Black men like him to obtain their Ph.D. He believed that while finding community to support you is critical during your doctoral program, setting an example for a generation of Ph.D. students to come is equally as important.

The narrative that I've kind of at least internalized around what it means to be a Black man in a Ph.D. program is a feeling like that it’s not just about me. Like I'm representing so many other folks. I’m representing so many other Black folks, so that if I do well, if I kill it, then this Black man who was trying to get in at interview day has a better chance because they know that, “Well he [Jalen] did this well. And so maybe this guy next behind him will do as well as he did,” you know? [...] Another piece of my success now is really trying to stay true to like what I believe and who I am as they connect to my community and my family. Like those are things that I'm trying to get back to.

Kyle’s Story

Kyle is a third-year Ph.D. student originally from the Midwest and is currently studying Strategic Communications. Inspired by the late Stuart Scott, American broadcast journalist and
ESPN anchor, Kyle landed on his passion after teaching for Teaching for America prior to the start of his doctoral degree (Scott, 2016). Growing up, Kyle attended predominantly White and gifted schools. While his middle school was fairly diverse, he was one of seven Black males in his graduating high school class. Kyle’s college years were when he began to have the most salient encounters with himself. When narrating his autobiographical timeline, Kyle described the following about his college experience:

I would say I really started to come up in my appraisal in college because I was like free on my own. Was pursuing this stuff that I liked, not pursuing the stuff that I didn't like and like, it's like that middle ground between being like in high school, and being like an adult adult and having all these responsibilities and stuff. So college would be a high point for me because I was just acting on my own accord, I would say. Joined a frat, all of that stuff.

While Kyle was teaching post-graduation, he realized that teaching wasn’t necessarily his calling. He was aware of the responsibilities of impacting children’s lives, but it was not where his passion rested. He eventually determined that his purpose narrowed in on aiding Black-owned businesses while simultaneously mentoring high schoolers in his surrounding community who are interested in attending college.

In his program, Kyle developed a clear understanding of what and who he will allow to cause him stress. Even though he found himself advocating for his needs or asking in ways unexpected, he found comfort in knowing that academics are only a finite piece of the larger endeavor of life.

To be honest, that was one big thing. Like at the end of the day, it’s just school. It could be way worse. Like I could be trying to figure out what I'm eating for dinner, you know?
But my, if my toughest thing in life right now is that I gotta get a paper done or I don't understand what this theory is talking about, I'm okay. So keeping that in mind really helped me.

His ability to maintain perspective and have one or two people on whom to rely in times of need aided Kyle greatly during his time at his institution. While he found a true mentor who guides him in his journey, many of his stressors were from the lack of guidance from his academic advisors. With his third advisor, Kyle finally experienced a relationship that served his learning style of requiring explicit direction of next steps as well as clearly articulated feedback on how he is progressing through his program. His mentor further added to his ability to cope through their shared new experiences at the institution and with the program.

Kyle described the significance of his success as a doctoral student as standing on the shoulders of giants. And while he acknowledged that he’s been afforded many academic privileges thus far, he is still susceptible to the stressors associated with lack of leadership. While growing in his program, he adapted new methods of coping that addressed both his mental and physical health, which will be discussed in Chapter V.

Nasir’s Story

Nasir is originally from Queens, New York, but was raised in Brooklyn. His family is primarily from Jamaica, but his grandmother was the only child out of her siblings born in the United States. Nasir also practices Lucumí, which is derived from the traditional Yoruba language and religion. One word to describe Nasir would be ‘conscious,’ as he possesses a strong sense of awareness about himself and with regard to his position in the world. Nasir intended to join the military after graduating from high school but was urged by his sister to
pursue a college degree even though most people in his network were aware that he detested school and the structure of our educational system in the United States.

School has been probably some of the lowest points of my life outside of like college because it offered a lot of struggle, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of issues that I didn't originally understand. I hated school. I still hate it to this day, and then people that know me will say, "Yo, you doing a Ph.D. program?" I'm like, "Yeah." They're like, "You hate school. You hated school. You was cutting class and all that." When I hear these stories and I hear this narrative, it's like what is it that I hate about school, even when I was positioned to talk about my experiences, it was always around the negative points, not necessarily the high points, but I always made the most out of it. I like the social experience of school but the academic part, it was just like I hate systems and structures and you know, authority and all that. I have a problem with all those spaces because it's just the nature of how I grew up and my background.

Nasir eventually matriculated at a state university in New York during his undergraduate years and also participated in an equal opportunity program to assist with acclimation. However, Nasir was unimpressed and frustrated with the premise of the program.

It was crazy, because they were trying to get us to learn how to socialize in a college environment, because we were those students who did not have the grades, or the money, or come from these backgrounds that weren't, I guess privileged. We had to adjust to be comfortable in these college environments. Some of us first gen etc. The story goes on. From low socioeconomic status. You know the deal. You get into these spaces and all they try to do is try to say, "You need to learn Shakespeare, you gotta take these math course, you have to take this reading course, we want to make sure that you're
academically prepared to be in this space,” in addition to socializing with the people that you might not necessarily have seen before or come across. I’m just like, "Yo, that's cool. I'm not really with that." I was always rebellious in that standpoint because I was like, "Y'all playing this game, and this really doesn't make any sense to me." So, that was my experience in terms of going to college and then it was like riding that wave. Trying to find those spaces where those things that were congruent to who I actually what I was, or am, to be a better person. Be a better me.

He ultimately decided to pursue his passion for creative writing more intentionally and began exploring MFA programs. He was, again, confronted with the idea of rigidity and structure within that academy that conflicted with a desire to speak his most authentic truth.

I was just like, I don't like being boxed in, but I learned how to move within those boxes, within that frame. That was very interesting to me. That was like “all right, now I have a situation where I have to be confined to a certain style, certain rhyme patterns, but I had to figure out how to freak it in their space.” I learned how to do that. Did I like it? Not necessarily.

Nasir eventually decided to pursue a Masters in Higher Education, having worked within that field as well as the not-for-profit sector for a number of years. He is currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in the Midwest, where he initially began in a program focused on higher education but ultimately decided to switch his focus. His current program concentrates on cultural and social studies. Nasir’s time at his current institution entailed many ups and downs thus far, including the birth of his daughter, switching advisors, and becoming a voice for student activism on campus. He described changing programs and changing advisors as two of the major stressors he’s experienced, both of which required a tremendous load of mental wrestling on his
part. The evidence of his need for internal processing often clashed with the need to maintain a particular identity in the academy. However, Nasir’s involvement in his program and institution reflect a clear ability to maintain his authentic self as he grows throughout his doctoral program.

I try to be as real as I can be and as often as I can and I'm all about living congruently with who I am as a person, so I try to let a lot of things mirror who I am as a person. Like the things that I do are usually congruent with who I am as a person, so I try not to go outside of that line.

Q’s Story

Currently enrolled at an institution in the Southern region of the United States, Q is the only participant who is in the first year of his Ph.D. program. While he may only be in the first year of his doctoral program, he certainly exhibited the confidence and knowledge of an advanced Ph.D. student. Q was raised by his mother in a single-parent household in the rural South. After graduating from high school, Q attended a HBCU for his undergraduate degree, was an honors student athlete, and joined a historically Black fraternity. During this time, Q also was introduced to his biological father, which aroused emotional discomfort while in college. Following the completion of his Bachelor’s, Q attended a predominantly White institution for his Master’s degree, where he experienced some dissonance within his identity. He was a first-year graduate student in a program composed of predominantly athletes, and he no longer held that shared identity.

I went through difficulties being there, like being one of the only Black male non-student athletes in my class. 'Cause what happens is at Division 1 schools, a lot of times the athletes, once they graduate they put 'em into a graduate program so they can be eligible to play that year. I wasn't connected to athletics. So that kinda made my structure a little
different from everybody else, right? 'Cause when you work with a athletic team that makes millions and millions of dollars, of course that ain't gonna be different from [...] I'm just a regular guy now.

Overall, he would describe his Master’s experience as positive despite the shifting in his identity as a student. Following his Master’s, he worked for his hometown running a youth sports program. Q has remained in his home state since and is now working as a graduate assistant at his institution and as an instructor for a local women’s college. In describing his motivation for pursuing his Ph.D., Q did not perceive an alternative option either personally and professionally.

I knew the only way to have a full seat at the table, I needed a Ph.D. I knew for my voice to really mean something, I had to prove myself to others. So like [...] from a academia standpoint, right? To really hold some weight. You know, you being in a room where you got a Master's but everybody's got a Ph.D., they may listen to you, but now we're all equal, we all had the same higher level of degree, and I've shown that. “Hey I've earned the right to be called doctor.” I think that carries some weight.

At his current institution, Q wears many hats while pursuing his degree in higher education and also still manages to give back to his community. He was recently elected to his county’s local school board and aspires to one day become a college president.

Rico’s Story

Rico is a fourth-year Ph.D. student originally from New Jersey but was also partially raised in Georgia. He describes his early life as fairly calm and was raised in a two-parent household. Upon relocating to Georgia, life became a bit easier for him and his family considering the cost of living differential between the two states. Challenges in his life arose when he was 12 and his father passed away.
Primarily a lot of people [are] close to their mom, but I was primarily close to my dad.

Like he took me to parent teacher conferences, he coached me, I mean he did everything.

He picked me up, he did like, I was super close with him.

The discourse Rico experienced with his mom and losing his father took a toll on him throughout high school, and he eventually withdrew from high school and joined the military at age 17. Rico’s military experience played a pivotal role in his forming structure and getting his life back on track. He eventually went back to school, enrolled in college, and became a Division I football player. Rico described his undergraduate tenure as being the pinnacle of his life at that point in time, and he thoroughly enjoyed his experience. He decided to teach for a few years before pursuing his Master’s, followed by his Ph.D..

Then I went to the school where I like started my Ph.D. program, and that was a low period because [it was] different for me. Being out at the school, being by myself. And not just a predominately White institution but a predominately White area. So I went through a real rough time, just in that area with moving out there, relationships, and things of that nature.

Additionally, from what Rico shared, his challenges frequently rest in what Du Bois called double consciousness, which describes a person’s individual sensation that their identity is fractioned into several pieces, making it difficult or nearly impossible to possess one unified identity (Du Bois, 1965). Upon finishing his coursework for his Ph.D., Rico decided to pursue a full-time position in athletics, in which he is still currently working while completing his dissertation. Rico possesses a sincere passion for student athletes and support systems for that demographic. He hopes to pursue a career as a scholar-practitioner within athletics following graduation.
Roosevelt’s Story

Roosevelt is a fourth-year Ph.D. student who hails from the rural Southeast region of the United States. He described his town as having between 15,000-18,000 people and housing various agricultural farms, meatpacking and aluminum plants, and textile mills in general. However, when he was in middle school, many companies began to close and shift their work to more affordable options overseas. During elementary school, Roosevelt’s family lost their home to a fire, forcing them to move out of what he describes as an insular Black community and into an apartment complex next to a trailer park community that was predominantly White.

At this point, Roosevelt began to experience his own issues with Whiteness in the South. The community to which he relocated endorsed racist behavior, and he recalled getting into fights and being called ‘Nigger’ quite frequently. During this time, his great-grandparents, who were at the centerfold of his family’s cohesion, passed away. However, despite these challenges, Roosevelt continued to persist in his educational endeavors. Throughout high school, he was exposed to life outside of his circumstances through a cousin who was a physician in California. He was accepted into a STEM-focused, residential, public high school in his home state, which provided opportunities to explore surrounding universities. His undergraduate institution was highly selective, private, and predominantly White. For Roosevelt, this experience disrupted much of his understanding about his identity.

It was a completely unfamiliar territory, and being one of a few Black kids who came from a low-income background, working-class background, [it] was hard to be there because they push for conformity, and you felt like you had to…

After joining a historically Black fraternity and having a child with his now wife, Roosevelt decided to take time away from his institution. He eventually completed his degree,
and after pursuing opportunities in both corporate management and school counseling, Roosevelt decided to pursue his Ph.D. in Higher Education.

His time at his current Midwestern institution is a double-edged sword with having a fantastic advisor but also needing to adjust to a new version of racism from the White community as well as a form of racial complacency among the Black community. Roosevelt’s experiences as a doctoral student can be described as transformative. He describes the duality behind attaining his degree as a Black man in relationship to both learning and unlearning.

**Shawn’s Story**

Shawn is a fourth-year doctoral student originally from the Southern region of the United States enrolled in an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in the same region. He described growing up in a head-shift household where there were not many men present but that was also highly community oriented. At an early age, he was exposed to a community of teachers and educators, his grandmother being one of the crucial people who positively influenced his awareness and identity development throughout school. Shawn’s educational experiences in his state public school system exposed him to a significant amount of diversity during his formative years, which he believes prepared him for a higher level of competence, awareness, and understanding of other peoples’ issues. In the same token, he was consistently surrounded by people and teachers who empathized with his positionality in life. The hyperawareness he developed at a young age led him to exhibit a highly critical, conscious, and inquisitive mentality of his educational environments.

What I mean by that is like, I knew something was off about growing up in [the South], as it related to like race and the experience, but you know, people just kind of brush it under the rug as the as is. It wasn't until I got older that I realized that I wanted to
question the Confederate names of things, what was being taught to me, and things like that. So yeah, I think that's one way to describe it. I've always been curious, and I've always just kind of, not “fuck the system,” but just wanted to question it.

Shawn’s understanding of success also has evolved significantly over time, which he attributes to his both his grandmother’s and mother’s commitment to positively impacting their community.

Yeah, I think my grandmother kind of illustrated to me what [success] looks like, what she felt that it looked like, and then I eventually kind of had my own destination. But I knew success was being self-sufficient, making mom and grandmom proud, and then helping other people. My mom has always been like this social service, I guess, or like human resources, or human services field. So, it was always about contributing to the community and really doing something for someone else.

Prior to attending his current institution, Shawn worked as a criminal defense investigator for the state of Alabama. While his background is in social work, that experienced solidified a clearer direction for him in the next step of his academic career, with location resting at the heart of his choice for a Ph.D. program.

Yeah, I've been interested in the justice system, and the disparities in there, especially if they relate to race. I saw just so many clients, Black clients, be thrown into the system and suffer from that. So I got really interested in the laws that supported that system…And like as related to the justice system, there are a lot of issues down here, and I knew that it was close to [a large prison system in the South]. So there were reasons like that too. And I knew I wanted to work around Black people, in Black communities, and in really rich like cultural communities.
When describing what it means to be a Black male pursuing a Ph.D., Shawn expressed a variety of sentiments, many of which point to a level of advocacy on his part to speak on behalf of people who have not made it to his education level.

**Terrance’s Story**

Terrance is a third-year Ph.D. student at a historically White institution in Virginia. The primary focus of his research interests is the effects of bureaucratic discretion and zero-tolerance policies on disciplinary outcomes in K-12 education. He is originally from rural North Carolina and identifies as Christian, having grown up in the church. Early in his elementary school days, his parents’ marriage suffered from infidelity, which led to an early confrontation with PTSD.

Nevertheless, Terrance continued to thrive academically. He was enrolled in all honors classes and eventually graduated from high school early, having taken classes at a local community college that would allow him to bypass a year. He was enthusiastic about attending college, but these emotions were dampened when his mother found out that he is bisexual. While his father expressed no care about his sexuality, it was very difficult for his mom to embrace this identity within Terrance. During this time, Terrance’s mother left his father and began dating Terrance’s stepfather. This shift in his mother’s relationship, coupled with other boundaries his mother had drawn with her children, propelled Terrance into what his physician initially diagnosed as depression; however, after three years of being treated for depression, he later discovered that he was living with misdiagnosed bipolar disorder. Terrance’s mental health battles impacted his academics during his first year, and he failed his first semester as a result.

Although he experienced a number of highs and lows with his mental health, Terrance graduated with honors from his HBCU.
I was very active. I did a lot of things after that first year. Despite all the stuff I went through, I had to keep pushing, you know? I knew where I wanted to be in life.

He continued on to pursue his Master’s at another HBCU in North Carolina. Upon realizing that he was passionate about research, he decided to pursue a Ph.D. While his first year was challenging with battling depression and being exposed to the wrong crowd, he simultaneously battled his program and their policies on graduate assistantships. He experienced a severely isolating incident involving his professors, department, and peers that deeply troubled him and his closest friends. However, he found security and hope in his faith.

I knew that God put me here for a reason. You know what I'm saying? He was gonna keep me through all this, and no matter what you do, no matter what you go through, God is gonna take care of you. No matter what the devils do to try and control you, there's nothing they can do. They're not gonna be able to touch you no matter what. And God got me through this, and He's blessed me more than ever.

Terrance continues to thrive in his program despite the many hurdles he experienced with the politics of the academy. He possesses a strong sense of understanding of how his multiple identities intersect and positively contribute to his narrative. During his undergraduate tenure, he started his own writing/editing business and continues to support students through his business to this day.

Terrance’s journey in his identity development was not always steeped in Blackness. Yet his exposure to Black intellectuals at his two HBCUs aided in his understanding of Black history and how the world views and treats the Black community. His Ph.D. tenure helped him establish a deeper sense of his Black identity and the privilege he holds as a native Black man in a doctoral program.
I'm just happy to be here and also to be with other Black men too, and just know the other Black men. I mean, I feel like I have to give back just so other people talk to other young people about it. Just let my nieces and nephews see me here so they could push themselves to not get here, but to do even better. You know what I'm saying? So and then my community on Facebook, people from my community, everybody who knows me, college and stuff, they see me. There's not a lot of people doing Ph.D.s that they know, so while I don't go and boast and stuff, I'm happy that they can see me and say, "Hey, I can do it." Or tell their kids, "Hey, look he did it. Come on, you need to work hard." So that's important.

**Terrell’s Story**

Terrell is originally from Texas and is currently a third-year Ph.D. student studying educational leadership. He identifies as a hip hop scholar. His Ph.D. journey is his first experience in a predominantly White educational setting, as he attended a HBCU for his Bachelor’s and a Hispanic-serving institution for his Master’s. Terrell found this study to be particularly interesting, as it is a conversation that he has frequently in his research as a hip hop scholar and in his studying of how Black men see the world.

Early in Terrell’s educational journey, much of his intellect was validated through standardized testing and support from his principal. However, he also experienced various degrees of tension as a child and adolescent.

Even though I was scoring perfect on tests, I was getting into a lot of trouble, fighting and cussing, just being a kid, being a child. Instead of being expelled [...], I did grow up in a corporate punishment era, so there were teachers that I was disciplined with a paddle by certain teachers. Instead of expelling me and suspending me and kicking me out of
school, one thing that the principal did [...] and again, this is prior to that sixth grade principalship [...] was teach me how to play the game of chess… Still knowing how to play chess, and looking at chess kind of the same way that I look at life. I forget which artist it is, it's on the tip of my tongue, but they say, "You're about to watch a pawn become a king," and I really credit my elementary principal with that. One of these days, hopefully she's still around and I can locate her and just tell her thank you.

Throughout elementary school, Terrell attended a school in an urban environment, but switched schools when his family moved to the suburbs. He described his new area as being composed of predominantly upper-class Black people. However, his environment wasn’t as supportive of his abilities as he would have hoped for.

…because I was so high achieving, scoring perfect, that wasn't the coolest thing amongst my friends. I knew when I switched districts [...] because I used to get made fun of for being smart, I guess. I knew when I got to seventh grade I was going to dumb it down a little bit. Seventh grade was when I got my first C. As a Black man, you have a couple routes out, as we're told. Athletics, entertainment, being a dope boy. For me it was sports. I knew I could sing. I hadn't really found rapping yet, but I was like, "Well nobody want[s] to hear me sing, so I better play football and basketball." All I really cared about was making a C because that's all you needed to play.

When graduating from high school, he was left with the option of attending a HBCU or joining the military. Frustrated with his choices, Terrell was holding on to the stigma of rigor at HBCUs.

I went there with the intention of transferring after a semester or maybe after a year, but honestly, a year is really all that it took… I found it rewarding, really, being educated in a
predominantly Black setting. You're not like the racial object. It's really all about you. There's more to education than endowments and institutional rank. Students are people, and their personhood has to be factored into their educational experience. That's what [my HBCU] did for me. It's things that I got from [my HBCU] that I can't get from [my current institution]. It's things that I get at [my current institution] that I would not be able to get from [my HBCU].

Terrell began college with the intention of becoming a veterinarian and pursuing a degree in animal science and agriculture. However, an encounter with administration during a run-in with his fraternity encouraged him to pursue higher education administration.

…what really changed my mind was that experience, but I told myself, "Man, these folks did us wrong. I could do a better job than any of them. They don't even know how to talk to their students." It was at that point that I told myself, "Bro, science isn't your thing," and my grades kind of reflected that too, "but relating to people, developing people, that is your thing."

Terrell carries a strong sense of pride when it comes to being the first Black male Ph.D. student in his family. Much of his motivation is rooted in his community at home in Texas as well as the Black community in America as a whole.

First, I think about all my identities, right? I'm a student, but I'm also a son, a brother, I'm an uncle. I'm a LB [Line Brother], former supervisor. I'm the first-born child, and so I feel like I'm kind of paving a way. Both of my parents did go to college, I'm a second-generation college student, but I'm the first gen to do this right here. I see it. I see the impact that it's having on one, my family… I feel it's my duty to be able to use my voice
on a platform that many Black males unfortunately won't be able to have but should. It means the world to me.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress and coping experiences. The target population is Ph.D. doctoral students specifically. Narrative inquiry was used to expose the raw stories of participants from across the country, and Airhihenbuwa’s PEN-3 model guided the semi-structured interview protocol. Full participation entailed one individual interview followed by a focus group, which was divided into two separate groups of five and four participants, respectively. Emergent themes discovered through this research will answer the following three core research questions guiding this study:

1) How do native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress experiences at historically White institutions?

2) What factors shape native Black American male Ph.D. students’ ability to cope with stress?

3) What are the storied experiences of native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions?

Airhihenuwa’s PEN-3 model (Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Yick & Early, 2008) served as the conceptual framework for this study. The PEN-3 model was used previously to develop culturally sensitive interventions for HIV populations in Africa. However, within this study, it was used to frame the narratives of support with stress and coping among native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions. The elements of the PEN-3 model are as follows:

1) Cultural Identity
   a. Person
b. Extended Family

c. Neighborhood

2) Relationships & Expectations

a. Perceptions

b. Enablers

c. Nurturers

3) Cultural Empowerment

a. Positive

b. Existential

c. Negative

In analyzing the data, the PEN-3 model led to the development of themes and subthemes that encapsulate participants’ experiences within their doctoral programs thus far. Narrative inquiry coupled with an online demographic survey and an autobiographical timeline created a holistic portrait of stress and coping for the nine participants. The analysis is divided into three overarching themes and eight subthemes, which were developed through a priori coding followed by a combination of pattern coding and axial coding.

Chapter V provides context of the three emergent themes and subsequent eight subthemes, all of which were developed and supported through each of the participants’ statements. The three overarching themes are Chosen Family, Strategic Social Capital, and “Shine, Brothers, Shine.” The first theme, Chosen Family, details how participants constructed their own networks of support. The second theme, Strategic Social Capital, delves into the facets of the academy with which doctoral students are confronted. And the last theme, “Shine, Brothers, Shine,” elucidates the facets of identity necessary for balance within historically White
environments. Table 5.1 below provides a summary of the aforementioned themes and subthemes.

Table 5.1:

Themes and Subthemes.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Brief Description of Subthemes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) Chosen Family</td>
<td>1A) Name Your Village</td>
<td>Constructing group(s) of supportive people</td>
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<td>1B) Advisors vs. Mentors</td>
<td>Delineating between what is needed and what role each position plays</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1C) Skin Folk vs. Kin Folk</td>
<td>Discerning between who is on your team, even if they do/don’t look like you</td>
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<td>2) Strategic Social Capital</td>
<td>2A) Transactional Behaviors and Attitudes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2B) Maneuvering in the Academy</td>
<td>What methods can I employ to yield positive outcomes for my mental health and wellness?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3) “Shine, Brothers, Shine”</td>
<td>3A) Defining Oneself</td>
<td>Remembering who you are throughout the doctoral process</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3B) Openness to Growth</td>
<td>Recognizing that there is room to grow throughout your tenure</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3C) For the Community</td>
<td>Completing the Ph.D. is larger than an individual accomplishment</td>
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Figure 5.1 below provides a visual of the collapsing of this process for each overarching theme and subtheme. Reading from left to right, the PEN-3 model is first depicted containing the three larger categories of Cultural Identity (red), Relationships & Expectations (green), and Cultural Empowerment (blue).
Figure 5.1:

Collapsing of Themes and Subthemes.

The first theme, Chosen Family, focuses on how native Black American male Ph.D. students identify and delineate between various support mechanisms associated with stress and coping within historically White institutions. It is composed of the collapsing and recoding of the PEN-3 model’s Extended Family, Enablers, and Nurturers subcategories. Within the PEN-3 model, there are three overarching categories of Cultural Identity, Relationships & Expectations, and Cultural Empowerment, all of which contain three underlying subcategories. Both extended family and neighborhood rest in the Cultural Identity category. Nurturers falls into the Relationships & Expectations category.

**Chosen Family**

The term Chosen Family was initially utilized by Roosevelt during Focus Group #2 to explain how he and his peers curated support mechanisms among each other and throughout the
university. The chosen family became a source of support empowerment when confronted with various milestones, trials, and tribulations during his doctoral experience. Historically, the term chosen family is used in the LBTQ+ community to describe the construction of family of choice outside of one’s own biological or legal family (Lee & Quam, 2013). The following sections will detail the subthemes of Chosen Family.

**Name Your Village**

Within historically White institutions, the majority of the participants quickly found themselves needing to seek out additional support from peers both within their programs and throughout the university. Furthermore, many were confronted with the issue of not having their traditional or previous networks fully comprehend their current educational predicament. In reflecting upon his most stressful experience, Jalen detailed this conflict during this individual interview.

So my partner was super supportive, and that's pretty much it. And I say that because no one understood the complexities of the different aspects of my life, right? None of my friends have even Master's degrees. And so something like my friends. Outside of the program, right? And so they don’t, they just think I'm in school. (laughing) You know, they don't understand. They know that like getting a doctorate is like “Ohhhh that sounds hard.” But I'm like, “Y'all don't understand, like, this is literally the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” And so, try to tell my fraternity brothers like I feel like I'm constantly on line, like do you remember? I feel like I am pledging all the time, and it’s going never going to end, you know? And so they kind of get it more then, but not really. So friends can’t be supportive and family have no context of what I'm doing. So like being first gen, they don't even understand my undergrad experience, let alone. So my mother is
supportive, she's proud of me and sends happy messages and stuff. But she like doesn't know, and I can't fault her for that. I try to explain as best I can. […]

Jalen continued to describe the divide between his network understanding what he accomplished in the past and why he is on the current educational path down which he is traveling.

My friends, I like even to this day, like it's been very touch and go because they just don't, they don't understand, you know? They don't know, and they wouldn't mean to minimize, but they would absolutely minimize by even, even in their way of trying to be supportive, like, “Oh, you gon’ be all right. You have two degrees already. You gon’ be good.” And it's like, that's not helpful, right? I understand you’re trying to be supportive, but like it’s only making it worse, and so like definitely distanced myself from them.

(Jalen, Interview)

Such experiences urged many of the participants to define and construct their own network of people who can be fully supportive. Whether it is through on-campus activities or through social media, many participants found creative ways to name their village during this time. Jalen went on to explain how his ideal support networks engaged him across many of his identities.

We have a GroupMe with all of our program in it. But we also have a cohort GroupMe, and we also have a Black GroupMe. So, I'm able to go in like “these White folks acting up today” in the Black GroupMe, you know, and have those kind of conversations (laughing). And so it’s been really good in those ways to see other Black, brilliant black folks who were just doing it, you know […]
To take his actions even further, Jalen described his endeavor of fostering community even further among doctoral students. He, along with a few other colleagues, created a first-generation doctoral students group to support those experiencing the same journey.

I've found a lot of first-gen doctoral students from all over, and I found a lot of community in that, so that's been probably the most exciting in just having such a wide variety of communities that I can tap into when I need recharging refueling. (Jalen, Interview)

Roosevelt has also taken initiative in this area by capitalizing on what initially appeared to be a segregation of folks of color in his program. While three doctoral students of color in his program were confined to one office, he detailed that the space eventually became “headquarters” for other students to seek solace in during challenging times.

I'm actually in my office on campus right now trying to get some stuff done, and this used to be like our headquarters for the crew, but I'm a fourth year, so folks have graduated, some folks are writing their dissertations, and they left as soon as they could, have taken full-time jobs back across the country. But we still make time to get together just to check in with each other, hold each other accountable for different deadlines. All of that type of stuff […] And we have a brother to brother, a group that's all of the Black men, and we try to get together. We started out my first year getting together once a month, and as some of them have left and other people have switched programs and stuff like that, we don't get together as often as we did, but we always stop by each other's offices and check in. (Roosevelt, Focus Group)

Roosevelt also suggested doctoral students widen their view of whom they can receive support from. Sometimes, reaching out to students in different departments or programs can create an additional level of social support as Ph.D. students advance. However, he also noted that his
sense of community and professors’ investment in his success began when he was admitted to the program. One professor in his department connected him and two other doctoral students during the decision-making phase, and encouraged them to reach a decision together on attending.

When we all were accepted and were trying to decide if we were coming, he put the three of us in touch with each other and was like, "I wouldn't recommend y'all make this decision individually because I wouldn't recommend for just one of you to come by yourself because this is [the Midwest], our department is going through some growing pains," and he knew the, I guess benefit of community, and so he put us in touch. (Roosevelt, Interview)

Furthermore, Roosevelt was also able to gain a better sense of his future community during this time. His visit to his institution also included attending the Black Graduate Students Association meeting.

One of the best things that happened for me that I didn't plan was, they planned for me to go to a BGSA, a Black Graduate Student Association meeting, while I was on campus for my visit. I met folks that were from all over campus, who I only saw a handful of times outside of BGSA meetings, but who held me down and who became some of the crew to talk to. (Roosevelt, Interview)

That exposure allowed him to have a network of people on which to lean upon his arrival on campus in fall, which is unlike the experiences of many first-year, full-time doctoral students.

**Advisors vs. Mentors**

The sentiments around advisors and mentors was varied among all participants. Some considered the roles to be synonymous, while others were utterly uninterested in either one influencing their trajectory throughout their program. A few participants placed a high priority on having an advisor who matched their own identity, and some were open to and more interested in
having an advisor who did not share any of their identities. In terms of mentorship, all participants agreed that mentoring is critical to their success, but where and how they found those mentoring relationships also varied among participants. Q is one participant who was fully committed to the idea of having a Black man serve as both his mentor and his advisor to help him grow both academically and personally.

For me, I would say external, I need that support. That support from an advisor, for me, my advisor is actually a Black male, which is what I went into the program or went into a Ph.D. program looking for. I turned down an opportunity to go into a different department. They didn't have any Black faculty members in at that department. And for my research being about Black males, I found it critical to find somebody else who was doing research in that same focus and that was also Black. I didn't want to work with a White person that was doing research on Black males, that was just something I wasn't really feeling and still don't feel to this day [...]. (Q, Interview)

Shawn shared similar sentiments of doubt in having a non-Black advisor during his interview, who is a White man in his sixties. While his advisor is very nurturing to his interests, he often finds himself questioning the motives of his advisor.

I'm wondering if it's because he sees me as like, not this stat, but like this project, or this idea of like there being this White savior complex, so to speak. Or this, you know, White man's burden, or something like that. Like, "Oh, I got to nurture you, I got to protect you." Because sometimes I'll ask them for feedback on some things, he'll be like, "Great work. Good job." I'm like, "Fam, surely there's something." (Shawn, Interview)

Kyle’s experiences have also mirrored Shawn’s, urging him to question the commitment of his advisor to his success. Kyle has had three advisors, his first a Black woman, his second an
Asian woman, and his current a White woman. While his experiences with his current advisor are generally positive and she provides him with the structured guidance that aligns with this learning style, unanswered questions remain during more nuanced encounters with his advisor.

And so right now, like I think like is it because I'm Black? My advisor, does she keep postponing my meetings with her because I'm Black? It's that questioning like are people not giving me good feedback because I'm Black? That's always in the back of your mind. Could that explain why I'm having the experiences that I'm actually having?

Contrarily, Nasir’s experiences at the intersection of advising and mentoring were somewhat discouraging for him. He previously had an advisor who was academically committed to researching and speaking on good mentoring but failed to execute such practices in his relationship with his advisee. That left Nasir not wanting to engage with any advisor or a mentor within in the academy whatsoever.

My first advisor was big on mentoring and big on ... His research is surrounded around research teams and how to retain students in the professorial thing. How to identify scholars. He has this very unique way of doing things. If I'm speaking about it broadly, he has articles published around this ... But all that is lies. His fault. It baffles me when you look at Inside of Higher Ed, and you might see your advisor's name, and they talk about how important mentoring is, and they suck at mentoring. I was there, plus, I was his only student, so that was like, "Come on." You know what I'm saying? [...] It's just like there's that idea, and I think it weighs more heavily on professors of color, because you tend to cling to them because those are the individuals. But what I noticed is that the professors of color were not, in my experience, the best mentors. They were almost the worst, in some cases, so I did not lean on them. (Nasir, Interview)
From a more positive lens, both Jalen and Roosevelt embraced experiences with both mentors and advisors of color (non-Black). Roosevelt’s advisor is a Filipina woman with whom he connected academically and also personally, as they both have families with children around the same age.

Mentorship has been really important, and really helpful, so much so that my mentors are two African American women. They really took me under their wing and told me a lot of the ins and outs and let me vent to them as well. There was this balance of talking about professionalism and what goes on in academe, but also letting me talk about personal stuff. Those two women, at this point, are on my dissertation committee. I'm proud of that. I appreciate it. There's definitely this exchange. So, yeah. Mentorship has been crucial […] and also recognizing that I think even until very recently, I was looking for a mentor with someone who identified just like me. Right? I mean not recognizing that there are other folks of color, there are women of color who can help me and who can mentor me and who I need to be seeking out as well. Um, so I had the opportunity to be matched up in the mentor program with a South Asian guy, a faculty member, and our little 30-minute coffee was probably one of the most impactful experiences I’ve had in my doc career, and he was like, “this what you need to do” and I was like, “you’re right.” (laughing) Um, so even realizing the cross-cultural mentorship is necessary and important, you know? It has definitely been kind of an aha moment for me more recently. (Jalen, interview)

Skin Folk vs. Kin Folk

The notion of “skin folk ain’t always kinfolk” (Terrell, Interview) was noted multiple times throughout the data collection process. This phrase essentially means that people who share the
same race as you may not always be your kin or people who will advocate for you/your identities. Roosevelt shared this awareness during his focus group interview.

And so I was intentional in looking at programs that had, if not Black faculty, faculty of color or faculty from racially, ethnically minoritized groups, who did research on people of color. Because I had some other experiences working in higher ed where that whole skin folk ain't always your kin folk, it's real.

Terrell’s interview highlighted his comparative experiences from his HBCU. However, his tenure at his current institution revealed how identity does not always yield awareness or advocacy. He, too, was cognizant of this realization prior to applying to doctoral programs.

What I find challenging is being able to connect with faculty. I'm sure you're probably aware that research shows faculty student engagement at historically Black colleges really serves as a prime example of how faculty should be interacting with their students, but there's also racial dynamics that play into that that I think helps.

He acknowledged that issues with race and advocacy from the student perspective can be attributed to establishing personal connections as well as a deeper sense of awareness on the faculty or staff’s behalf.

I think the challenge is just really connecting with folks. There are other Black people in the program, Black woman, all skin folk ain’t kin folk, everybody has a different kind of socialization. It's hard to find folks that are just real, their authentic selves.

At Kyle’s current institution, he faced similar conflict with determining if certain administrators were “looking out” (Kyle, Interview). He described one senior administrator in particular with whom he struggles to find a connection.
And so, like we cool, but that ain't like my guy, if that makes sense [...] I can't call it if he a Tom or not. I can't quite call it. It's really hard to explain because he's real cool, but it don't feel like he looks out as much as he's supposed to, if that makes sense. Sometimes people put you up on game and you can tell they put you up on game, like I don't feel like he really tells me how it is sometimes, but he ain't like a Tom either.

Both Roosevelt and Terrance experienced somewhat of a shock when they first began at their institutions with regard to the cohesion and overall awareness of the Black community both in and outside of the school. Roosevelt formerly compared the Black population to being “in the Twilight Zone” but has since updated his analogy.

I used to call this place the Twilight Zone when I got here, but then Get Out came out, and I'm almost certain that [this state] is the sunken place. And I say that jokingly, but deadass, it's the Sunken Place [in reference to Jordan Peele’s 2017 “Get Out” film]. A lot of the Black folks that I've interacted with here and met who've been here for a while or grew up here just have no ... they've bought into color blindness and post-racial yes, and so I've struggled with trying to figure out like, "That's racist as hell, did you just say colored?"

Terrance likened the same befuddlement when describing his current community and how Black people interacted with each other upon his arrival.

I like it 'cause it's diverse but sometimes ... I mean, I know I fit in, but sometimes I kind of feel like I don't because I am so used to being at a HBCU and you feel that love, you feel that pride, you feel everybody just there for each other. Everybody speaks and stuff like that. I mean it's not like you're not gonna be cool with everybody, you know, but you just feel all of that and coming here, the Black people like they will not speak to you. Unless they know you, they will walk past you, they're gonna look the other way, pretend like they
never seen you. It's that ... you know, I asked my professor, literally, I'm like, "What is going on?" When I first came here, I said, "You need to do a study on this. This is a identity crisis or something."

Further down the line in Terrance’s experiences, he encountered an additional piece of isolation that was incited by a Black peer in his program. After winning a case of discrimination in his department, he shared his story.

I basically won the case, but it took me through hell that next semester because I had two professors who were tenured, and they were kind of the ones who were running things the next semester for my classes, and my luck, the classes were both about like organizational behavior. So, in those few, these was like nine of us students in there, and one of the students, he was a Black boy, and he's close with other White people, not trying to be funny. And I had told him about the situation that was going on. He went and told all of them, including the professor. My information, my letter that I sent to the dean was shared with the class; however, it wasn't shared with the international students. And it was only three of them, and I was close to them. In class, I went through hell. They tried to be funny, like the whole class, the whole semester, like they were saying little stuff under their breath, like, "Oh, in my job I felt discriminated against today," 'cause that was something I said in my letter. "Oh I felt so discriminated against today," they kept saying that, all of them.

Regardless of the severe isolation Terrance experienced in the classroom with his peers and from his professors, he persisted without hesitation. While it was a hurtful and stressful time for him, his faith in God provided him with the additional support he required to persist.

But then sometimes they would direct their comments to me, like directly say my name. And like the thing about it, they knew I had bipolar disorder, so they thought that I was just
gonna lose it and just snap. That's what they wanted me to do. It didn't happen because I have so much faith in God. I knew that that's what they wanted me to do. I knew I couldn't reach my dreams if I did that.

While many doctoral students encounter faculty, students, and staff who share similar identities to theirs, the participants shared their need to frequently assess the support of their extended family, nurturers, and enablers, regardless of race.

**Strategic Social Capital**

The second emergent theme, Strategic Social Capital, entailed the collapsing and recoding of data from the Perceptions and Neighborhood facets of the PEN-3 model. Strategic social capital is unique in that focuses on the academy as a structure of oppression and liberation. All participants reflected on the rejecting of academic standards as well as the need to strategically maneuver within all White environs. The first subtheme, Toxicity of the Academy, narrows in on the dangers of all White academic environments that lack structure and also encourage denial of self. For example, Rico spoke of the increased need for “hypersensitivity” with how he carries himself so he is clear of any misperceptions. The second subtheme, Maneuvering in the Academy, details how native Black American male Ph.D. students have created a sense of liberation in the academy. Many of the narratives reference relying on innate abilities to hustle and embrace long-term strategy.

**Transactional Behaviors and Attitudes**

**Rigidity of Culture.** Participants were collectively very critical of how the culture of the academy encourages people from minoritized communities to deny themselves for the sake of success, as well as “do a dance” (Nasir, Interview) to appease untouchable structures of
hierarchy. Although articulated in a number of ways, identifying those issues was by no means lacking on the participants’ behalf.

So I'm really hypersensitive about, all right, how will I act in these spaces, just knowing that culturally as a Black man, everything I do is going to be perceived differently than anybody else. (Rico, Interview) For me, it's like I think about it in that construct, knowing that culturally, some of their problems or issues or things that I'm having when I go into a classroom, I gotta be extra jolly. I gotta smile. I gotta be cool just so I don't intimidate nobody, so nobody think nothing crazy or just so I don't get any or elicit any emotions from them that'll make me kind of try to go off on them. (Rico, Focus Group)

School is very much structured in the way it doesn't allow you to be that way. You have to conform to a system that puts you in the position to do the dance. That's why I hate the academy. That's why I hate school. That's why I don't like folks who are really, I'll be candid, with their head up in their ass, right? They're so far removed from reality that I just have a problem with that, but I get it. If we're going to play this game, let's play the game, let's be real to ourselves and know that we're playing this game [...] This shit sucks. Straight up. It's rough, because just like the Ph.D., it's a microcosm of how it is in America. Especially for the Black man. I can speak about that because that's my personal experience. In society, you're forced to conform, play by the rules. There's perceptions that are up against you where you have to move a certain way, do a certain thing. Your research has to be a certain way. You have to sound a certain way. You have to look a certain way. You have to act a certain way. Even in the academy, there is like cliques and crews. There's these elitist groups [...] I'm just asking myself, how much to they have to sacrifice in order
to get there, and I look at that the same way of my brothers and people who I know who are very much successful in the field of their work, whether it be in business, finance, or education, or whatever field that they're in. I'm wondering, how much did you have to sacrifice, and it's a lot. (Nasir, Interview)

The most challenging thing about the program itself is probably this projection that I have of this expectation that I feel like I have to reach or achieve where there's this bar that I feel like I have to reach, but I don't even know what the bar is because they don't tell you exactly what they expect? You’re supposed to do research (waves hands magically). Well, how many publications am I supposed to have on summer graduate? “Well for each person it’s different,” you know? (Kyle, Interview)

Because right now, everybody wants to study people of color on campus. Everybody wants to do a focus group. Everybody wants to do a survey. I'm like, nah. I have to limit that because it's like I've seen how y'all get down when you studied Katrina victims. Y'all don't nurture people the way that you like to think that you do. (Shawn, Interview)

An interesting perspective Q shared as a first-year doctoral student was the struggle of also being taught by first-year professors. He detailed the duality of tension between him and his professors attempting to establish a reputation for themselves with his ability to persist, often suffering at the expense of their desires to follow suit with academic protocol.

[…] the last problem would be working as a first-year student working with first-year professors. A lot of times, or what I've seen out of my three professors, one has years of experience, my other two don't. And so it seems like they trying to prove themselves. So
that's kinda been it. Not prove themselves like going overboard, but not really giving us much input and saying, "You know what, is this really working? Are you really learning from this? Or could we do this a different way?" I think that would be more beneficial for the students. And for them too. Not just to have an assignment because the departments or dean say you need to keep it, but we need to really talk about, is this assignment really going to be effective for us in learning? 'Cause at the end of the day, we supposed to be learning. Not just doing assignments just to do 'em.

**Diversity and Inclusion.** When asked about diversity and inclusion efforts, all participants had critical feedback concerning how universities should approach such endeavors. Some, like Nasir (Focus Group), simply do not see Diversity and Inclusion to be a viable effort that will create systemic change.

That diversity and inclusion is a big joke because they're trying to create Black space on campus when the whole campus is a White space. It's like we can go on and on about this […] I think, the concept of trying to even materialize this idea around something that is so systemic. It's so at large in the United States, and then try to see how you can divert what's happening worldwide. Seriously, the United States. And then try to make us believe. It's all about how can we trick these motherfuckers to believe that they feel cool, that we like them and they're comfortable here and we're going to give them all the resources […] most of the people who are writing the rules and speaking about how to do these things are not people of color […] Then it's about how can we really just make it sound cool til the summertime, til everybody leave and then we go back to being racist again. (Nasir, Interview)
Jalen expanded upon these sentiments by first acknowledging that Black is not a monolith and understanding the nuances of Blackness is critical for change in a very heterogenous country.

I think that when folks are talking about diversity they're, one, not talking systemic. They're not talking equity. And they're not talking in nuances. It's very much siloed of what we want. All the Black folks are monoliths. We're going to have this conversation about Blackness without nuancing what all Blackness encompasses, all the other salient identities for folks that is coupled with Blackness. I think all of those things is just not being talked about on many college campuses […] In addition to that, I don't think folks are really passionate about it beyond checking it off of an institutional checklist […] We'd have to completely overhaul the institution. It wouldn't be an American college or university. We was founded on Whiteness. We'd have to start from scratch and reimagine. We'd have to go to Wakanda. That's where it would have to be.

Shawn echoed these sentiments in sharing, “You gotta scratch the whole thing and start over. It's just so deep” (Shawn, Focus Group).

While these issues are very apparent to the participants, an act of resistance for many is continuing to honor their authentic selves in the process. This is expanded upon in the next subtheme, Maneuvering in the Academy.

**Maneuvering in the Academy**

While expressed in a number of ways, many of the participants shared how they have been successful at maintaining their sense of awareness and coping with challenges during their doctoral programs. Q was the first participant to speak on social capital and how he used it his to his advantage to prepare for entry into his doctoral program. He began working at his institution a year
and a half in advance and began building relationships with key stakeholders before applying to his program.

So I got the position. I've been a mentor in the athletic department, did it for a year and a half. They actually wrote me a letter of recommendation to the Ph.D. program. And I just used it to my advantage, or what we would call social capital, right? And so I just used my social capital to help me out. But everybody doesn't have social capital, or don't have access to build their social capital. So I used mine through working. I didn't get paid a lot of money, but I knew what my goal was. And I knew strategically, if I could put [a specific institution] on my application and network, and they can see like, "Wow, this is what he's doing," I can work my way into the program […] And so I tell people all the time, I have a hustler's mentality. I never been the smartest person in a room, never been like the guy that's always reading books, but the guy that hung around, always had money, always had nice things, because I hustle so hard. I'm talking about rain, sleet, or snow.

He went on to speak about how Black people have an innate obligation to maneuver strategically within White systems in order to be successful.

People won't say that, but that's what Black people got to do. You have to think outside of the box. I call it, they call me the king of finessing, 'cause I'm ... I mean, you have to finesse the system. Everything has a system. But you gotta play the game the way they play it, and that's what I do. (Q, Interview)

Jalen adds to this narrative when speaking about the success of his peers in his program. He attends a highly ranked program in his field, which ultimately leaves him with needing to compete against peers who are also highly accomplished like he is.
Black folks in America have to be twice as good. And so often feel like I can't just do what my White classmates are doing, you know? I have to be, if we’re presenting in class, my presentation has to be the best. If White folks are submitting two [conference proposals], I need to submit four.

Terrance’s experiences at his institution have led him to serve as his own advocate when his faculty are unsupportive. Luckily, he continues to embrace an optimistic mindset with his work and growth as a scholar.

Mostly the Black people are the ones presenting the research, you know and publishing. They [faculty] don't give us any type of pat on the back, they don't come to see us present, they don't care. For me, I don't care either. Because at the end of the day, I'm gonna keep trying to, you know, present my research, I'm gonna keep trying to publish regardless, you know. This is my life, my future.

Terrell also describes his tactics as analogous to a game of chess. As a hip hop scholar, he referenced a rap lyric that perfectly depicted his mentality with maneuvering in the academy.

Part of it is […] playing a game of chess […] Still knowing how to play chess, and looking at chess kind of the same way that I look at life. I forget which artist it is, it's on the tip of my tongue, but they say, "You're about to watch a pawn become a king."

Lastly, while creating a strategy of operation with the academy was important to all participants, finding the balance between the academic environment and peace is critical for success. Terrell (Interview) described that as balance between being “ratchet and an academic,” while others like Kyle (Focus Group) and Jalen (Interview) emphasized the need for counseling.

I would put the emphasis on the mental health aspect of it too […] Know what you got to do in order to like keep your sanity. Like this semester, I started doing yoga, and it's actually
been like super helpful. I actually been going to counseling as well, so just being able to like keep myself on top of myself as far as mental health goes.

“Shine, Brothers, Shine”

The last emergent theme, “Shine, Brothers, Shine,” consists of the collapsing and recoding of data from the Person facet of the PEN-3 model. Maintaining identity is perhaps the crux of all of the interviews and focus groups with the nine participants. The first subtheme, Definition of Self, focuses on the continuation of defining oneself in the context of the academy and the world as a native Black man. The second subtheme, Open to Growth, illustrates the need to continue to grow as a person during the doctoral tenure. Lastly, For the Community narrows in on the participants’ ultimate motivation behind their persistence and obtaining a Ph.D.

Maintaining Identity

The Black man in America historically has a negative stereotype of solely becoming successful in one of three areas: athletics, entertainment, or selling drugs (Rico, Interview; Terrell, Interview). Rico, in particular, openly discussed his understanding of this identity through the lens of Du Bois’s double consciousness.

I grew up and I was very much so, the jock. Slit eyebrows, gold teeth, you know what I'm saying? All the way. Hella over-aggressive. That was me. All the way up through college. Up to the point where I felt like, alright, I got to get my life together. It's the only way to work no more. You know what I'm saying? Like I had a bright red charger and a mouth full of golds and then when I wanted to get in the culture and stuff, kind of saw the looks and stuff that I would get when I started teaching, honestly. I was student teacher primarily, and I was like “Alright, this is it.” Really, I kind of felt it changing. But it was tough because I felt like being a Black male is not really celebrated being smart, or being
intelligent, right? We celebrate and we get respect by, you know, rapping, selling dope, or playing sports, you know? That's kind of our three areas or three layers where we get the most respect. So being a Ph.D. student, right, you know, being in education, anything like that for me is tough just because I almost feel like I'm not supposed to be here. Not from the White construct, but from the Black male construct that you not really a man, you know what I'm saying? If you're not doing one of those three things based on kind of where everybody was in my community.

Adding to this identity narrative, Jalen posed a question to his focus group on what it would mean for him to not hold any of his identities.

I wonder what this experience would be like if that was something I didn't have to think about. Because that is what has caused so much trauma in this process is if I took away, if I were the White male, Christian, able-bodied person in the classroom, cis, what would that look like?

Such a question segues into Terrance’s understanding of what it truly takes for him to thrive in an environment where all of his identities are not fully accepted by the academy or within Black culture. He states, “But having two mental disorders, being Black, maybe if it's being male, being a bisexual, you have to have some strong will.” And while strong will is critical to the narrative of any Black man, that sense of who you are can sometimes be overturned by success and accolades within the academy. This is why Q emphasizes his slavery analogy.

And what you gotta understand is that, when you get a Ph.D., or you get in a Ph.D. program, you can't be the house nigga. All right? You still gotta be that slave outside. You still gotta be the one that's okay with saying, "Aight. If I get a chance to do X, Y, Z,
I ain't gonna forget about y'all." You can't forget about the people that helped you get there. Gotta be unapologetic about being you. Like liking rap music, liking R&B, loving Black women, right? You can't be ... you can't let that change, you gotta understand who you are.

Knowing who you are became a truly fervent theme throughout each of the conversations. Nasir expands on this with a comparison of “keeping up with the Joneses.”

I think for me, it's you gotta know who you are as a person, I think is the most important thing out of everything because the academy has a way of swaying you to think about something else other than yourself, and then it's a way you kind of lose yourself trying to keep up with the Joneses. That's the thing that throws me off completely, because I'm like the more I get involved in the program, I feel like I'm losing much more of myself, so I start to change the way I'm thinking, which is good. But I think a part of who I am as a person, I start to lose that. It starts to chip away at that, and I try to indoctrinate myself or assimilate into a culture that's not necessarily, that I feel that I have to […] (Nasir, Focus Group)

Acts of resistance within this context were also addressed via a participant’s choice in attire while around their faculty, colleagues, and peers. A critical piece in this is maintaining balance, as there is an acknowledgement of professionalism within certain academic situations.

Some days I'll wear slacks. Shit, other days Imma a wear sweatpants. I stopped wearing Yeezys, but I still wear Air Max and shit like that. I stay true to who I am because it's comfortable, and that's what I want to do. I try to tell them [peers], "Yo. You don't have to do that. You may not have to tuck your shirt in, fam. It's Saturday. We good."

(Roosevelt, Focus Group)
For Jalen, honoring oneself also entails honoring the knowledge learned prior to the start of his Ph.D.

[…] Just validate in that their knowledge is valid. So whatever you've learned back at home, what your mama's been saying for years, that knowledge is still valid on this college campus and probably more so than the stuff they're about to teach you. Keeping that at the forefront goes with remembering who you are. It's just really critical because that's the stuff that I've been able to hold onto as I've gone through this process of knowing that my work is likely twice as good as the white folks in my cohort.

Lastly, Terrell brought the second focus group home with a powerful message about Black bodies and the need for Black men to shine regardless of how their institution or society labels them.

My three things, I think one, practice and vulnerability. You don't know what you don't know, so being able to ask for help and be comfortable being uncomfortable, I guess. Two, just echoing what everybody said about being true to yourself and staying authentic, for me, I think like my HBCU experience, one thing that taught me is that there's so many different kinds of Black people. Like everybody ain't street, and so the last thing you need to do is try to act like somebody that you're not. If you went to a predominantly White institution or went to a White school, like great, cool, like be true to yourself, stay true to you. Blackness is so diverse, and so stay true to that. And then the third thing for me is like, our bodies, like the Black body itself is already viewed as a weapon and as a threat. And we're taught to dumb it down sometimes or really be humble, be modest, for me, like one line that stands out, and our deepest fear is that you're playing small doesn't save the world. So, I mean, don't be afraid to shine. I'm quick
to tell somebody, “Yeah, I got a 4.0.” I have no shame in that, because I've never had that before. I'm going to shine, and I'm going to ... it may be bragging and boasting to somebody, but for me, I'm doing this for everybody ... Shine, brothers. Shine. (Terrell, Focus Group)

Embracing Growth

A continuous theme throughout all the narratives of the nine participants was maintaining a sense of desire to learn. Whether that is through experiences or unpacking identity, a Ph.D. inherently yields opportunity to grow in some way shape or form. Terrell set the pace for this subtheme in his closing statement: “You don’t know what you don’t know.” In acknowledging that there is more to be learned, participants articulated how this could impact their identities.

Think for me it means unlearning a lot of what I was socialized to believe about Black men, to unpack a lot of the internalized racism that I had, to unpack the woman in our crew and the gender non-conforming and trans folks who have been in our crew have forced me to unpack and to unlearn and relearn and deconstruct and burn down a lot of my notions of masculinity, a lot of the hegemonic things in ... like various identities to consider, not just the multiple identities that I hold, but when those identities, what context those identities are salient in, when am I oppressing other folks that are in my crew either intentionally or unintentionally. Yeah, I think for me, it means doing all of that, basically having to dismantle myself and try to rebuild myself as I'm still going through learning what it means to be a scholar, it means fighting through imposter syndrome and celebrating all of the various milestones, big, small et cetera. It means trying to be there for Black, indigenous, other people of color and other marginalized communities without needing to say like, "Oh look at me, I'm an ally for the LGBT
community." I can't give myself that title. Somebody from that community has to say like, "Yo, we appreciate you for being there, you are an ally to us." or "I appreciate you speaking out in this space when you knew that we were being attacked and that our voices wouldn't be listened to in the same way that yours is, without us conspiring before and saying 'hey can you do this thing for us?" but doing it because I'm learning to recognize when those things are happening and learning to recognize when to use my privileges to change things.

As a former athlete, Q frequently leaned into his understanding of what it means to be coachable.

[…] You don't know everything, but be coachable. It's okay to go into a field or going into a program thinking you have to know everything, because you're in a place where you're supposed to be ... the thing that you don't know, somebody should be teaching you. And be open to be coachable because great players are ones who are able to be coached. Everybody's not just great from the beginning, so be coachable and know that learning is a continuing thing.

Contrarily, it is seen as equally vital to participants to know how to grow in your boundaries as a doctoral student for the sake of your own mental health. Shawn states, “I definitely check myself and reflect. I've also had to protect myself by saying no." Unfortunately, Nasir learned this process partially through drawing boundaries with faculty in his department.

I would really knock on your door and set up that meeting, try to ask those questions, ask the great questions, ask good questions, try to process how I should approach the situation from an advisee standpoint because it's a two-way street. It's a relationship. I realize that everyone doesn't have your best interest at heart, and then it becomes a place
where you've just gotta be careful with your intellectual property. So then you start
talking, and then people are like, "That's a great idea," then you see it published. You'd be
like, "Wow, that's crazy." For me, it's like the impact of having these individuals in terms
of professors or teachers or mentors of color in these spaces, it's a catch-22 for me. I
always gotta be very careful, and I never, at this point, I'm not putting my foot forward.
I'm just going to just play the scene first to see what's going on before I make a decision
about how I approach the relationship.

Jalen went through a similar experience during his first year when contact with his cohort
and program began to arouse heightened levels of stress and anxiety for him. After speaking with
his counselor, he recognized the need to draw boundaries around areas that facilitated
comparison of his accomplishments and success against others'.

So it was actually his suggestion that like maybe you shouldn't engage in the GroupMe as
much. You know, like pull yourself out of that. I was like, “Oh, you're right.” Like that is
was giving me stress and more anxiety. He was like you're in your head enough for like,
you know, don't allow those other thoughts also be your head as well. So I was alight so,
getting suggestions like that was super helpful.

For the Community

The last subtheme focuses on the collective participant understanding that the Ph.D. is
more than an individual accomplishment; it is a degree for the Black community and a means of
setting an example for native Black men in the future. Each of the participants had a collective
theme around community and their educational pursuit. Kyle is becoming a part of history within
his program, but much of his motivation reverts back to his teaching days with his students
serving as motivation.
I feel like I'm standing on the shoulders of the people who came before. And you know all that. But then, like, there's also that macro feeling of it as well because I'm the second African American Black male ever in my program. And so there's that feeling of like in my program, if I stink it up, the, the next African American male may not get to a chance. You know, so there's that dynamic of like feeling this added pressure, like I gotta perform just so I don't put us in this box of like not being able to achieve. So there's definitely, there's definitely that element of it feeling like, not only that I have to be good, but that I have to be perceived as good enough as well. I was a teacher. And so I was in front of my kids, and it's like if I don't teach these kids how to read, they could legitimately go to prison. (Kyle, Focus Group)

Jalen has found a sense of motivation and inspiration around his current academic culture. In having such a diverse doctoral program and cohort, incoming doctoral students inspire him to demystify the process for those who come after him.

Now that I'm doing firsthand research and working with first-time students, like, and then trying to build that community, now I feel like I'm also doing it for them, right? So like who are those first-year folks who don't know the process and don't know what it is, what it means to be in a Ph.D. program, particularly Black for gen folks who are studying. So I'm wanting to be able to communicate that and to be demystify this process as much as possible for those who come after me because I don't, I always feel like, and this is kind of a commonly used for, like, I feel like if I can do it, you should be able to […] I feel like there's this immense responsibility of reaching back and bringing folks along, um, that have the opportunity, but may not even know that they have the opportunity. (Jalen, Interview)
Roosevelt’s reflection is steeped in his continuous desire to learn more about himself and his history. Through that process, he’s developed an even stronger sense of embracing symbolism of Black men in the academy.

And the deeper I get into higher ed and like reading and learning about the history and all of that, yeah, I'm not supposed to be here, but I'm here, and I ain't going anywhere unless I choose to... I was taught to be almost ashamed of because somebody who looked like they came from where I'm from and all of that doesn't get to be here. Somebody has to grant you access, but I'm like, "No I'm about to kick this door in." (Roosevelt, Interview)

Lastly, Terrell brings the narrative of community home with a reference to his ancestors and finding fuel through his heritage.

… I think about being the only one. I don't carry the burden, I don't feel like it's a burden, but I know that I wear the scars of my ancestors. (Terrell, Interview)

Familial motivation was all around one of the most salient themes throughout each of the narratives. The participants were keenly aware of their agency in the face of a nation that has scarcely embraced Black men, and they all were collectively passionate about serving as role models for generations to come.
CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this narrative analysis was to investigate stress and coping among native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions in the United States. This study was guided by the following three research questions:

1) How do native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress experiences at historically White institutions?

2) What factors shape native Black American male Ph.D. students’ ability to cope with stress?

3) What are the storied experiences of native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions?

The findings from this study led to the development of three overarching themes, eight subthemes, and two sub-subthemes. The study’s findings add to the literature concerning graduate student experiences, particularly for doctoral students who enter historically White institutions from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds. While there is no literature examining native Black American male Ph.D. students within this context, the participants’ experiences mirror that of the undergraduate minoritized experience at HWIs. Experiences of isolation, need for belonging, overcoming stereotype threats, and forming community are critical to students from underrepresented backgrounds (Brown & Dobbin, 2004; Gardner, 2011; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006). However, it is clear that the perception of experiences at the doctoral level is also strongly influenced by: 1) the many nuances of the Ph.D.; 2) the academic environment; and 3) the level of consciousness by the student. While stress and coping are nearly inevitable at this level, participants were able to clearly articulate how they prepared, acclimated to their new environments, and grew within their identities as scholars.
Historically, studies focused on stress and coping reference more physiological outlets to care for oneself, such as exercising, eating healthy, and obtaining the recommended amount of rest (Sano, Johns, & Czerwinski, 2015; Viveros, & Schramm, 2018). This study embraces alternative approaches to confront stress and coping by addressing internal reflections and awareness of stress, network support or lack thereof, and systemic boundaries that can positively and/or negatively affect a person’s ability to cope through stressful times. These are clear examples of both proactive coping and anticipatory coping, both resulting from one’s perceived ability to cope (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). However, research further emphasizes that these mechanisms are subjective to the individual, current context, social functioning, and somatic health.

Within this chapter, I will integrate key findings and sync them with contemporary literature as well as the study’s conceptual framework. Following the presentation of the discussion, I will present the recommendations regarding how students can combat stress within their doctoral programs, historically White institutions can subsequently construct more inclusive experiences for marginalized and underrepresented populations, and researchers can expand upon this research.

**Discussion of Key Findings**

The narrative of the native Black American male Ph.D. student is complex. This study reiterated the numerous gradations of identity and experiences that native Black American males and doctoral students in general experience at historically White institutions in the United States. The findings of this study will be discussed through the three overarching themes outlined in Chapter V: 1) Chosen Family; 2) Strategic Social Capital; and 3) “Shine, Brothers, Shine.”
Chosen Family

A system of education is not one thing, nor does it have a single definite object, nor is it a mere matter of schools. Education is that whole system of human training within and without the school house walls, which molds and develops men.

-W.E.B. Du Bois

While the Ph.D. experience generally has a similar structure across institutional types, the dynamics of cohorts, advisors, and support systems in general can vary drastically. To circumvent these challenges, participants developed their own mechanisms for continued support. The doctoral cohort is traditionally a model used within postsecondary institutions to introduce and acclimate doctoral students to their new academic environment. With these participants, the cohort model proved to be so fruitful to the point of informally expanding the model outside of their academic department areas. The literature affirms these successes through evidence of increased sense of community, fewer feelings of isolation, and enhanced relationships with peers (Mullen, 2003; Olson & Clark, 2009; Wisker, Robinson, & Shacham, 2007; Zahl, 2015). Many participants also stepped outside of their programs to find community and shared experience with students from across the university. Participants like Jalen and Roosevelt utilized structures provided to them within their programs to create support for themselves, but they also took their efforts a bit further by curating their own communities that fit their needs. They took the initiative to capitalize on shared identities in diverse capacities across campus and throughout the doctoral experience, thus, addressing the external state of stress via community formation, as well as the first subtheme, Name Your Village (Aldwin, 2007; Pearlin, 1989).
What is fascinating about Jalen’s initiative in this area was his cognizance of the current literature. Its findings on first-generation student stressors and need for community, particularly for those who hold marginalized identities, informed his efforts (Adams, 2011). First-generation doctoral students are at risk for experiencing many stressors related to their generational status, including understanding the graduate system, financial constraints, financial support and time to degree completion, feelings of otherness, and imposter syndrome (Gardner, 2013). In creating communities that tailored to vulnerable populations, Jalen capitalized on the data and added to the validity of studies concerning first-generation students.

Furthermore, it should be noted that community support is not limited to the borders of institutions. Shawn’s research is specific to the geographic location of his institution, and he made it a point to begin developing relationships in the surrounding community to create support and inspiration for himself. Rico explained a similar circumstance within his field, as athletics can be strongly siloed from the remainder of the university. Through athletic-specific conferences, he developed a community of people who share similar interests at the intersection of athletics and academics. These are examples of what researchers labeled problem-focused coping (PFC) in the literature. PFC consists of thoughts, actions, and strategies geared toward remedying and/or its repercussions (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Struthers, Perry, & Menec, 2000). Both Shawn and Rico were proactive in their ability to recognize a deficit in their support and subsequent need to cope through PFC.

Expanding upon the findings under Chosen Family, the topic of advisors and mentors revealed some fascinating reflections from participants. To begin, the titles of advisor and mentor were defined and assigned differently from participant to participant. Nettles and Millett (2006) described advisors as acting in an official capacity within the academic environment, such
as approving a plan of work for a doctoral student. On the other hand, the authors defined mentors as having a working relationship with the student and shepherding them through the doctoral process to completion. Acting in these roles can differ from person to person. Some students expected their advisors to also serve as mentors, while others considered their advisors to be strictly academic and mentors to serve in other capacities outside of their academic environment. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter V, participants like Nasir did not see the need for an advisor considering the tainted experiences he encountered in the past. A few participants did not see a need for formalized mentoring but rather informal relationship-building outside of their relationship with their advisor. To make this clearer, I’ve constructed an advisor-mentor scale based on the literature and participant experiences to visually understand how these relationships can be categorized, in flux, and add to/detract from the appraisal of stress.
Figure 6.1: Advisors & Mentors.
While the literature notes that academic advisors typically evolve into the dual role of advisor and mentor, this is not always the case for students. Mentoring relationships offer a wide range of support, which often includes the psychosocial and career mentorship, making mentoring relationships highly relational and subjective depending on the student and mentor (Bagaka’s, Badilla, & Bransteter, 2015). Additionally, mentoring often takes place voluntarily depending on the needs of the student, future goals, and willingness/availability of mentors. Advising, on the other hand, traditionally consists of pairing or matching based on the research interests of the advisor and the student and are assigned at the start of a Ph.D. student program (Corné, Löfström, & Pyhältö, 2017). Such differences in understanding how each relationship may positively or negatively impact a student should be discussed and unpacked at the start of the program. In Roosevelt’s experience, faculty identified the need for both faculty mentorship and peer mentorship relationships. This serves as a prime example of the level of awareness faculty should possess around support as well as how to utilize their agency to construct further support mechanisms to prevent increased stress for students. This behavior is clearly outlined by Flora (2017) in his research on doctoral mentoring relationships. He articulated that scholarly leadership employs four essential elements: acting with authenticity, facilitating growth or change, possessing vision, and acknowledging deficiency.

Furthermore, as students enter their programs, delving deeper into understanding what they require to be successful will add to their ability to persist. Although Nasir was uninterested in having an advisor or a mentor, it was clear that he knew what he needed to be successful and overcome stressors. Support mechanisms like a therapist or someone who lives and operates outside of the academy ultimately serve his immediate needs more constructively and further address his intersectionality as a Black man in the academy (Bertrand, Osborne-Lampkin,
Patterson, & Davis, 2015). This represents an added layer of sponsorship in which people who do not have affiliation with the student academically, but they continue to support and uplift them as supporters in their journey.

Jalen and Roosevelt were two participants who shared similar experiences of having mentors and advisors who did not share their racial/ethnic identity but were highly instrumental in their academic success thus far. The literature demonstrates that this level of cross-cultural supervision has led to positive implications for both the student and the supervisor (Gjotterud, 2018). However, Q, on the other hand, was on the opposite end of that spectrum. The notion of advisor-mentor identity-matching was evident through Q’s narrative. While only a first-year doctoral student, he began developing relationships with the Black male faculty in his program two years before his matriculation and was committed to the idea of having a faculty member who can share in cultural experiences and beliefs. Q found support in these relationships academically but also personally as he matured in his understanding of masculinity, respect for women, and uplifting other Black males. He described these relationships as a stress when he needed people to whom to vent to unpack a recent encounter. Past research has shown the benefits of Black students seeking out mentorship from Black professors at the undergraduate level (Griffin, 2013; Moore & Tolliver, 2010), but Q’s narrative adds to the need for more Black professors within graduate education as well. This level of awareness segues into the next topic of Skin Folk vs. Kin Folk.

While all participants came from similar predominantly Black backgrounds and neighborhoods, how their experiences with the Black community panned out differed among each participant. Each participant articulated unique experiences with White and other underrepresented peers and colleagues. However, there was consistent mentioning of
encountering Black people within their program or institution who had questionable investment in Black students. Kyle mentioned this during his focus group, stating that he was unsure if an administrator was an Uncle Tom or not. Historically, an Uncle Tom, is derived from a character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The term is used as a derogatory epithet for a Black person who may be subservient to a White person while disregarding their own racial identity (Carroll, 2013).

Two additional participants articulated levels of confusion and doubt when ruminating on holistic support from their Black professors, colleagues, or general administrators across the university. While this terminology may be unique to the Black community, it leans on the understanding that shared identity yields shared experiences, and thus, shared advocacy. Professor Linda Hill of Harvard Business School names this encounter over-differentiation, which can potentially lead to withdrawal and isolation of the student once they are aware of this divide in advocacy (Hill, 2018). Leaning on the first subtheme, Name Your Village, students are therefore encouraged to look at the full range of identities and experiences within a person when searching for support. Affinity groups tailored to educational status, professional interests, and accountability, are proven to add an additional layer of coping support when completing a degree at any stage (Gates, Delgado, Bernat, & Cabrera, 2006; Harper, 2009).

**Strategic Social Capital**

*If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.*

-Audre Lorde

Participants in this study expressed a need to balance dual identities. As mentioned previously in Rico’s story, the idea of Du Bois’ double consciousness became commonplace.
Double consciousness is rooted in the feeling of your identity being separated into several parts, making it difficult or nearly impossible to possess one unified identity (Du Bois, 1903). Rico, Terrell, and Nasir all spoke on denying pieces of themselves for sake of others’ comfort as a means of survival. This deeper awareness of the Black man’s position within the academy and in the United States parallels the larger societal belief that Black men are dangerous, unacceptable, and on the margins of society (Oliver, 2003). Positive and negative perceptions of a man’s positionality impact his belief in the agency within himself. Ph.D. students require supportive environments where every facet of their identity is not only respected but accepted. The literature shows that those environments lessen the mental and physical wellness barriers that students from marginalized populations are typically confronted with at historically White institutions (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Walten & Cohen, 2011).

While this tips on the negative side of transformation, additional positive perceptions of social capital were evident for other participants. While acknowledging the rigidity of both the academy and his institution, Roosevelt also found himself needing to unlearn and learn more about constructs such masculinity and gendered identities. That level of understanding ties into the subtheme 3B), Openness to Growth, as well as 2B), Maneuvering in the Academy. Growing with peers and taking advantage of university deficits can foster the creation of a new lens on the approach to both belonging and inclusion within postsecondary institutions. Nasir, in turn, capitalized on these behaviors by speaking truth to power as a student activist at his university. He consistently found himself in rooms and spaces where he was pushing the needle and advocating for a truly inclusive environment. However, both focus groups collectively agreed that Diversity and Inclusion efforts at universities were often a waste of time, as their universities rarely made substantial progress.
Through actualizations like Nasir’s and Shawn’s regarding the authentic care and concern demonstrated by their institutions, a sense of self-preservation kicked in. As mentioned in Shawn’s story, the university’s post-research concern or lack thereof for the surrounding community after Hurricane Katrina reiterates his mindfulness of how much of himself he was extending. Both participants found a need to slow down, reevaluate their walks, and place their mental health and wellness at the forefront of their journey. While their institutions may have held good intentions, ultimately, the completion of their degrees was a priority. Furthermore, when Nasir began to speak with student activists at other institutions, he was often discouraged to continue his activist endeavors, signaling a sense of defeat from peers across the country. This level of burnout has been evidenced through the literature in studies on racial battle fatigue and 21-century student activism (Franklin, 2016; Hope; Velez, Offidani-Bertrand; Keels, & Durkee, 2018; Ruff, 2016). Finding a sense of peace and mental stability is critical for all students who are coming from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds; however, particularly for doctoral students, adding the layers of socialization that are woven into the journey creates a thicker fabric for students to cut through in which they pave their way as individuals and scholars (Hurtado, Ruiz Alvarado, 2015; Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, Hubbard, 2018).

“Shine, Brothers, Shine”

*If there are 42 million Black Americans, then there are 42 million different ways to be Black.*

- Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Each participant in this study held very unique understandings of their Black identity. However, the most salient theme that was apparent throughout the narratives was that one’s Blackness should be used as a tool for elevation and intrinsic motivation. To begin, all participants reiterated the need to know yourself and acknowledge your needs before entering a
doctoral program—needs meaning what is necessary to thrive in your new environment. This reverts back to the literature on doctoral and graduate students’ needing to prepare themselves for an increased level of autonomy and expectation. Previous literature addressed this level of socialization among Black doctoral students being attributed to factors such as undergraduate preparation and parental academic background (Gardner & Holley, 2011; Nettles, 1990). However, there is a growing body of literature addressing the new age of consciousness held by doctoral students who are entering the academy, reiterating the higher level of consciousness demonstrated by the participants. This newer generation appears to mirror our larger society’s emphasis on balancing physical, mental, and emotional health (Benjamin, Williams, & Mahere, 2017; Taylor, Hiley, Humphrey, 2017). Taylor et al. expanded on this in stating, “While they appear more than willing to put forth the cognitive effort and work the long hours required to earn their discipline’s highest degree, they are highly cognizant of an internal need to balance doctoral program obligations with other life obligations. If this need is unmet, potentially negative implications arise in terms of students being retained…” While this may be a generalized finding among doctoral students, individual reflection of needs coupled with a nourishing, stress-less environment are both necessary for the success of native Black doctoral students (Bair & Haworth, 2005). Taylor et al.’s (2017) study also reiterated the combination of curating a work-life balance that is suited for both the student and the institution.

It was evident that the road to and during the Ph.D. for each participant was not evenly keeled, with roadblocks involving advisors and changing programs along the way. However, each participant successfully navigated his new environment by relying on a deeper understanding of himself as many of the participants were the only Black man in their respective doctoral cohorts. The literature supports the commonality of this predicament as the percentage
of Black male doctoral students who were awarded degrees in 2017 was 1.6%. Terrance, who is the only Black male in his cohort, is one example of a participant who exemplified a clear understanding of his multiple identities while finding strength in his individuality. Regardless of his adverse experiences thus far, he evoked sheer certainty about his purpose and direction as a scholar, which adds to the protective implications of his optimism as well as his perceived control over his life as a scholar (Grote et al., 2007). This level of awareness reiterates the subtheme of 3A), Defining Oneself. Terrell’s story mirrored Terrance’s, as he approaches being “the only” with a level of pride and makes it a point to hold his head high and celebrate accomplishments along the way. The literature also articulates that this type of celebratory behavior widens a person’s ability to carry increased stress loads, particularly as stress is exhibited as an internal state. Through emotional reactions like feelings of anxiety, anger, or guilt, stress has the ability to encroach upon physical wellbeing and impact facets of the nervous system (Aldwin, 2007; Lazarus, 1991).

Furthermore, while much of the literature frequently highlights the negative light under which Black men in America are displayed (Gilbert, Ray, Byrd, Richards, & Johnson, 2018), a few of the participants found joy and comfort in knowing that their past struggles serve as catalysts in their achievements, confirming the literature’s evidence of positive academic consequences associated with Black identity (Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015). Researchers explored the multidimensionality of the Black identity and its use in delineating between mainstream American schema and the African American cultural schema and found that they facilitate positive academic consequences when working in tandem. An awareness such as this lends itself to a clearer appraisal process when under stress by converting turbulent times into ulterior motivators. Additionally, the awareness held by participants concerning their identity
reiterates previous literature’s findings that tie African American identity to advantageous outcomes. Tying racial/ethnic identity to one’s racial/ethnic group has been shown to predict higher academic grades among African American and Latino American middle school students (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2006; Brannon et al., 2015). This research has also been tied to positive health outcomes associated with Black identity, highlighting that racial/ethnic minority group status can serve protective functions against stress associated with discrimination and promote resilience within this group (Brannon et al., 2015; Ryff Keyes, & Hughes, 2003).

Additionally, many of the men were keenly aware and critical of their coping through stressful moments within their program, allowing room for periodic reevaluation of what was necessary to relieve undue stress. Participants in this study were also fervently and collectively unapologetic about their coping habits. Whether it is stepping away from a group of individuals or creating mental space for yourself through yoga and meditation, it is vital that you know what consistently serves your mental health. Recent and past literature validates this need to develop stress-relieving habits and coping mechanisms that are tailored to positionality and current life circumstance, and these habits should also be modifiable over time, aligning with the subtheme 3B), Openness to Growth (Holinka, 2015; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016). In establishing these, students will ultimately create a buffet of options to choose from when confronted with an adverse event or circumstance while in their doctoral program.

Lastly, the all of the participants viewed their Ph.D. journey as a foundation for others’ upward mobility. It was fascinating to hear each participant’s motivation behind their degree, be it for their community, their family, or their daughter—the journey is not solely their own. They recognized the gravity of their achievements and how it could pave the way for future Black males in their programs and create a new understanding of the Black male in the academy.
Implications for Theory

Outside of three overarching findings categories, the narratives also added to important theoretical implications for Collins Airhihenbuwa’s PEN-3 model. The PEN-3 model provides a structure for categorizing what facets a person’s life an interventionist should focus on when trying to create sustainable impact. The three larger domains of Cultural Identity, Relationships & Expectations, and Cultural Empowerment. The findings of this study support the PEN-3 model that understanding and addressing stress and coping occurs at those three different levels.

Collins Airhihenbuwa’s PEN-3 Model

Airhihenbuwa’s model presents a framework for creating culturally inclusive interventions. It rests in three overarching domains, which each contain three subcategories. Within Cultural Identity, there are three different points of entry. They are the person, their extended family, and neighborhood. For the Relationships & Expectations domain, perceptions, enablers, and nurturers comprise the subcategories. Lastly, the Cultural Empowerment domain houses the positive and negative beliefs. Existential is the third subcategory for Cultural Empowerment, but it was not utilized within this study (Iwelunmor et al., 2014).

Previous use of the PEN-3 model consisted of addressing health problems associated with HIV, cancer, diabetes, malaria, and smoking. However, the findings in this study indicated how this model can be applied to higher education and mental health among marginalized populations. Data from the study revealed how participants viewed, accepted, and appraised various behaviors, people, and resources that contributed to their stress and ability to cope while enrolled in their doctoral programs. Figure 6.2 below provides an overlay of findings with the model.
Figure 6.2:

*PEN-3 Model Overlay of Findings.*

The overlay of the findings provides a visual flow through the model’s application. The model first illustrates the numerous stakeholders involved in the experience of the native Black doctoral student and who subsequently have a hand in their success. Understanding the roles and boundaries of the extended family and the culture of the neighborhood are both critical in decision-making as the majority of participants in this study moved to a new state to begin their doctoral programs. As students name their resources, they begin to develop various perceptions around stress and coping, whom they will allow to serve as nurturers, and what resources will enable their persistence. Lastly, engaging in positive and negative appraisal creates an ongoing flow of what works and what doesn’t work for the doctoral student. This supports the need for students to critically evaluate themselves, their mental space, and the proximity to stressors within their environment. Additionally, this study validates the PEN-3 model as a means of
providing a more comprehensive level of how stress and coping are both identified and addressed through the various facets of a doctoral students’ experiences.

Further implications of this theory within the context of higher education entail the incorporation of elements of socialization and its influence in the cycle of stress and coping. As mentioned in Chapter II, the socialization process for doctoral students can be highly nuanced and challenging for many students regardless of their identity status. Exploring the relationship between elements such as socialization and appraising can uncover explicit habits and promising practices for interventionists and administrators seeking further understanding of how to improve support mechanisms.

**Recommendations**

Exploring native Black American male Ph.D. students’ stress and coping experiences opened the door for important recommendations for individuals, for historically White institutions, and for researchers. The results from this study can support students, faculty, mentors, advisors, and administrators in better identifying stress and helping facilitate positive coping mechanisms. Institutions can also utilize these findings to evaluate and restructure current practices that exacerbate a student’s need to cope. This section will address three overarching audiences who can use this research to elevate their practices: 1) doctoral students; 2) institutions; and 3) researchers.

**Recommendations for native Black American Male Ph.D. Students/All Doctoral Students**

The most salient implication that came from the direct voice of the participants is first being certain of enrollment motives, or as Nasir stated, “Why?” Knowing the purpose behind attaining a Ph.D., what doors it will open, and if it is a necessary piece in your career trajectory will ultimately lay the foundation for motivation and persistence. The process can average
anywhere from three to ten years depending on the person, which means an established level of commitment must be in place before beginning the first year. Furthermore, it is also important to consider if your career trajectory necessitates a doctoral degree. Not every discipline requires or even respects a Ph.D. and answering that question could save a person years’ worth of time and energy. On the other hand, if your discipline does necessitate a terminal degree, identifying the timing of when you should work towards the degree will also be critical. For example, if you are pursuing a career in a higher education administration, many employers will prioritize full-time work experience over degree attainment, encouraging many students to work for a number of years before pursuing a doctorate. Below are critical questions on which students should consider reflecting before applying, deciding on a school, and matriculating.

Furthermore, all participants in this study chose their institutions because of their financial aid packages, and in doing so, they released a level of stress that could have impeded upon their experience. Previous literature has associated financial security with greater satisfaction and lower rates of attrition among students (Sverdlik, Hall, McAlpine, & Hubbard, 2018). While Roosevelt spoke on his financial aid package being a primary point in his decision-making, he also encountered a few stumbling blocks with his department promising research/support funding but not honoring those promises upon matriculation. This highlights the notion that there are many nuances of funding outside of tuition that students should consider and have conversations about in advance, such as conference presentation funding, research grants, transcription grants, dissertation and completion grants. Additionally, students should also consider if their funding is guaranteed for the full duration of their matriculation, if it will be renewed year to year, or if funding is dependent upon grant renewal.
Students should also critically evaluate their support mechanisms before they matriculate. Some students prefer to be within driving distance of their hometown, while others require only a partner on whom to lean during their doctoral journey. Establishing a network of support and continuing to reevaluate what works or what doesn’t work will help students delineate between positive and negative enablers extended family. One method of approaching this topic area is having an honest and open conversation with loved ones about the life change on which a doctoral student is beginning to embark. Identifying people in advance who are able to aid in stress relief and coping will inherently prepare both the student and their community for the next step in their educational journey. Furthermore, geographic location and density of particular populations can also be a factor in deciding if the physical environment outside of the community is a good fit for student needs.

Prior to matriculation, doctoral students should also critically assess their mental space, what they need to relieve stress, and how they will best cope with their new lifestyle. While many students are aware of how challenging the doctoral journey can be, preparing for a change of pace, changes in financial predicament, and shifting of social circles can lead to increased awareness of preparedness. Speaking from personal experience, the Ph.D. journey is a lifestyle change, especially for those who enroll full time. Creating a deeper understanding of your needs physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually will make the path for acclimatization easier. Much of this can be accomplished through deep self-exploration and conducting a critical assessment of your current state prior to matriculation. Speaking with a counselor/therapist or a primary care physician about your physical and mental health are excellent places to begin this conversation. As stated in Chapter II, stress can manifest itself in physiological forms that impede upon the day-to-day wellness of people. Illnesses such as anxiety, depression, bipolar
disorder, and high blood pressure, for example, can and should be addressed before beginning a doctoral program.

Lastly, students should consider if the institution and its level of underrepresentation will be strong factors in their sense of belonging. Luckily, at the graduate level, doctoral students possess a deeper understanding of the environment they will require to prosper based on their college and Master’s degree attainment. Historically White institutions, minority-serving institutions, and historically Black colleges/universities all offer unique experiences. However, they all come with their challenges as well, and assessing those challenges well in advance can possibly prevent disruption in their journey down the road.

I have included a list of starting questions (Table 6.1) for students to consider as they move through assessment of self the application, decision-making, and matriculation phases of their programs. The questions within the table are grounded in both personal experience and evidence derived from the narratives of the nine participants.
Table 6.1:

External-Facing Questions to Ask When Applying to Ph.D. Programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application Phase</th>
<th>Questions to ask yourself</th>
<th>Questions to ask regarding the program</th>
<th>Questions to ask regarding the institution/location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does my career necessitate a PhD?</td>
<td>How many students do you typically admit per year?</td>
<td>How large is the institution?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What type of doctorate is necessary for me to complete?</td>
<td>Is there an opportunity to meet or speak with the faculty prior to applying?</td>
<td>Where is the institution located?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What type of institution do I prefer (PWI, HBCU, MSI, etc.)?</td>
<td>How long does it typically take students to complete the program?</td>
<td>How have the number of minoritized populations grown in the past 5-10 years?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Will there be a financial investment in this degree depending on the institution/program type?</td>
<td>What is the male:female ratio?</td>
<td>What statements has the institution made regarding national events (i.e. domestic terrorism, student activism, etc.)?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How did interactions with faculty and staff make me feel?</td>
<td>How will the program support me financially?</td>
<td>How important is physical location to me?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did current doctoral students seem happy and satisfied with their experiences?</td>
<td>How accessible are faculty in terms of collaborating on research projects, presenting at conferences, etc.?</td>
<td>What is the cost of living in the area that I’m considering?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Potential advisor- How comfortable did you feel in conversation with them?</td>
<td>What are faculty stances on co-authorship for students?</td>
<td>How diverse is the local community?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>How attentive have people within the program been towards your questions and overall application experiences?</td>
<td>How does the program support doctoral students who are not interested in tenure-track positions?</td>
<td>How does the institution play a role in the local community?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What personal/familial conditions or circumstances should I be cognizant of? (i.e. mental health issue, aging parents, etc.)</td>
<td>Is there a cohort model in place?</td>
<td>How diverse is the senior-leadership of the institution?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who will comprise my support network?</td>
<td>If so, how many students of color will be in my cohort?</td>
<td>How close is the nearest airport?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How am I financially preparing myself for a new student lifestyle?</td>
<td>Are there opportunities to apply for funding for conference presentations, travel, etc.?</td>
<td>What is the primary method of transportation for students?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How are students assigned an advisor?</td>
<td>Will I be allowed to enroll in courses across campus? At surrounding institutions?</td>
<td>What resources on campus will aid in acclimating?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a specific academic plan for students to follow?</td>
<td></td>
<td>What organizations or offices can I become involved with that aid in alleviating the stress of being enrolled in a PhD program?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What level of support does the program play in student well-being?</td>
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Furthermore, I have included a secondary list of suggestions for preparation and questions to ask that can aid in more reflective and intrapersonal development for students prior to matriculation in Table 6.2 below. These are based on data from participants interviews and focus groups as well as my own experiences living as a graduate student and working directly with graduate students as a full-time administrator.
Table 6.2:
Internal-Facing Questions to Ask When Applying to Ph.D. Programs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment of Self</th>
<th>Online Tests: Myers-Briggs Type Indicator; Strengths Finder; Emotional Intelligence EQ; personal learning styles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action:</strong></td>
<td>• Spend time exploring what your current stress level is and what aids you in balancing a healthy amount of stress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Further explore your coping mechanisms that have aided your stress management as well as those that have detracted from your ability to carry stress</td>
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<tr>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Assessment of Personal Relationships:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What types of relationships are benefiting you right now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What types of relationships may be deaccelerating your pace?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Which major relationships may be impacted if you begin a Ph.D. program? How prepared are you for those shifts/impacts?</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Questions to Ask Advisor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do your relationships look like with students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are there any stressors in your life right now of which I should be aware and mindful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How often do you want to see me?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How often do you want to communicate with me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What does success look like for a student under your guidance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How did you cope with stress during your doctoral experience?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do I need to be successful in this program?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you need from me to develop our relationship (insert your relational preference such as professionally or personally)?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Cohort-Based Community Building Questions</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What can we do to support each other?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• What are people’s individual goals? Personally? Professionally?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is anyone looking for accountability?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Are there any life events that anyone is willing to share for us to be mindful of as we advance?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How should we communicate with one another?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What is everyone’s love language?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• When is everyone’s anticipated completion date?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions

It was clear through each of the narratives that students, particularly underrepresented doctoral students, expect their universities to hold themselves accountable in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. While none of the participants shared any positive regard for Diversity & Inclusion efforts, there are a few layers of improvement that can be addressed concerning the Ph.D. student experience.

Programmatic Support

As mentioned previously through Roosevelt’s narrative (Roosevelt, Interview), intentionality on the programmatic end can open doors and serve students in ways that traditional structures may not allow. A faculty member at his institution shared his power by empowering Roosevelt and other men in his cohort to make a joint decision about their acceptance. While this is unusual, it essentially begins the building of the belonging process earlier than usual. Belonging is defined as the degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group (Strayhorn, 2012). While doctoral student sense of belonging has not been explored, this is another facet of the collegiate experience that can be transferred to the support of graduate student populations. Students, particularly those who identify as marginalized or underrepresented at HWIs, require a higher sense of belonging due to their underrepresentation and minoritized experiences. A higher level of belonging yields creativity on the program’s part in supporting students who likely do not identify with the majority of the faculty and administration in their program. One way to address this gap is by creating opportunities for students to connect with faculty of color in their program on a consistent basis, be it through dinners, individual meetings, or targeted events. Furthermore, introducing students to student groups with which they may connect during their time at the institution adds to
developing belonging before matriculation as well. If students know in advance who their
networks may be when they arrive on campus, increased opportunity for belonging settles in.
These are small ways programs can begin adding layers of both support and trust for their
students.

Additionally, as detailed through Kyle’s narrative, the doctoral process can be fairly
uncertain and ambiguous depending on the department. Some students require less rigidity in
structure, while others require a detailed plan of milestones and progression. A way in which
programs can add to their mechanisms of support is by addressing the academic and personal
needs of each doctoral student. Taking a hands-on approach by enabling students to share what
they need, where their deficits may be, and how programs can aid in addressing those deficits all
have the potential to add to the scholarly development of doctoral students. Tools such as MBTI,
Emotional Intelligence (EQ) testing, and Strengths Finder can also provide insight into the habits
and behaviors of the student and build stronger relationships with the multiple stakeholders in the
program (Cooper & Sawaf, 1998; Myers et al., 2012; Rath, 2007). Ph.D. programs are not simply
rearing students, but they are preparing scholars and grooming future advisors and mentors. By
pouring into their individual students’ needs and being attentive to their development, programs
will ultimately create environments where students feel more supported and enabled.

Diversity of Faculty and Programs

Diversifying doctoral programs from the student perspective as well as from the faculty
perspective can lend itself to create less stressful environments for students and staff. Feelings of
isolation or being “the only” create undue stress and the need to cope for students of identity
status. However, creating increasingly diverse environments can potentially detract from student
and faculty needs to move beyond their racial identities for the sake of their success in the
academy. Furthermore, many students of color cling to the faculty of color in their programs for support and mentorship, which ultimately adds to the burden of faculty of color. This means as the student populations diversify and increase within programs, faculty of color hiring should also experience a level of increase to balance out these needs. Efforts like this will ultimately prevent burnout from both the student and the faculty perspective.

Expanding on burnout, faculty of color are also prone to experiencing various levels of secondary trauma that can impact both their productivity and the level of support they provide their students. Secondary trauma is defined as the effects of working with traumatized persons on therapists and is traditionally used within the field of social work (Jenkins & Baird, 2002). Evidenced through the narratives of the nine participants, students experience varying levels of racialized experiences that impact their perceptions of themselves, their agency, and their environments. Alleviating that stress is frequently achieved through the emotional support of faculty of color. However, while also being people of color, faculty also run the risk of internalizing and experiencing secondary stress that is tied to the sharing of their students’ experiences. Programs should also place a priority on supporting faculty of color in their mental health and wellness. Examples of this could include creating faculty of color affinity groups, providing safe spaces on campus, and hiring a therapist and a case manager who will work within a specific program or for an entire college.

Furthermore, programs should consider the messages they are sending concerning student othering. In Roosevelt’s narrative, he mentioned all of the students of color sharing one corner office that did not have any windows. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts also include physical space and the messages that are projected through both the use of space and the assigning of space. The symbolism of isolation and othering is appalling and can detract from a
student’s sense of belonging both within their academic program as well as within their institution. By placing students in areas of visibility and with diversity, programs can more intentionally portray an investment in inclusion.

Ongoing development of faculty and administration is also critical as student populations are becoming more diverse. The American Council on Education recently released a report focusing on this area of research. The report found that students were more likely to encounter people of color in service roles than in faculty or leadership positions (Race & Ethnicity in Higher Education Report, 2019). Additionally, while people of color represented less than one-fifth of senior executives, 42.2% of service and maintenance staff and one-third of campus safety personnel were people of color. This evidence makes it more imperative that faculty and administration prepare for developing students from minoritized backgrounds. Through both Kyle and Shawn’s narratives, we were able to deduce that White faculty often struggled with forming authentic relationships with and supporting their students in ways that aligned with their identities. Training and development that aid faculty and administration in understanding their identities as well as how their identities intersect with and students in predominantly White spaces is critical to minimize attrition in graduate programs.

**Institutional Support**

Lastly, as it relates to universities and their efforts with alleviating stressful boundaries and supporting graduate students of color, one area of improvement would be creating a strategic plan that aims to diversify graduate faculty and student populations across the institution. Specifically, at institutions that are historically White and are also located in predominantly White geographic regions, universities hold the power to construct their own environments of
support. While increasing numbers alone may not alleviate tensions and isolation, it is a starting point for many graduate students and faculty to be able to recognize that they are not alone.

Furthermore, providing more outlets across campus that address mental health and wellness among graduate students is critical considering the research on graduate students and the development of psychiatric disorders. Hiring more case managers, therapists of color, and administrators who are focused on graduate student wellness as well as creating more opportunities to empower students in their health will ultimately yield more positive outcomes for graduate and doctoral students. Mental health disorders are on the rise at postsecondary institutions, and addressing our most vulnerable populations in the academy is of critical concern.

Lastly, by including graduate students of color in the narrative of university-wide strategic planning, postsecondary institutions can and will leverage an opportunity to cater to a population that often feels distanced from the larger community. The majority of participants in my study described being detached from the larger institution. While this is understandable considering the nature of the doctoral experience, there is much room to engage a more academically advanced, innately more mature, and informed population who, generally speaking, holds a more robust understanding of academic and institutional pitfalls that could be improved.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study addressed stress and coping among native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions. I chose to limit the study to native Black students to capture students whose parents and grandparents were born in the United States in hopes of developing a richer narrative around race in America, to capture an inter-generational Black American narrative, and to address a gap in the literature on Blackness and racial identity.
Furthermore, I sought to elevate the narrative of the native Black American male and his successes within postsecondary institutions and terminal degree attainment. Lastly, this population of doctoral students is severely underrepresented nationally and even more isolated at historically White institutions. Highlighting how they have persisted despite structural boundaries adds to the research of what is needed for marginalized and underrepresented populations to excel in all-White environments.

Future researchers can expand on this study by examining other marginalized identities and conducting a comparative analysis of experiences. While they may share similar encounters, the research adds to and legitimizes the need to address any deficits that may be present within Ph.D. programs at historically White institutions. Additionally, it will create a fuller, more comprehensive narrative of the marginalized Ph.D. student experience. Marginalized and underrepresented identities can be explored through various identity models such as Cross’ Five Stage Model of Racial Identity Development or the Multidimensional Model of Black Identity. Through models that are focused on identity of participants, the nuanced narrative of Blackness, marginalization, and underrepresentation can be explored more in depth and construct a more nuanced narrative of how identity implicates outcomes. For example, Roberts, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, and Zimmerman’s 2003 study explored direct and indirect relationships among racial identity, racial discrimination, perceived stress, and psychological distress among African American young adults. Their results demonstrated a relationship between various racial identity variables and African American psychological functioning; however, the interesting piece is that their results suggested that individuals whose race served more central roles in their lives were more likely to report lower levels of psychological distress. The results were aligned with previous studies that used the Racial Identity Attitude Scale and revealed that more robust
identification with race was associated with better mental health. These findings further expand upon Cross’ argument that the primary function of an internalized racial identity for African Americans is to shield individuals from the destructive implications of racism on their psychological welfare (Cross, 1998). Additional research in this area can lend itself to understand the potential protective events racial identity has on doctoral students throughout their academy journeys.

Both Tables 6.1 and 6.2 can also be used as the foundation for a potential intervention study within future research. By providing students with both external-facing and internal-facing questions, researchers can equip participants with entry-level preparedness through each phase of their doctoral experience. Additionally, such an intervention creates space for intentional coaching and guidance, which may impact persistence for marginalized and underrepresented doctoral students. Furthermore, research in this area can be delineated across doctoral program types and among post-doctoral scholars to explore and test for differences in needs of students.

Researchers conducted an adjacent systematic review in 2016 exploring the prevalence of depression, depressive systems, and suicidal ideation among medical students. Their review unveiled that of the 195 studies involving 129,123 medical students in 47 countries across the world, 27.2% of students screened positive for depression; 11.1% also reported suicidal ideation while enrolled in medical school. The review also revealed that 15.7% of the 27.2% of students who screened positive for depression reportedly sought treatment (Rotenstein, Ramos, Torre, Segal, Peluso, Guille, Sen, & Mata, 2016). Expanding on evidence such as this through explicit narratives and long-term qualitative analyses be beneficial for both faculty and administration as they address topics of mental health, inclusion, equity, attrition, and support within their
academic programs. An added layer to this would be to explore institutional and program type and differences that may be experienced based on those factors.

The last recommendation is to explore the experiences of marginalized faculty with their students at HWIs. As the advisor-mentor relationship was unique to each participant, expanding upon the expectations and experiences from a faculty perspective will also add to the literature on identifying, forming, and sustaining these types of relationships. The faculty role in the academy is highly distinct from that of the student, and thus, can create an entirely separate narrative of what faculty require to thrive in their multiple identities and within their responsibilities to their university. Multiple participants in my study also indicated switching academic advisors more than once, exposing students to a potentially stress-inducing event. From the faculty perspective, this could be a red flag for faculty who are responsible for supporting advisees who have recently lost an advisor and can also implicate an increased burden on current faculty if the previous advisor departed the institution, conceivably leaving advisees with a sense of abandonment or isolation. These minutia in a faculty-focused study conducted longitudinally can be investigated simultaneously through the student, advisor, and student-advisor narratives. Each player in that relationship has separate milestones, responsibilities, and overall experiences that require cohesive intersection, which naturally necessitates investigating the continued evolution of those roles and subsequent stressors that accompany each.

**Conclusion**

The current study explored the stress and coping narratives of nine native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions. While there is little to no research on this population at the graduate level, the study expands on the success of the Black male within postsecondary institutions, particularly within Ph.D. programs. The storied
experiences of these men painted a picture of upward mobility through an institutional structure that was not created with their identities in mind. Yet they are successfully triumphing through their processes despite the burdens the journey endorses along the way. While stress and coping are inevitable at the doctoral level, maintaining identity, surrounding yourself with the right people, utilizing your power, and growing in the process have all surely proven to supplement coping and add to the narrative of persistence.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED VIDEO INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participant’s Pseudonym:   Location:

Gender Pronouns:           Scheduled Time:
Interviewer/Researcher: Chelsea A. Doub   Start Time:
Date:                     End Time:

Instructions:
Italic words are the exact script to be followed by the interviewer/researcher. Probes indicate supportive language to aid the interviewer/researcher with diving deeper into the participant’s statement and subsequent narrative.

Interviewer/Researcher: Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today! I am excited about the opportunity to learn more about your story and hope that I will be able to illuminate it even further through my research. As you know, the focus of this study is to explore the native Black American male Ph.D. students’ journey as well as broaden my understanding of how this population approaches stress and coping at historically White institutions. For clarification purposes, native Black American is defined as a person whose parents and grandparents were both born in the United States.

All information discussed within this interview will be confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed on any documentation affiliated with this study. No official identities will be used within this study with the exception of a pseudonym to guarantee confidentiality.

Throughout this interview, I will ask you a series of open-ended questions about your experiences. If deemed necessary, there is potential for me to ask you to elaborate or clarify answers or statements. Please do not hesitate to ask for clarification at any point.

Additionally, I will video and audio-record our interview as well as take reflective notes. Following this interview, a third-party transcriber will transcribe this interview. Upon the receipt of the transcription, I will forward you a copy for your records and review.

Lastly, I ask that you do not use specific names of your institutions, people, or program. Please use pronouns when referring to your advisors, colleagues, etc. For example: “at my institution” or “in my program” or “one of my peers” or “one of my colleagues.”

You may choose to end the interview at any point and may decline to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. You may also take a break at any point during the interview. Please let me know if you need further clarification regarding the interview questions. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?
LIVED EXPERIENCES

- Can you please tell me about yourself?
  - *Probe:* Can you illustrate more of your life growing up?
  - *Probe:* How did people in your life play roles in your maturation?
- I have here a template for an autobiographical timeline that starts with birth and ends with present day. The vertical axis indicates subjective appraisal of well-being at each point in your life. In drawing such a timeline, peaks indicate highs/positive times and valleys indicate lows/challenging times. Can you please take a moment to draw your timeline? Following your completion, we will discuss it a bit further.
- Can you narrate what your line means?
  - *Probe:* Can you tell me more about the neighborhood(s) in which you grew up?
  - *Probe:* Tell me more about the people who shaped your personality and character.
  - *Probe:* Tell more about your friends and family growing up.
  - *Probe:* Tell me about how you would describe yourself.
  - *Probe:* Tell me more about how you approached success.
  - *Probe:* Can you add some color to how you handled stressful times?
- Is there anything else you’d like to share about your timeline?

DOCTORAL JOURNEY

- Can you tell me more about your journey in becoming a Ph.D. student?
  - *Probe:* What was your major in college?
  - *Probe:* Was your Master’s degree in a different field (if a Masters was required to be admitted)?
- Why did you choose the institution you are currently attending?
  - *Probe:* Did you actively choose a historically White institution? Why or why not?
- Think back to when you were preparing to begin your doctoral program after you decided where you wanted to attend. Please tell me about your preparatory experience.
  - *Probe:* Were there any people who were influential in your preparation?
  - *Probe:* Did you use any services/companies/preparation tools to prepare?
- Thinking back to your first year, how academically prepared were you on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the most prepared and 1 being not prepared at all?
- Can you tell me about what you enjoy most about your program?
- What does your relationship with your advisor look like?
- How important is mentorship to you during this time?
- Have you developed new mentors (informally or formally) since starting your program? Why or why not?
- Contrarily, can you tell me more about what you find to be challenging about your program?
- Can you tell me what you enjoy most about your institution?
- Can you add more color to what you find most challenging about your institution?
  - *Probe:* How does this institution compare to your undergraduate institution (if different)?
  - *Probe:* What does the faculty makeup of the institution look like?
• Can you think about a stressful time during your program that sticks out to you?
  o Probe: How did you cope through that situation?
  o Probe: What coping mechanisms helped?
  o Probe: What coping mechanisms needed improvement?
• Can you tell me about a time when people around you (faculty, peers, friends, family, etc.) helped you cope with stress?
• Can you tell me about a time when people around you (faculty, peers, friends, family, etc.) detracted from your ability to cope with stress?
• What does it mean to you to be a Black male Ph.D. student?
• How have your multiple lenses on life influenced your ability to thrive in your academic environment?
• What do you plan to do post-graduation?
• Is there anything else you would like to share that has not been covered?

*Thank you very much for sharing your story with me!! I will be in touch regarding our focus group meeting.*

The following are additional probes that will be employed as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2003):

• What do you mean?
• I am not sure that I am following you.
• Would you explain that?
• What did you say then?
• What were you thinking at that time?
• Give me an example.
• Tell me about it.
• Take me through the experience.
APPENDIX B

SEMI-STRUCTURED VIDEO FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Location:

Interviewer/Researcher: Chelsea A. Doub

Scheduled Time:

Date:

Start

Time: End Time:

Participant Pseudonym:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in focus group today!

All information discussed will be confidential, and your identities will not be disclosed on any documentation affiliated with this study. No official identities will be used within this study with the exception of a pseudonym to guarantee confidentiality.

Throughout this focus group, I will ask you a series of open-ended questions about your experiences. If deemed necessary, there is potential for me to ask you to elaborate or clarify answers or statements. Please do not hesitate to ask for clarification at any point. Additionally, you will participate in a group activity during the second half of this interview.

I will audio-record our interview as well as take reflective notes. Following this interview, a third-party transcriber will transcribe this interview. Upon the receipt of the transcription, I will forward each of you a copy for your records and review.

You may choose to end the interview at any point and may decline to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering. You may also take a break at any point during the interview. Please let me know if you need further clarification regarding the interview questions.

Additionally, I ask that you do not use specific names of your institutions, people, or program. Please use pronouns when referring to your advisors, colleagues, etc. For example: “at my institution” or “in my program” or “one of my peers” or “one of my colleagues.”

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Background Questions
• You each have been provided with a nametag that contains your pseudonym. For audio purposes, let us go around and share our pseudonym and year in your Ph.D. program.
• To begin, let’s first reiterate the purpose of this study, which is to explore stress and coping among native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions.
• What do you believe to be the biggest myth about being a Ph.D. student?
  a. *Probe: Does race play a role in that myth?*
• From your perspective, what has been the most poignant external factor in helping you reach this point in your academic career?
• Contrarily, what has been the most poignant internal factor in helping you reach this point in your academic career?

**Lived Experience Questions**
At this point in the interview, I’d like to learn more about your lived experiences as Black males in the United States.

• Please raise your hand if you are the first in your family to receive a Bachelor’s degree. (researcher counts number of hands)
• Please raise your hand if you are the first in your family to receive a Master’s degree. (researcher counts number of hands)
• Please raise your hand if you are the first in your family to work towards a Ph.D. (researcher counts number of hands)
• What are important elements to “community” at the doctoral level?
• Can you all tell me more about how the university has aided in helping you form your community?
  *Probe: In what ways can they improve?*
• Can you tell me more about major keys to coping with stress at this level?
  *Probe: Storytelling is also strongly encouraged.*

**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**

• Please take a moment to reflect on the number of Black male professors you encountered in a classroom setting from your first year at college until now. Is anyone willing to share that number?
  o  *Probe: Are there are any further thoughts about these numbers?*

• Racism is defined by Parsons, Bulls, Atwater, Butler and Freeman as:
  o “A hierarchical superior-inferior relationship among races that is established and maintained by power enacted through social and institutional practices (Bonilla-Silva 1997). The hierarchical superior-inferior relationships are founded on perceived genetically-based differences, visible differences consciously and subconsciously believed to be linked to socially relevant abilities and characteristics (van den Berghe 1967). These differences are considered a
legitimate basis for the arrangement and positioning of groups in society (Byng 2013).”

- Please raise your hand if you have experienced racism at any point in your educational trajectory. (researcher counts number of hands) Is anyone willing to share a story with us?
- How frequently do you think about your race as a Ph.D. student?
  
  *Probes:* How do you cope with those thoughts?
  
  *Probes:* Who are people to help support you through moments of perceived isolation?
- How frequently do you think others (faculty, colleagues, friends, etc.) take notice of your race as a Ph.D. student?
  
  *Probes:* Why?
- What does inclusion mean to you as a doctoral student of color at a historically White institution?

**General Concluding Questions**

- Based upon your experiences, what advice would you give to Black males looking to earn their Ph.D.?
- How do you think historically White institutions can foster more inclusive environments for doctoral students of color?
- Do you have any concluding thoughts you would like to share?
APPENDIX C

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Title of Study: Stress and coping among native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White universities: A narrative analysis
Principal Investigator: Chelsea Doub
Faculty Sponsor: Joy Gayles, Ph.D.

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of [complete this sentence with a few words describing the purpose of your investigation].

You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office as noted below.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress and coping experiences. The target population is Ph.D. doctoral students at historically White universities. Through analyzing the narratives of native Black American male Ph.D. students, the goal of this study is to better understand the experiences and circumstances that shape their stress and subsequent coping.

Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?
In order to participate in this study, you must:
- Be at least 18 years of age
- Self-identify as native Black American (Black parents and Black grandparents both born in the United States)
- Self-identify as male
- Be at least third-year standing in an accredited Ph.D. program in the United States
- Enrolled Full-Time as a Ph.D. student at historically White institution

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
1. Read and sign this informed consent form for an in-person interview
2. Complete an online demographic survey ~7 minutes
3. Participate in one in-person ~60 minute interview in a location at the choosing of the participant or a neutral location chosen by the researcher if the participant does not have a preference; audio recording will occur
4. Receive transcription of data via NC State Google Drive for your review
5. Return transcription back to researcher
6. Request sent regarding your participation in a future focus group

During the in-person focus group encounter, you will be asked a series of questions regarding your experiences as a native Black American male Ph.D. student in the United States. You may ask any questions about this study prior to or during your participation. Your interview will be recorded using two tape recorders to ensure quality recordings. Interview data will be transcribed verbatim. Following the interview, the principle investigator will provide you a copy (shared via NCSU Google Drive) of the transcription for your review. At that point, you will be permitted to provide edits or additional feedback on your transcripts.

**Location:** The in-person interview will take place at the participant’s location of choice

**Length of Study:** The study is expected to conclude within one of the date of the concluding focus group.

After all data are collected and transcribed, the researcher will use the information to conduct a narrative analysis. Through this study, the researcher will check for validity by providing preliminary findings to you as well as a copy of final findings for your review. If there is a need to change collected data based on participant feedback, I will edit data per the participant’s needs.

All data collected may be used in future publications, talks, and presentations by the researcher. In providing your consent to participate, you are granting permission for the researcher to use your narrative in multiple settings related to this research and for potential future publications.

**Risks and Benefits**

In this study, the researcher will ask questions regarding your experiences as a Ph.D. student. However, no data will be collected regarding the name of the Ph.D. program in which you are enrolled, the university you are attending, nor any other demographic area that could jeopardize your academic standing as a student.

This could potentially arouse emotional distress as you reflect on positive and negative experiences through your enrollment. You have the choice to stop or end your participation at any time. Personal identifiers will not be shared in future publications, talks, or presentations of this study. You are also strongly encouraged to seek counseling/therapy support should you experience any adverse emotional, mental, or psychological responses.

Direct benefits of your participation could include further understandings of how you have grown in your coping and development as a native Black American male and as a doctoral student. The proposed study will also add to the growing body of literature examining mental
health among marginalized and graduate student populations in the United States. This narrative analysis will also provide additional information on how to better support students from these populations. Through this research, there is potential for participants to increase their self-awareness regarding their internal and external stress and coping experiences while enrolled as a Ph.D. student.

Confidentiality

Study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by the law. Digital data will be stored in a password protected external hard drive and stored in a safe. Handwritten notes and reflections will also be stored in the safe. No reference will be made in either oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants to mask their identities, and university affiliations will not be noted. Should the names of individual institutions be mentioned through either the interview or focus group, a pseudonym for those institutions will also be used.

Compensation

Once you complete all aspects of the study, you will receive a $40 Amazon eGift card. Compensation will not be provided for participants who withdraw from the study prior to its completion. Full participation of this study consists of participation in both the interview and focus group.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Chelsea Doub, at cadoub@ncsu.edu or (717) 576-6967.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB Office via email at irb-director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1.919.515.4514. You can also find out more information about research, why you would or would not want to be in research, questions to ask as a research participant, and more information about your rights by going to this website: http://go.ncsu.edu/research-participant

Consent to Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Participant's signature____________________________________ Date____________

Investigator's signature_____________________________________ Date ___________
APPENDIX D

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH FOCUS GROUP

Title of Study: Stress and coping among native Black American male Ph.D. students at historically White institutions: A narrative analysis
Principal Investigator: Chelsea Doub
Faculty Sponsor: Joy Gayles, Ph.D.

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of [complete this sentence with a few words describing the purpose of your investigation]. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those who participate. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above or the NC State IRB office as noted below.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this narrative study is to explore how native Black American male Ph.D. students narrate their stress and coping experiences. The target population is Ph.D. doctoral students at historically White universities. Through analyzing the narratives of native Black American male Ph.D. students, the goal of this study is to better understand the experiences and circumstances that shape their stress and subsequent coping.

Am I eligible to be a participant in this study?
In order to participate in this study, you must:
- Be at least 18 years of age
- Self-identify as native Black American (Black parents and Black grandparents both born in the United States)
- Self-identify as male
- Be at least third-year standing in an accredited Ph.D. program in the United States
- Enrolled Full-Time as a Ph.D. student at historically White institution

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
1. Read and sign this informed consent form for video focus group
2. Participate in one video (~120 minute) focus group; video and audio recording will occur
3. Receive $40 Amazon card for participation in study
4. Receive transcription of data via NC State Google Drive for your review
5. Return transcription back to researcher

During the video chat interview, you will be asked a series of questions in a group of four to five males regarding your experiences as a native Black American male Ph.D. student in the United States. You may ask any questions about this study prior to or during your participation. Your focus group will be recorded using video recording and an external audio recorder to ensure quality recordings. Focus group data will be transcribed verbatim. Following the focus group, the principle investigator will provide you a copy (shared via NCSU Google Drive) of the transcription for your review. At that point, you will be permitted to provide edits or additional feedback on your transcripts.

**Location:** The focus will take place online via Zoom video conferencing

**Length of Study:** The study is expected to conclude within one year of the date of the concluding focus group.

After all data are collected and transcribed, the researcher will use the information to conduct a narrative analysis. Through this study, the researcher will check for validity by providing preliminary findings to you as well as a copy of final findings for your review. If there is a need to change collected data based on participant feedback, I will edit data per the participant’s needs.

All data collected may be used in future publications, talks, and presentations by the researcher. In providing your consent to participate, you are granting permission for the researcher to use your narrative in multiple settings related to this research and for potential future publications.

**Risks and Benefits**

In this study, the researcher will ask questions regarding your experiences as a Ph.D. student. However, no data will be collected regarding the name of the Ph.D. program in which you are enrolled, the university you are attending, nor any other demographic area that could jeopardize your academic standing as a student.

This could potentially arouse emotional distress as you reflect on positive and negative experiences through your enrollment. You have the choice to stop or end your participation at any time. Personal identifiers will not be shared in future publications, talks, or presentations of this study. You are also strongly encouraged to seek counseling/therapy support should you experience any adverse emotional, mental, or psychological responses.

Direct benefits of your participation could include further understandings of how you have grown in your coping and development as a native Black American male and as a doctoral student. The proposed study will also add to the growing body of literature examining mental health among marginalized and graduate student populations in the United States. This narrative analysis will also provide additional information on how to better support students from these
populations. Through this research, there is potential for participants to increase their self-awareness regarding their internal and external stress and coping experiences while enrolled as a Ph.D. student.

Confidentiality

Study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by the law. Digital data will be stored in a password protected external hard drive and stored in a safe. Handwritten notes and reflections will also be stored in the safe. No reference will be made in either oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants to mask their identities, and university affiliations will not be noted. Should the names of individual institutions be mentioned through either the interview or focus group, a pseudonym for those institutions will also be used.

Compensation
Once you complete all aspects of the study, you will receive a $40 Amazon eGift card. Compensation will not be provided for participants who withdraw from the study prior to its completion. Full participation of this study consists of participation in both the interview and focus group.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Chelsea Doub, at cadoub@ncsu.edu or (717) 576-6967.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact the NC State IRB Office via email at irb-director@ncsu.edu or via phone at 1.919.515.4514. You can also find out more information about research, why you would or would not want to be in research, questions to ask as a research participant, and more information about your rights by going to this website: [http://go.ncsu.edu/research-participant](http://go.ncsu.edu/research-participant)

Consent to Participate

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Participant's signature_______________________________________Date___________

Investigator's signature____________________________________Date ____________
APPENDIX E

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TIMELINE