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Towards an Understanding of Race and Academic Achievement in the Lives of African American Students

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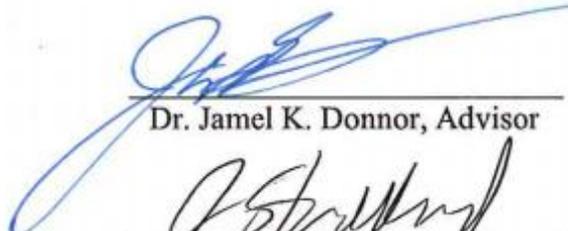# Towards an Understanding of Race and Academic Achievement in the Lives of African American Students

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from
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by

Mary Grech

Accepted for _High Honors_
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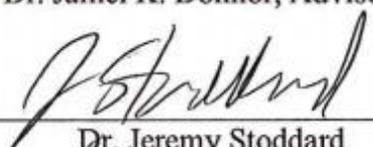
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<u>Chapter One: Introduction and Positionality Statement</u>

The purpose of this honors thesis was to explore the nature of African American student experiences with race and education. More specifically, I sought to explore the role of raci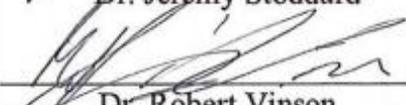al identity in these experiences, whether academic achievement was ever associated with being White or "acting White," and if these potential associations affected student attitudes, decisions, or behaviors.

To study this topic, I started by reviewing relevant literature, including public discourse related to Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu's notion of the "burden of 'acting White'." Their theory posited that in some situations, Black students would avoid engaging in certain behaviors, often which were necessary for academic success, because they were labeled as "White." Their work spurred much discussion about the role of race in African American students' experiences, especially in regards to influences from parents, peers, and teachers, in addition to debates about the most appropriate theories and methodologies to use when studying minority educational experiences. I chose to employ social constructivist theory, which approaches research by focusing on the process of creating and assigning meaning to one's subjective reality, and phenomenological research methods. These methods included interviewing fourteen undergraduates of African descent about their lived experience with the phenomenon of race in educational settings. Questions were designed to be semi-structured and open-ended to allow the participants' responses and my relevant inquiries to guide the conversation, rather than testing for a specific theory or pattern.

As the primary researcher, I became interested in this topic as the result of my work as a tutor and mentor for low-income, predominantly African American students in a small, southern town where I attended college. Because of these experiences, I developed a passion for education inequality and my coursework steered increasingly towards related Anthropology, Community Studies, Sociology, Africana Studies, and Education classes. A concept that recurringly emerged from my service work and academic pursuits was the necessity and importance of cultural competence when working with other community members or students. I recognized that the extent of my interactions with African American students and peers and my understandings of their experiences with culture, education, and society were limited because of the predominantly White educational institutions I attended and because of my own racial identity. Race was therefore not only a topic of great interest to me, but also something I noted as important to explore in order to best serve the students with whom I was working.

I was additionally motivated to pursue this topic because of my future professional role as an elementary school teacher in a low-income, urban school district in the Midwest. I recognized the importance for teachers, whether or not they share a similar racial background to their students, to understand the specific social and cultural reality of each student so that they can best design learning opportunities that respect, build upon, and incorporate the individual student's prior knowledge. Teachers must also be aware of the processes used by students to continually construct the realities in which they choose and act upon their approach to education and the role of the teacher in those processes and constructions. Therefore, it is

important to me to gain a richer knowledge of African American students' individual experiences with race and academic achievement in order to fulfill my role and satisfy my interests as a scholar, future teacher, and member of society.

It is from this place of high personal and professional investment in the success of African American students that I chose to pursue this research. I hope to focus the wider, ongoing conversation about African American academic achievement and educational experiences on the individualized nature of students' experiences with this phenomenon. The philosophical assumptions, personal background, and personal and professional motivations I bring to this study are concepts that I have continued to consider and reflect upon throughout the research process. By stating them for the audience, I invite them to do the same as they read the study and construct their own evaluative reality from its contents.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Historical Context for Ogbu's Work

The "achievement gap" is commonly used to refer to the disparity in levels of academic achievement and attainment between students of different races, socioeconomic classes, and genders. While the term first appeared in the 1960's, the issues it refers to have persistently plagued the United States educational system since our nation's colonial origins (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.5). Because of the oppressive treatment and lack of educational opportunities for minority racial groups, the negative effects of education inequality on these groups have persisted through the generations (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p.5). After *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, equal education to all children was guaranteed by law. However, the collection and analysis of national student test score data in the 1960's proved that education inequality was still statistically significant (Sadovnik, 2013, p. 372-373; O'Connor et al., 2006, p. 1). These results made the "gap" a proven and prominent issue in American society that still remains today (Sadovnik, 2013, p. 372-373; O'Connor et al., 2006, p. 1). Finding ways to raise the academic performance of minority students is important to many stakeholders, including public officials, future employers, school administrators, teachers, parents, and, most importantly, the students themselves, as their performance will affect the economic, political, social, and cultural environment of our nation in the years to come (Horvat, 2006; Buck, 2010).

A surge of research, policy making, and educational practice has focused on finding ways to create more equal educational opportunities and experiences for

children of all races. Many of these studies focused on structural factors, such as school resources and the impact of the school environment on student learning. However, in 1966, the Coleman Report stated that "the organizational differences between schools were not particularly important in determining student outcomes when compared to the differences in student-body compositions between schools" (Sadovnik, 2013, p. 372-373). While the study's purpose was to rationalize policies that would increase federal funding for schools attended by mostly minority students, it seemed to suggest that "peer group association could be more important than the number of books in the library" (Sadovnik, 2013, p. 372-373; Buck, 2010, p.29). The Coleman Report additionally concluded that "the critical role of the family" was more significant in the "transmission of educational advantage or disadvantage" than the role of the school (Sadovnik, 2013, p. 372-373; O'Connor et al, 2006, p. 7; Buck, 2010, p. 29). In the second half of the 20th century following the publication of Oscar Lewis' Culture of Poverty Theory, scholarly interest turned toward the culture of minority racial groups and communities of low socioeconomic status (Sadovnik, 2013, p. 445). Work similar to the Coleman Report proposed that many of the social "ills" experienced by African Americans were sourced in Black families, communities, and cultural norms (Horvat, 2006, p. 7).

Following this academic trend of focusing on the cultural or out-of-school influences on education, John Ogbu, a Nigerian-American anthropologist, explored the disparities in educational performance between African American students and those of other racial backgrounds. Ogbu focused on the impacts of outside community and cultural factors on student participation, behavior, and success inside

the structure and environment of schools. It is important, however, not to immediately lump Ogbu's actual theoretical contributions with contemporary deficit-minded theories or the popular misinterpretations and misuse of his scholarship that blame the achievement gap on low-income students of color themselves (Foley, 2008, p. 225; Fordham, 2008, p.227; Spencer and Harpalani, 2008, p.222; Akom, 2008a, p. 252). While his predecessors and some contemporaries pushed forth theories about biological differences in intelligence, cultural difference and deprivation, and social reproduction, Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model was instead his attempt to acknowledge the important role that both structure, stemming from cultural and societal systems, and individual agency play in shaping one's experience (Horvat, 2006, p. 6, 9-10). That said, critical analysis of his work still demonstrates ways in which his ideas could represent a cultural deficit model.

      I chose to begin my literature review with Ogbu's work because of its notable presence in research related to African American students and education and the complexity of the debates it provoked.

The Cultural-Ecological Model

   The purpose of Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model (see diagram in Appendix A) is to provide a framework to study the variety of interlocking factors that affect minority education (Ogbu, 2008, p. 11). Ogbu begins by separating the issues affecting the performance of minorities in schools into two parts: (1) "the system" which consists of societal and school factors, and (2) "community forces" which consists of dynamics in the minority's community (Ogbu, 2008, p. 11, 12). Ogbu's system factors include educational policies (at all levels of government and ranging from segregation

to funding, staffing, and other resources), the in-school and classroom treatment of students (such as teacher expectations, curriculum, assessment methods, and tracking), and the rewards given to minority students for educational achievement (employment and wages) (Ogbu, 2008, p. 11, 12). Community forces are described as "the dominant patterns of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in the domain of education that are found in minority communities" (Ogbu, 2008, p. 13). Ogbu includes these factors to explain how the discrimination affecting system factors does not fully explain the differences in educational experiences between different minority groups (Ogbu, 2008, p. 13).

According to the Cultural-Ecological Model, four components make up the community forces on minority education (Ogbu, 2008, p.13). The first is the "frame of reference for comparisons" which differ between voluntary and involuntary minorities. The distinction between the two groups is a central argument behind many of Ogbu's explanations and theories (2008). Ogbu concludes that voluntary minorities, immigrants who chose to come to the United States, view their educational situation more positively because they chose it over the system and economic opportunities they decided to leave (Ogbu, 2008, p. 13). On the other hand, he sees involuntary, non-immigrant communities as viewing their experiences more negatively because they compare them to the superior opportunities given to the White middle-class (Ogbu, 2008, p. 13). The second component of the community forces is the instrumental beliefs held about schooling, including whether or not the minority views education as a strategy for getting ahead in society (Ogbu, 2008, p. 13). The third element Ogbu (2008) describes is the degrees of trust or mistrust in schools and

those who control them ("relational factors"), while the fourth component, "expressive factors," is defined as collective identity and cultural or language frames of reference (Obgu, 2008,. p.13).

The Fordham-Ogbu Thesis

The article written in 1986 by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu, "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the 'Burden of "Acting White"'", based on the two years of ethnographic study conducted by Fordham, applies Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model to explore and explain why "instrumental discrimination" is not enough to explain why some other minority groups perform better than African Americans in school (Ogbu, 2008, p. 14). Their conclusion, the Fordham-Ogbu thesis, claims that "societal and school discrimination", "some instrumental community factors (e.g., Black people's perceptions of and responses to lack of job opportunities and inferior education)", and Black oppositional culture "contribute to the low academic performance of Black students at Capital High" (Ogbu, 2008, p. 14; Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p. 596-597, 621). In addition to arguing that oppression inflicted by White racism, inferior schooling, and student's perceptions of a racial job ceiling and limited opportunity structure spurred oppositional "coping devices" and "survival strategies" (one of which is avoiding "acting white"), Fordham and Ogbu (2008) also argue that the maltreatment of African Americans as a homogeneous group created a strong collective identity and importance of "fictive kinship" and its code of behaviors (p. 596-603). Even though the population of African Americans consisted of diverse individuals and communities, White racist policies allowed for the blanket exploitation of the entire race, which according to Fordham and Ogbu,

gave them a common experience to unite around. Additionally, because support was needed to survive the discriminatory practices, a role often reserved for families, the relationships that formed between African-Americans felt familial and out of resistance the enemy. Thus, "acting white", or going against the oppositional cultural frame of reference or "status mobility system" (the socially or culturally approved way of moving up that is valued by the fictive kinship group), involved the risk of offending and losing the important African American support network and community (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p. 597, 601-602). According to Fordham and Ogbu, students at Capital High who wanted to succeed academically dealt with the "burden of 'acting white'" by avoiding behaviors and attitudes labeled as "White", hiding when they did practice these behaviors from their peer group, or engaging in activities or demonstrating attitudes that were regarded as "Black" so as to prevent accusations of "acting White" or devaluing Black identity (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p. 621-622). These actions, found necessary to take in order to avoid negative peer sanctions are, according to Fordham an Ogbu (1986), usually detrimental to academic achievement (p. 16, 594, 621).

Misinterpretations of Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model

The Myth of the "Theory of Acting White"

Because of it's recognition of influences from both structural sources and individual agency on decisions made by African American students, Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model received large amounts of attention, especially after it was employed as a theoretical framework for the 1986 Fordham-Obgu Thesis about "acting white" (Horvat, 2006, p. 10). However, the components, hypotheses, and

conclusions of both bodies of work were often lumped with the popular, misconstrued, and extrapolated reactions to these works as one set of ideas all attributed to Ogbu (Ogbu, 2008, p. xxiv, 4; Foley, 2008, p.225, Horvat, 2006, p. 10). O'Connor et al (2006) traces the development of public discourse and press coverage of the concepts (p. 10-14). Jumping from 25 articles about the ideas in the first five-year period after the release of the Fordham-Ogbu Thesis in 1986 to 22 articles in just 2002 alone, coverage of "acting White" has even reached the international press (Horvat, 2006, p. 10-11). The popular press has also added its own definitions and interpretations to Ogbu and Fordham's work, such as the notion of "the fear of acting white" and increased suggestiveness that Black cultural norms, not inadequate school systems, were to blame for lower performances (Horvat, 2006, p. 10-13).

Similar misconstructions occurred in academic responses to Ogbu and Fordham's ideas. For instance, in the preface and his chapters of the book, Ogbu (2008) explains how all of these sets of ideas have been falsely credited to him as "oppositional culture theory or 'acting White' theory" (p. 4). A perfect example of this is in the beginning of Spencer and Harplani (2008) where the amalgamation of the Fordham-Ogbu thesis, the individual work of Spencer and Harplani, and the Cultural-Ecological Model devalues the original Fordham and Ogbu arguments by constructing an "Acting White Hypothesis" (p. 224-225). The rest of the article then focuses its critique towards this amalgamation of the authors' own construction instead of directly at ideas completely stemming from Ogbu (p. 224-225). While their chapter presents important and well-supported arguments, it is up to the reader to distinguish towards which aspects of the original Ogbu- and- Fordham works the

critiques of the Spencer- and- Harpalani constructed "Acting White Hypothesis" are directed. If the authors had remained focused on the original ideas of Ogbu and Fordham, the study's findings and arguments would be more applicable to the reader and more accurate criticisms.

Another example of misconceptions is presented in the chapter by Bergin and Cooks (2008) in which they create and test the idea of students having a "fear of acting White", an idea they attribute to Ogbu and Fordham, even though its origins are in the reaction of the popular press (p. 147; O'Connor et al, 2006, p. 11). However, Ogbu and Fordham (1986) never used that term and only discuss the "burden of 'acting white'" in their independent and combined publications (Fordham, 2008, p.227). The authors therefore constructed the idea that Fordham and Ogbu (1986) paint all Black students as being fearfully resistant to academic engagement because of low confidence and a debilitating reliance on "fictive kinship" and instead of making a valid critique, and therefore only succeed at disproving an idea of their own creation (Bergin and Cooks, 2008, p. 164). Critics of the work of Ogbu and Fordham misinterpret their arguments by using static, limited, and often self-constructed definitions of the "burden of 'acting white'" and simplistic methodologies that seem to offer feedback, but actually cannot get at the cultural nuances of the issue (Akom, 2008, p. 254, 255).

Oversimplification into only a Cultural Deficit Model

Another potential misinterpretation is that Ogbu's narrowed focus on community forces is that it is only characteristic of a deficit model approach that fails to acknowledge the influences of system forces. Despite the fact that Ogbu discusses

the importance of system factors in his Cultural-Ecological Model and other

publications, he focuses most of his research and writing on community forces (Ogbu,

2008, p.12; Foster, 2008, p.584, 588). Many criticize this "emphasis" as placing the

source of low performance from African American students on the students

themselves or their culture (Farkas, 2008, p. 344; Spencer and Harpalani, 2008, p.222;

Foster, 2008, p.588). Farkas (2008) implies a different take from Ogbu when stating

his finding that oppositional culture is stronger among minority and low-income

students and that it may "be more of a consequence than a cause of poor achievement"

(p. 344). However, Ogbu would not disagree with this statement. While Ogbu chose

to focus on the community forces, his decision was driven by the fact that

"community forces were systematically understudied," his desire to bring attention to

them, and the anthropological and ethnographic practice of studying an abstract idea,

system, and set of cultural values through the lens of specific communities' concrete

responses to and performances of these abstract values (Foster, 2008, p.588).

In his description of his Cultural-Ecological Model, Ogbu makes several

points to dispel misinterpretations of and clearly define his specific theory. For

example, in response to claims that he studied only "acting white" and based all

theories off that observation, Ogbu clarifies that he is instead proposing a *model* that

"can predict the school performance of any particular minority group," not a "thesis

or hypothesis based on a single factor" (Ogbu, 2008, p. 11). Ogbu notes that "acting

white" is only a part of the model – specifically the "expressive factors" – that may or

may not be performed by a minority community and could only maybe be related to

the oppositional frame of reference they may potentially subscribe to (Ogbu, 2008, p.

11, 13). He also responds specifically to criticisms that his focus on African American culture represents his deficit mindset and belief that the issues experienced by students originate in the students and communities themselves. He further acknowledges that the content of his final book is mostly focused on the community forces, specifically expressive factors of the Cultural-Ecological Model – due to the attention they received during his career – but then clarifies that he did explore and argue the importance of the system factors in his earlier (and less popularized) ethnographies and other publications (Ogbu, 2008, p. 12). However, to fully refute accusations of a deficit mindset, Ogbu (2008) needed to show more than just previous research on system factors. Instead, Ogbu (2008) needed to provide an answer as to why he chose to strongly pursue only community factors in future research. In other words, if he had articulated (a) that the model was initially a critical response to earlier and contemporary theories that blamed Black school failure on "genetic factors … or … cultural deprivation" and (b) that the model argues that the attitudes held by some Black students that reduce their levels of academic performance are not inherent in or caused by their race, but are instead influenced by unjust system factors dating back to the beginnings of our nation, it could have been easier to prevent the labeling of Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model and other works as deficit-minded (Foster, 2008, p. 588; O'Connor et al, 2006, p.9-10, 13-15).

Unfortunately, Ogbu's unexplained narrow focus did spur understandable issues of "emphasis and impression" and limited him from exploring interesting and formative *interactions* between the two sets of forces (Foster, 2008, p.584). A related casualty of the attention placed on community forces, partly sparked by Ogbu's work,

was a lack of attention to solving the injustices still remaining in the system and "distrust and suspicion about what schools can and will do" to provide the education low-income and minority students are owed (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 9).

Theoretical Debates Arising from Ogbu's Work

   The assertions made through Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model and its application to data from Fordham's ethnographic research have attracted attention from scholars, policy makers, educators, and the popular media. While much controversy exists over the (often misconstrued and extrapolated) conclusions of the 1986 article, there is some scholarly agreement that the basic framework presented in Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model is problematic. That said, it "offers an important tool for future research on this dilemma" (Mickelson, 2008, p. 367). For example, four major debates have arisen between Ogbu's supporters and his critics:

> 1) Does the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture exist in African American students' educational experiences?
>
> 2) If yes, how much do these two related concepts affect academic engagement? Is the effect significant enough to address with policy?
>
> 3) If yes, what are factors that influence the occurrence and nature of "acting White" and oppositional culture?
>
> 4) What is the best way to study the culture and academic achievement of minority students?

(1) Does the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture exist in African American students' educational experiences?

While many ethnographic or qualitative studies do find the presence of oppositional cultural frames of reference and reports of accusations of the "burden of 'acting White,'" several other studies, many of which are quantitative, fail to find evidence of the phenomenon. For instance, results from Mickelson's (2008) empirical, 15-year-long study of African American students in Charlotte, North Carolina support Ogbu and show that the Cultural-Ecological Model is correct in identifying the two sets of factors that influence student attitudes (p.368-369). Mickelson's (2008) study also shows oppositional cultural frameworks as existent and affecting the school performance and identity perceptions of students who hold them (p.368-369). Additionally, the analysis of a survey of student attitudes in a multi-ethnic high school conducted by Irving and Hudley (2008) demonstrated the existence of cultural mistrust and resistant cultural attitudes as well as the fact that "oppositional identity had an inverse relationship with academic achievement," as predicted by Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model (p. 382, 386).

However, Cook and Ludwig's 1998 analysis and Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey's 1998 analysis of the 1990 National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), show no racial differences between engagement in school behaviors supposedly labeled as "White", such as educational attainment goals and time spent on homework, or in student popularity, and therefore refute the existence of "acting 'White'" (Spencer and Harplani, 2008, p. 225). However, because the existence of oppositional culture and potential labeling of attitudes and behaviors as "White" is a socially constructed phenomenon, its existence cannot be studied using empirical research or tested as a positivist theory (Buck, 2010, p. 40; Creswell, 2013, p. 25). Its existence is situational,

dynamic, and individually experienced (Creswell, 2013, p.76; O'Connor, 2006, p. 14-16). Therefore, whether a study finds "acting white" or "oppositional culture" to exist or not is dependent on the study's specific participants, the researcher's conception of the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture, and the methodology employed.

(2) If the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture do exist, how much do these two related concepts affect academic engagement? Is the significant enough to be addressed with policy?

In an attempt to determine how much the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture should be considered in local and national policy making, scholars and policy advisors heavily debate the extent to which the phenomena actually affect student performance. An interview-based study conducted by Bergin and Cooks (2008) finds that, while students reported knowing about the idea of "acting White," no students admitted that "they had altered their behavior, reduced their effort, or earned poor grades in order to avoid accusations of "acting White"', suggesting that the phenomenon has no effect on student performance (p.164). In addition, Cook and Ludwig's (2008) analysis of the 1990's NELS data reports a similar finding of negligent effects of knowledge of "acting White" on student performance and social standing. While ethnographers may observe and document comments about "acting White," Cook and Ludwig (2008) report that "either these taunts do not inflict especially grievous social damage or high achievement has offsetting social benefits" (p. 288). Finally, Farkas' (2008) reanalysis of NELS and new analysis of many other measures finds that peer group oppositional culture only affected 10% of the Black reading deficit (p.3 42). However, Farkas (2008) also finds that oppositional culture

does "significantly" affect the reading scores of fourth graders who reported subscription to elements of oppositional culture, suggesting a large effect on school performance when existent (p. 342). As evidenced by the contradictory results of the Farkas (2008) study, the extent to which oppositional cultural frames of reference and the "burden of 'acting White'" affect students and groups of students is based on how the mix of present system and community forces combine to influence each individual child. Therefore, quantifying the extent of its effect on one participant group does not capture the potential for influence with other students. Culture does play a role in a student's participation in and attitude toward schooling, so there should be large-scale policies that acknowledge the extent to which local culture can affect student academic engagement. However, as argued by Hillard (2003), policies and procedures regarding the effects of culture on student performance and behavior must be addressed on a local and individualized scale due to the specific and different ways culture influences the unique perspective of every child (p. 158-160).

(3) If the related phenomena do exist, what are factors that influence the occurrence and nature of "acting White" and oppositional culture?

Many scholars debate over which environmental and social factors, such as peer norms, racial make up of school population, or relationships with teachers, contribute to or instigate the existence of the "burden of 'acting White'" and oppositional culture. For example, while Cook and Ludwig (2008) left "peer norms" out of their study and failed to measure the behaviors indicative of these norms, Ferguson (2008) argues for their importance in determining the 'triggers' of oppositional culture (p.290). Ferguson (2008) states that the two conditions needed for the Fordham-Ogbu thesis to

play out (p.290). The first is that "Black adolescents must be faced with different peer norms for academic achievement," and the second posits that "these norms must affect their academic achievement" (Ferguson, 2008, p. 290). Instead of peer norms, Bergin and Cooks (2008) and Farkas (2008) both conclude that the racial makeup of a high school is significantly relevant to the degree of oppositional cultural frameworks and the chance a student would be accused of "acting White"(p. 163; p.334). In both studies, increases in the percentage of Black students also increased the occurrence of both experiences (p. 163; p.334). However, Bergin and Cooks (2008) report that Black students in schools with closer to equal percentages of Black and White students, in comparison to schools with majority African American student population, "appear most likely to be accused of acting White" (p.163). According to the authors, because high-achieving Black students are enrolled in predominantly White Honors classes and therefore have "constant, visible contact" with White students, the other Black students have more opportunities to notice these associations and make comments (Bergin and Cooks, 2008, p.163).

Instead of placing causation in racial makeup, Valenzuala (2008) takes a different perspective, attributing the development of oppositional cultural frameworks and subsequent behaviors on relationships with school administration and teachers (p.503, 504). From her perspective, schools that only promote "aesthetic caring," or a "commitment to ideas or practices the purportedly lead to achievement" – instead of "authentic caring" relationships where teachers and students engage in "sustained, reciprocal" learning – are more likely to have minority populations exhibiting and reporting oppositional cultural frameworks (p. 503, 504). Research on the variety of

factors that can potentially affect the "burden of 'acting White'" and oppositional cultural frameworks is important, but policies and programs designed to address these factors should be created on a local and individual basis in order to account for the great variation between the communities and the individuals dealing with these issues.

(4) What is the best way to study the culture and academic achievement of minority students?

A major debate between the different critics of Ogbu, in which Ogbu also engages, is about whether quantitative or qualitative (specifically, ethnographic) methods are the correct way to study minority education issues. For instance, the statistic, or "scientific, quantitative approach is fueled by positivism which supports that "social scientists should imitate the methodologies of the physical sciences or natural sciences" and seeks to prove factual existence or causality (Ogbu, 2008, p.66). For example, the Cook and Ludwig (1998), the Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998), and the Farkas (2008) studies use quantitative research to see if the experiences ethnographers write about that support Ogbu's theories and the Fordham-Ogbu Thesis are, in fact, experienced by students across the nation and have a statistically proven effect on their academics (Farkas, 2008, p.313).

As positivists, their methodology, language, and goals for the study demonstrate a belief in objective fact and their ability to fully answer the three prior questions in this section. Interestingly, while many qualitative studies have supported Ogbu's work (with some variation from original theories), many quantitative survey-based studies have analyzed data in a way to disprove Ogbu's work (Spencer and Harpalani, 2008, p.225). However, there are many flaws with using broad quantitative

methods to study such a specific and nuanced phenomena, so their negative results cannot be held as fully accurate. For example, Akom (2008a) argues that "researchers who use quantitative, large-scale surveys-even in conjunction with in-depth interviews-misinterpret the 'burden of 'acting White',' in part because some of these researchers have no real conceptualization of the power of autonomous, situational, microanthropological ethnographic analysis" (p. 254). Another issue with quantitative and survey-based research is that the behaviors and sentiments that researchers decide to set as indicators of a belief, value, or attitude held by the participant are based off the etic perspective of the researcher designing the study. Quantitative and non-ethnographic qualitative studies also do not include observations that can serve as reason for choosing indicators or proof that self-reports are correct (Ogbu, 2008, p. 67). Therefore, the validity of indicators selected and studied through quantitative research should be questioned (Ogbu, 2008, p.67).

According to Ogbu, qualitative ethnography is a better option because, while ethnographers begin research with some ideas and hypotheses, they are also "prepared for surprises and to change those ideas" based on what they find and learn during fieldwork (Ogbu, 2008, p. 71). The repeated cyclical ethnographic process involves the collection of data, the analysis, the asking of new questions in response to gaps in knowledge or unexpected results, and the reflection on the biases the researcher brings to the study (Ogbu, 2008, p. 71-72). Ogbu and many of his critics and defenders, including Akom (2008), argue that "ethnography is rigorous, scientific and a more appropriate methodology for studying school engagement and community forces than other approaches" (Ogbu, 2008, p.85).

Critiques of Ogbu's Work

   Ogbu's contributions to the study of minority education do not specifically demonstrate a belief in the cultural deprivation of African Americans and his Cultural-Ecological Model does provide a starting framework for the study of minority student experiences in schooling. That said, I believe his methods of implementing and reporting his studies undermine the agency of his participants and demonstrate an overly homogeneous view of the dynamics found within African Americans' experiences. While his anthropological background explains Ogbu's focus on community forces, Ogbu fails to follow basic tenets of the anthropological approach by neglecting the constant search for microdiversity, presenting a dichotomous view of participation, success, and influences on students, upholding White cultural norms as normative, and employing static ideas of culture and identity.

  For a scholar interested in how individuals frame their experiences, Ogbu does not properly frame his research conclusions within the specific environments in which they were recorded and applicable. For instance, in the 1986 article, Fordham and Ogbu list implications for the "Black community" and "Black youths" in general instead of suggesting changes the school administration of Capital High, specifically, and the local Black leaders could make to help the experiences of the study participants in Capital High (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p. 621-623). Just as racist policies ignored the diversity within the U.S. Black population and applied discrimination homogeneously, Ogbu takes results from one study in one location and

suggests a blanket solution for the African American race. Additionally, Ogbu's second chapter, "*Collective Identity and the Burden of 'Acting White' in Black History, Community, and Education,*" discusses the history of "Black Americans" without accounting enough for the unique history of the many different African American communities and microdiversity throughout the country and by creating a homogenized idea of Black culture (2008, p.29-63; Akom, 2008, p.256; Cousins, 2008, p. 174). If Ogbu sought to study the specific influences of a certain community's dynamics on student attitudes and behaviors, he should have reported his results as true only in that specific context, not as indicative of the entire Black race, and subsequently acknowledged the diversity and agency of the individuals he was studying and trying to help.

In addition, Ogbu diminishes the agency of African American individuals by having an overly dichotomous view of low-income and minority students "in which individuals are either accommodating or resisting, succeeding or failing, involuntary or voluntary" (Akom, 2008b, p. 212). While Ogbu (2008) encounters high-achieving students who are race-conscious, popular, and succeeding in school, he considers them anomalies instead of studying the organic community forces that enable these students' achievements (Foster, 2008, p.582; Witherspoon et al., 2008, p.258; O'Connor, 2006, p. 16-17). Further, Ogbu (2008) either fails to see or mention the historical tradition of African Americans valuing education and the successful leaders that have emerged from the Black population over the course of centuries. This omission could represent his biased search for underachievement because of having low expectations of Black students, which, if true, could demonstrate a hypocritical

relationship between Ogbu's stated goals for research and his methods. Ogbu fails to gather important data on the dynamic and interactive relationship between system and community forces by viewing the two sides of his Cultural-Ecological Model as too dichotomous, even though he argues for the importance of their relationship in his second chapter (Foster, 2008, p.584; Ogbu, 2008, p.75). While anthropology encourages the study of anomalies, "Grey areas," and dialectical interaction, Ogbu seems to bypass these opportunities for insight and instead produces works that "fail to demonstrate the ways in which Black people differentially make sense of and enact what it means to be Black...and posit the agency of Black people/people of color as an effect of their marginalized social positions instead of as a result of themselves" (Akom, 2008a, p.256). As O'Connor et al (2006) states, Ogbu treats race as a static variable, instead of recognizing its "phenomenological, operational, and performative dynamics" (p. 15).

While Ogbu argues that a tenet of ethnographic research is entering the field and data with flexible expectations, Ogbu seems to enter the field with a perspective that White American norms for academic attitudes, behaviors, and performance are the unchallenged normal expectations for children. He never questions that the behavior expected of children from their schools is that of White culture and that following school rules and educational practices has a positive effect on student development. Meanwhile, Downey (2008) does question the scientific validity of comparing attitudes with performances because what they are compared to is completely arbitrary and based on individual perspectives (p.303-304). Therefore, the rubric of what is decided as positive educational participation and practice is completely

created by the person defining the study. In Ogbu's studies, however, "White identity goes unproblematized as the correct identity to adopt or to aspire toward, whereas Black culture(s) are socially exoticized and characterized (at times) through atypical negative behaviors" (Akom, 2008a, p.256). Yet again, Ogbu seems to reduce the agency of African Americans by not acknowledging the validity of the community forces that emphasize educational excellence as original Black norms because of a lack of reflexivity on the personal bias and perspective he brings to his own work (Akom, 2008a, p, 256). His assumption of the White norms of achievement as a benchmark for African American academic achievement is also problematic, as it promotes the idea that African American student's reaching a level of objectively average achievement is a societal accomplishment and diminishes the flow of resources that should be pushing for educational excellence by African Americana (Hillard, 2003, p. 137).

While the Cultural-Ecological Model could accommodate the use of a dynamic definition of culture, Ogbu repeatedly uses a stagnant definition of culture in his studies and writings (O'Connor et al, 2006, p. 15). Ogbu does explain how culture is "configured historically" (Foster, 2008, p.587). However, when examining the case studies of programs effective at increasing the prominence of Black student success in their respective schools (AVID and MAC) and the achievement ideology of the Nation of Islam students, it is the creation, or social construction, of culture that makes them successful (Mehan et al., 2008; McGovern et al., 2008: Akom, 2008 chapter). By constructing a space that encouraged the development of new culture that included peer support practices, "positive, dual frames of reference," and

"reflexive achievement identities," an environment of success for individual students was spread throughout the school (Mehan et al., 2008; McGovern et al., 2008: Akom, 2008). Ogbu's view of culture as static makes his description of the potential for or existence of oppositional culture and the burden of "acting White" seem permanently attributed to all Black communities and therefore unfixable, deficit-minded, deterministic.

Ogbu also limits his participants' agency by holding a similarly limited and static view of identity. For example, even though Fordham and Ogbu (1986) discuss identity greatly, both neglect the formation processes and effects of adolescent developmental stages on the identities, racial identities, attitudes, and behaviors their participants experience and perform (Spencer and Harpalani, 2008, p. 228). Spencer and Harpalani (2008) and Tatum (1999) suggest the use of Cross' Nigresence Framework which includes four stages: the pre-encounter (individuals view the world from the White, Eurocentric perspective), the encounter (individuals begin to change their attitudes after an event that causes them to realize they can never fully be accepted in White culture the way a White individual can be), the immersion-emersion (individuals become more interested in their Black identity, have increased awareness of racism, and sometimes adopt anti-White views), and, finally, the internalization (individuals are more secure with their Black identity and centrally hold the Black frame of reference but do not hold anti-White attitudes) (p. 229). It is important to note that every individual experiences this process differently, at different ages, and recycles through the process at different intervals. Therefore, just as conclusions cannot apply to all African-Americans as a race, conclusions for these

studies cannot be assumed applicable to all in that age group (Tatum, 1999, p.67).

Ogbu and Fordham who mainly worked with high school students, a common age for

adolescents to experience the third stage, immersion-emersion, fail to even consider

the fact that the developmental stage of the adolescents they interviewed could be a

cause for their attitudes and behaviors (Spencer and Harpalani, 2008, p. 233). If Ogbu

and Fordham had consulted developmental psychology and identity formation

processes, they may have had better explanations for the race-conscious, high

achieving students they encountered who may have been experiencing the attitudes of

Cross' fourth stage. The methodological error of extending the attitudes held by high

schoolers, who are commonly experiencing oppositional and collective identity

attitudes related to the racial identity formation process, to the entire African

American race demonstrates a deterministic view of identity (opposition is not just a

stage) and blindness to the diversity and agency of their participants.

While Ogbu's research focus and Cultural-Ecological Model spurred controversy

and critiques among scholars, educators, and policy makers that are often based on

misinterpretations, the topic and framework Ogbu's work provides for future research

and discourse are still important in studying minority education. However, because

Ogbu fails to properly frame the reporting of his results and holds fundamentally

limited views of culture and identity, it is important for future research centered

around this topic and framework to recognize the extent to which his findings can be

appropriately applied to data analysis and solution creation. It is equally as important

to note that replicating and creating new cultures of academic success and pro-

schooling attitudes in African-American communities to address differences in

educational engagement and attainment is not an inorganic or novel idea, but in fact, one that has been practiced resiliently throughout American history by many Black individuals and communities despite the unjust system forces they have endured. However, in order to create more opportunities for more positive, proactive Afrocentric cultures, it is the responsibility of the society who has created and maintained the unequal and prejudiced context in which African American students have resided and gone to school to create initiatives and institutions that demonstrate and promote the historical and present value of African American accomplishment until the context has been changed to value it.

Impacts on My Theoretical Framework

During the literature review process, I paid particular attention to the discourse on the fourth major debate – how to study issues in minority education – so I could use the critiques of Ogbu's work to improve the quality of my honors thesis research. My research sought to answer questions elicited directly from Ogbu's work and the subsequent academic debates, such as whether race or "acting White" played a role in the educational experiences of the participants, to what extent that influenced their academic decisions, attitudes, and behaviors, and what factors influenced the occurance and character of those experiences. Therefore, it was important for me to critically analyze his approach, so that I could build off it, instead of repeat it. By guiding my research with theoretical propositions from Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model, the 1986 Fordham-Ogbu thesis, and the validity of critiques of them both, I explored a similar social phenomena while attempting to incorporate and address some of the critiques of these works.

Specifically, by using a phenomenological approach and social constructivist

theory to guide my research, the results of of the study will be situated in the clear

parameters of the individual experience and recognize the diversity of the sample.

With a nuanced and dynamic definition of culture and identity, I will focus my

analysis on the interactions between factors, including those between system and

community forces and structural and internal influences, as they emerge from the

open-ended questions I ask of participants. Additionally, instead of viewing high-

achieving African American students as an anomaly, the entire sample of participants

will be made up of undergraduate students at one of the most selective research

universities in the United States. This will allow me the opportunity to explore

experiences with race and education, specifically the notion of "acting White," as

well as the dynamics and formation of high-achieving academic identities in

individual African American students (Andrews, 2009, p. 299). With the belief that

these experiences and identities are shaped by interactions with social structures,

cultural norms, and other members of society, I will be able to more deeply explore

the role of parents, peers, and teachers on these phenomena and the actions I can take

as a future teacher to promote academic success in my classroom. Additionally, as

evidenced by many of the studies referenced in this literature review, internal beliefs

and biases play a role in shaping the interactions used to construct one's social reality,

both consciously and subconsciously. Through this research process, I hope to gain a

better self-knowledge of my biases, deeper understandings of the problems I want to

work on, and the details of the solutions I want to be a part of, so that my actions in

the classroom reflect the empowering agency and positive personal potential I believe

is inherent in every individual.

<u>Chapter Three: Research Approach</u>

To explore the role of racial identity and Ogbu's notion of "acting White" in regards to African American students' academic achievement and educational experiences, I chose to use qualitative inquiry methods. Because identity is a highly subjective entity, quantitative methods such as surveys or statistical research, would fail to acknowledge the nuances and personal experiences of the individual in attempts to condense data into generalized categories (Ogbu, 2008, p. 67). Therefore qualitative inquiry, which seeks to find commonalities between individual's experiences but also acknowledges the existence of multiple, subjectively defined realities, offered a more effective approach (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative inquiry was also an advantageous approach because its methodology is designed to evolve with the research, allowing the researcher to change the data collection strategy in order to further pursue unexpected knowledge and gain the best understanding of the topic (Creswell, 2007).

More specifically, I chose to use social constructivism as the theoretical framework for my research. The social constructivist worldview sees individuals as the creators of their own distinct realities, constantly seeking understanding of the world they live in and relies on two philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2007). First, social constructivism is based upon the ontological assumption of multiple realities and establishes that the subjective meanings people develop to construct their reality come about through interaction with the realities of other individuals, societal structures, and historical and cultural norms (Creswell, 2007). It is also reliant on the epistemological assumption that knowledge is known only through the subjective

experience of an individual. These theories informed my decision to seek the participant's perspective as the primary source of data (Creswell, 2007). They were also appropriate to apply to this topic due to the subjective nature of identity and focus on the perceived process of attributing "Whiteness" or assigning other meanings to academic achievement.

I also purposefully chose to use a phenomenological approach for this study because its focus was on understanding the "lived experience of a concept or phenomena", such as experiences with race in an educational setting or the idea of "acting White". According to Creswell (2007), phenomenological research methods are most appropriate for understanding commonalities between individuals' experiences with the phenomenon or one in which a consummation of more detailed understandings of the phenomenon could be used to inform decisions about policies or practices. By studying individuals' experiences with racial identity, the potential association of "acting white" with academic achievement, and the ways these concepts could affect student attitudes, decisions, or behaviors, I hope to use conclusions from my research to shape my future classroom practices, interactions with students of African American decent, and research endeavors.

Data Collection

As recommended by Creswell (2007) for phenomenological studies, I conducted in-depth interviews with participants about their experiences with race and academic achievement. Before beginning interviews, I reviewed relevant literature regarding the notion of the "burden of "acting White" as described by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu (1986). In the critiques of their work and in other literature

related to the formation of a student's racial identity and the impact it has on attitudes, decisions, and behaviors related to their education, some central themes and debates emerged. As discussed in the literature review, these included discussions about the role of parents, peers, and teachers in shaping student experiences with race and academic achievement, whether oppositional culture or the idea of "acting White" actually exist and the extent to which they may affect a student's academic performance, factors that may be related to race that could influence academic motivation, and the most effective methods of studying the culture and achievement of students of color.

In order to further investigate the topics of these debates, I conducted open-ended, semi- structured interviews with fourteen African American undergraduate college students. While questions were designed to ask about topics that arose from the literature review and were asked in a uniform manner in each interview, their open-ended nature allowed for individual participant responses to guide the conversation and prompt follow-up questions. Questions were also designed to gather relevant ethnographic data, such as specific examples of terms or practices and how they were used in context, that would be helpful in exploring the "social *meanings* humans construct and attribute, the *contexts* of particular phenomenon, and the *variances* that occur within them" (Saldana, 2011).

In order to gain a richer understanding of participant experiences, three categories of questions were asked as a part of the interview structure; descriptive, contrasting, and interpretive. The majority of questions regarding the participant's, their family's, and their peers' approaches to education, their interactions with

teachers, and the idea of "acting White" were descriptive in nature, allowing participants to choose the direction of their responses and describe their reality in an unguided way (Merriam, 1998). An example from the study is: *Describe what you were like as a student before coming to WM? Why did you use this description?* Some questions were also contrasting, such as describing their approach to education in direct comparison to peers or asking if they felt as though all students, regardless of race, were treated the same by their former teachers (Merriam, 1998). After participants responded to the descriptive and contrasting initial questions, I asked follow up questions that were often interpretive. These questions asked about specific examples or terms to elicit a more detailed description or to be sure that I properly understood the participants' response. An example of an interpretive question was when I asked, "*What type of behaviors are typically associated with 'acting White'?*", after I had already asked a descriptive question prompting participants to define "acting White" in general. By asking again and about specific behaviors, terms, or anecdotal examples, I was able to check that I had a "reliable" understanding of the participant's initial broad definition.

I also allowed some of my preliminary findings after the first few interviews to guide the addition of emergent interview questions to the basic structure. For example, while I did not initially ask about it, faith was mentioned by a few participants as a source of motivation to persist at academic tasks and was therefore added to the list of questions I asked every participant in the interviews that followed. Questions regarding the role of popularity in experiences with race and decisions about academic engagement, the use of "acting White" by different genders or in the

family context, and the participant's experience with accusing others of "acting White" were also added during the interview process.

Before beginning any interviews, I submitted a proposal for research to the Student Research Institutional Review Board at the research site to ensure that it adhered to ethical standards. I received approval to use the consent form and interview questions attached in Appendix B and Appendix C. Interviews were conducted in lounge areas of the campus center, residence hall study areas, and a residence hall duty office. While I offered suggestions of locations that were open to the public, but also offered quiet and privacy, I allowed each participant to select the location of their interview. Before beginning each interview, participants were given the consent form and asked to read it over before signing. I also asked permission to use the digital microphone to record the interview before beginning. After asking some "warm-up" questions about the participant's background, I verbally restated information from the consent form, explained the purpose of the study and that I would be asking questions about that purpose, and clarified that they could discontinue participation or not answer a question at any time so that participants felt comfortable and were fully aware of their rights.

Description of the Research Site

Barrett University, a state university described as "small, smart, & historic", was chosen as the research site for this study. Established in the late 17th century, Barrett University (BU) has a legacy of accomplished alumni, including ties to many of the Founding Fathers, school traditions, and close proximity to a national historic tourist destination. The university has remained at the top of higher education in the

modern era as well, earning consistent rankings for U. S. News and World Report as one of the top fifty national universities and one of the top ten public schools (U. S. News and World Report, 2014). According to BU's website, all demonstrated financial aid needs of in-state students are typically met each year (Barrett University Financial Aid, 2014).

At the time of the study, undergraduate campus enrollment totaled to 6,271 students (Barrett University Office of Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness, 2013). In the most recently accepted freshman class, 80 percent of admittants were from the top 10 percent of their graduating high school class (Barrett University Admissions, 2014). The middle 50th percentile of their SAT scores was 1270-1460, which is highest range of all of the state's other public universities (Barrett University Admissions, 2014). In the fall semester of 2013, 447 undergraduate students identified as Black or African American out of a total population of 6, 271 enrolled undergraduates (Barrett University Office of Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness, 2013).

The university uses a variety of initiatives, including an professional and student-based admissions staff specialized in multicultural recruitment and biannual overnight admissions events targeted towards prospective students of color, to increase diversity in the student body. Other campus diversity initiatives stem from the Center for Student Diversity which supports 31 multicultural student organizations, including historically Black greek organizations, and offers programming such as extended orientation workshops, multicultural celebrations,

lecture series, a student-to-student mentoring group, and summer preparation programs.

Barrett University was chosen as the research site because of its high academic reputation, its focused diversity initiatives, and my pre-established connections with the student community.

Sampling Technique

The participants solicited for this study were purposely selected, meaning that I purposely sought to interview 16 students, two male and two female students from each of the four undergraduate class years. The choice to balance the sample by age and gender was made out of recognition that students at varying points of their college studies and of different genders may not only have had distinct experiences, but also may reflect in different ways on their K-12 and college careers. For example, freshman students who are in the midst of their first few months at the university can provide fresh insight on the differences between high school and college academic experiences and may reflect more their preparedness for college by analyzing recent high school structures and influences (Clark, 2005). On the other hand, seniors who have spent more time on campus can draw on experiences in which they have adjusted to college academic expectations and may reflect more holistically on how structures and influences, both from high school and college, affected their undergraduate academic approach and therefore their preparedness for the next step in their career (Clark, 2005). After soliciting 16 students, fourteen agreed to participate; two male and two female students from each class year, except for the junior year, in which one male and one female responded.

Because of the number of relationships I already had established with African American students at BU, a "snowball" sampling method was used. A few individuals I was already familiar with were asked to participate in the study and then asked to refer other students that might be interested as well. Most of the students suggested by the initial sample were individuals with whom I had no pre-established relationships. Of the fourteen participants, seven were contacted in my first wave of soliciting and seven were referred to me. After engaging in an in-person conversation or reaching out through a mutual friend to prospective participants, individuals were emailed with a short description of the study and a request to schedule an interview during the month of November. Below is a profile of the participants in this study.

Sampling Profile

<u>Profile of Barrett University Participants</u>

<u>Participant</u>	**<u>Academic Standing</u>**	**<u>Academic Major</u>**
Joy Brown	Senior	Biology Major, Latin American Studies Minor
Carmyn Clarke	Senior	Psychology Major, Africana Studies Minor
John Doe	Senior	Neuroscience Major, Biochemistry Minor
James Baldwin	Senior	Neuroscience Major
Symone Tillman	Junior	Kinesiology Major, Psychology Minor
Klyde Styles	Junior	Sociology Major
Amina Pepperwood	Sophomore	Psychology Major, English Major
Diane Pitts	Sophomore	Kinesiology Major with Public Health Concentration, Gender Studies Major
Phillip William	Sophomore	Government Major, History Major/Minor (still

Clay		deciding)
Christopher Brown	Sophomore	Government Major, Psychology Major
Carmen Cafe	Freshman	Government Major, either Business Major or Africana Studies Minor
Nicole Scott	Freshman	Mathematics Major, but still deciding
Melvin Smith	Freshman	Economy Major, Math Major/Minor (still deciding)
Lonnie Clay	Freshman	Biology Major, Religious Studies Major

Sampling Concerns

As the researcher, I acknowledge several flaws in the participant selection

process. First, there is the issue of "backyard" research, in which a researcher

conducts research in an environment where they already hold another role, (Glesne,

2007, p. 26) and convenience sampling (Saldana, 2011). As an active undergraduate

student at Barrett University, I had varying pre-established relationships with many of

the participants, particularly the seven who I contacted initially for referrals.

For example, of those participants with whom I already had a relationship,

four were former classmates in courses for which race was the primary topic.

Therefore, discussing race in an intellectual sense was a previously exercised part of

our relationship, but because of the encouraged academic nature of classroom

discussion, for most, this was the first time we had discussed race in a more personal

context. Similarly, I established relationships with three of the participants in a

Residence Life setting, as a fellow staff member or as their resident assistant. While

previous conversations about race with these participants were sometimes structured

by staff training exercises or spurred from news stories, their content was

predominantly an exchange of personal experiences. My friendship with the initial

participants made interviews feel more comfortable and most likely prompted more

robust responses to interview questions. Discussions of race did not seem like

something outside of the bounds of or new to our relationship. However, because of

our friendship and the knowledge that future and frequent interactions in classes,

organizations, staff environments, residence halls, social gatherings, and campus

events was essentially assured, participants may have chosen not to share some

experiences or perspectives that they considered too private or potentially influential

on my perception of them. Some participant answers may have additionally been

affected by the fact that I held a leadership role in the environment in which we

initially met or continued to interact, such as a club director, academic program

fellow, or head staff member, even though I would consider my leadership style in

these settings as highly informal. I acknowledge my personal bias in my assumptions

about the closeness and character of each friendship and ways in which it affected

participant answers. Additionally, I acknowledge the bias my previous experiences

with each participant, whether it be memory of classroom comments or presentations,

personal social interactions, social media posts, knowledge of their campus

involvements and achievements, or previous conversations about race, affected the

way I selected, interviewed, and analyzed each participant and their story.

In regards to participants with whom I had no previous relationship, the issue

of "backyard research" is still a concern. Because of participant awareness of my role

as a student who has some overlap in social networks and who they would probably

have interactions with in the future, responses might be biased. Additionally, the way

the study and my role on campus was represented to them by initial participants during the referral process may have influenced their perceptions of the research and way they approached the interview. However, because of the more limited social connections and less probable future interactions, these participants may have had a greater feeling of anonymity which may have affected responses. While these interviews often began more formally, I feel as though participants were relatively open about their experiences and increasingly comfortable as interviews progressed. I have continued to have positive social interactions with all the participants of the study. I acknowledge the personal bias in my assumptions about participant's openness and the positivity of our continued personal relationships. Additionally, I acknowledge the way that these assumptions, the way participants were described to me in initial participant referrals, and my prior knowledge of individual's roles on campus affected the way I selected, interviewed, and analyzed each participant and their story.

Data Analysis

After completing all fourteen interviews, I began the process of transcribing each interview verbatim. This allowed me to re-listen to the interview recording and pay close attention to hesitation, pausing, and inflection. During the transcription process, I began to make some analytic memos about passages or patterns that stood out to me (Saldana, 2011, p. 45). I also reviewed my handwritten notes and analytic memos I had taken during the interview and transferred any information I found important, such as interview location, initial greetings before the recordings, and time of day, on to the transcript document. After completing the first draft of the interview,

I listened to the interview again and read over my transcription to ensure that the transcript was as complete and accurate as possible and that punctuation marking used to represent certain inflections, such as pauses or interrupted words, were used consistently throughout the document.

To ensure validity of the transcription process, I used "member checking" and emailed a copy of the exact document I used for coding and analysis purposes to each participant (Saldana, 2011, p. 135). Participants were asked to approve the transcript and use the software's comment feature to make corrections, clarifications, or elaborations on any parts of the interview. Most participants approved the transcripts without making any comments. Some made corrections about misheard or misspelled names of former schools or teachers, all of which were replaced with pseudonyms before the writing process, and only a few added minor clarifications, elaborations, or corrections. Participants were also invited to choose their own pseudonym (first and last name) so that they could play an active role in the way they were represented in the study. The true identity of the pseudonym is only known by me and the participant who chose it. All fourteen participants responded with a pseudonym and approved the validity of the transcript.

When approaching the coding process of the transcripts, I began by using descriptive coding and reading through the transcripts and underlining phrases that "stood out" or annotating the margins with a keyword that described the passage (Saldana, 2011, p.104). After transcribing a few interviews, I used "expert checking" to ensure the validity of my process by comparing the codes I had extracted and assigned to those created by Professor Jamel K. Donnor, the director of my thesis and

outside expert. Professor Donnor read through all of the interview transcripts and offered input on coding themes and patterns to pull from the data.

After reading through the first half of the transcripts and creating an initial Master code list, I re-coded some of the first interviews with codes that had either broadened or narrowed since I had originally assigned them. While I generally allowed codes to "emerge" from the data, I was also particularly attentive to passages that related to my research questions. After creating the master code list, which was checked by Professor Donnor, I "chunked" codes that were more broadly related to each other into "meaning units" or themes (Creswell, 2013, p.193). For example, "Mother's Role" and "Father's Role" could be "chunked" under "Parents' Approach to Child's Education", which itself could be chunked with other codes under "Familial Influences".

I also reviewed the transcripts with the components of Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Model, the 1986 Fordham-Ogbu Thesis, and subsequent academic commentary and critiques in mind. This process allowed me to fulfill part of my research goal of evaluating the theoretical propositions of these works and usefulness of these models in the study of minority education experiences. While I annotated when a passage related to this literature, I did not specifically code the transcripts according to Ogbu's models or the critiques of his work.

<u>**Chapter Four: Research Findings**</u>

In order to explore African American experiences with race and education, I focused specifically on the role of racial identity, the idea of "acting white", and the influences these phenomena could have on student academic achievement or educational experiences. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings from my study that addressed the research questions guiding this study, while considering the theories and critiques of Ogbu and Fordham presented in my literature review.

In the first section, I will discuss my participants' responses regarding the dynamic process of developing their racial identity. I will then focus on how studying the dialectical interactions between system and community forces leads to more complicated understandings of African American students' experiences with race in educational settings and the importance of human actors in defining and carrying out their influences. In the following section, I will discuss the significance of parents as one of the most influential human agents in shaping their child's approach to education. Finally, I will examine the idea of "acting white" in detail in order to demonstrate how student agency contributes to the diversity of the lived experience with a single phenomenon or concept.

Formation of Racial Identity: An Individualized and Dynamic Process

A major critique of Ogbu's work was his limited and static view of identity (Spencer and Harpalani, 2008, p. 228). According to Spencer and Harpalani (2008), Ogbu neglected studying the process of forming one's racial identity, therefore perpetuating ideas that African American identities are uniform and inherent (p.228). Therefore, when exploring the role of racial identity in student experiences and

analyzing the interviews, I specifically sought out the factors that shaped the dynamic development of each participant's racial identity. While every participant uniquely experienced this process and interacted differently with the influences that shaped their identity, some commonalities did emerge. However, even with common factors, diversity of experience occurred.

For example, many participants stated age as a factor in when they became aware of their race. However, the age at which they felt as though their racial identity was developing and the reasons why it developed in that way at that age were different for each participant. Phillip, a sophomore who attended a predominantly White private school and whose father is a pastor, noted, "I don't remember a time when I was not aware that I was Black". Klyde, who attended diverse public schools in a large metro area, said that he started noticing differences in TV show or music preferences during elementary school playdates. However, the majority of participants noted that it was in middle school that they started to understand and construct meaning around race.

That said, the reasons that these participants named middle school as a period of heightened racial identity development varied. In Carmen Cafe's town, all the elementary schools combined into one middle school, meaning that students were often in situations where they didn't know anyone. According to Carmen, who reported realizing she was Black after watching a movie about Martin Luther King, Jr. in preschool, explains that when all the faces in the room are new, "you gravitate to the one similarity that you may have. And, most of the time, that is race". Similarly, Christopher said that he noticed his peers becoming more aware of the idea of race

and racial stereotypes in middle school because they were watching more TV and their parents were more likely to discuss the "more detailed aspects of racism" in society. Meanwhile after Melvin moved to the United States from Ghana at age 10, it was in fifth or sixth grade that he started noticing how, "Race was such a thing, or such a huge stigma" in his American community, something he describes as a little shocking after living in a nation where "everyone is Black":

> I was observing and I was like, "Oh my god, there's Black kids and then there's White kids and they're different and you know, like, sometimes they're not". But then, directly after that, you find that you have to like place yourself, so that was even more shocking. You're like, "Where do I go? Do I go with the Black kids, and you know, start tryna be like them or not? Or do I stay independent, like Indie (laughs), like not either".

Similar to Melvin, Symone Tillman reported that her family's move before she entered middle school from a neighborhood that was predominantly Black to a new area with different demographics influenced her perceptions of race.

> I really think it was when I moved because I literally had to change the thought that Black people were like everywhere…I think that I felt like what it was like to be White in the world as a Black student in a predominantly Black area, growing up in a predominantly Black area, and only knowing predominantly Black people. Like our friends were Black, obviously, whenever I visited my family it was all Black people... and I think that is the only understanding of what it's

like to be White in America, and like everything you see is represented

is White people. And that is what my life was for a while. Until I

realized, that's not what the world looks like….at all. And, that was

really bizarre, and that's what I had to be aware of the most.

Even though these findings only discuss some aspects of one factor that

influenced the identity formation process experienced by these participants, they

demonstrate the uniqueness of each individual's experience. This uniqueness refers

not only to the combination or nature of interactions with other factors, such as the

structure of the school system, media representations, parents, and neighborhood

demographics, but also the dynamism of the each individuals' developmental stages.

It is important to note that for most participants, such as Nicole Scott, there was not

one "specific moment" where the realized their race, but instead a continuous process

of constructing the meaning of their racial identity in their lives and the extent to

which those meanings were important to them.

For example, John Doe was aware of race and that it could play a role in his

experiences by the time he was living in Togo and was between 4 and 8 years old. He

was playing with a group of schoolmates, none of whom were Black, and after

someone accidentally hit a car with rock, the other children "put all the blame" on

John. He says, "it could be looked at as a good thing because I know how to

respond….when something like that happens", and because it exposed him to the

experiences his brother was only warned about by his father. His father would say

that, "worse comes to worse, he's going to be the odd man out if anything

happens. Like, if he and his friends get into trouble, he's going to be the odd man

out. If it comes to competition, like, business related, with one of his friends, he's

going to be the odd man out. He's going to have to prove that he's twice as good,

actually." However, John also explained that, "these concepts take, a certain amount

of maturity to understand....and, when you're told this as a young kid, you just...like

you almost don't believe it". When John arrived at Barrett University, he noticed his

race differently, partly because of his experiences as a Pre-Med major and the

surprised looks people would react with when he said he wanted to be a doctor and

was, at the beginning of his college career, on the football team. As he worked his

way towards graduation, his understanding of racial identity was again

recontextualized as he started "comparing [himself] based on racial things" and trying

to "one up" his White peers in order to bump up his competitiveness for medical

schools and the job market.

The dynamic process of developing one's racial identity while assigning it

different meanings and roles in the construction of one's reality was a phenomenon

shared by many participants. Understanding that racial identity is not an inherent,

uniform, static attribute that plays a singular, societally-determined role in an

individual's experience is important in recognizing the nuanced, subjective nature of

the topic and the agency of individuals to receive inputs from their environment and

create an output of their own design.

Experiences with Race in Educational Settings: From Dichotomy to Dialectical

Interaction

Just as the formation of identity was a unique, dynamic process for each

participant, their experiences with race in educational settings were also highly

individualized. However, one commonality was that race did play some sort of role in the educational experiences of all participants. These experiences were often influenced by what Ogbu defined as system and community forces in his Cultural-Ecological Model. While I did use this framework as a way of analyzing my data, I was also aware of the critique that Ogbu's work fails to study the ways in which these sets of forces, which he presents in a static dichotomy, can "exist interdependently and constantly influence each other" (Foster, 2008, p. 588). Therefore in my analysis, I not only explored the the various factors influencing African American students' experiences with race, but the dynamic, often "dialectical", way in which these factors interacted with each other (O'Connor et al, 2006, p. 7). Studying these interactions allowed for more complex understandings of the individualized ways in which they shaped the nature of student experiences and emphasized the importance of human actors in defining and carrying out their influences.

Race and Extracurricular Choices

For example, many participants noted that race affected the extra curricular activities students chose to participate in. In some schools, such as Amina Pepperwood's predominantly African American urban high school, opportunities for extra curriculars were limited in comparison to other schools in the region. While schools in the neighboring counties, which were predominantly White, had "a lot more resources….like the Equestrian Club and all these other things we had never even thought about having", Amina's school had less options. Despite these limitations caused by system forces, Amina also noted race playing a role in student choices between the activities that were offered at her school. She explained how "we

always had problems getting people to play soccer...but football was always done, basketball was always done, cheerleading was always a thing". While community forces may have affected attitudes about which extracurriculars were popular or believed to be most useful, and therefore the way extracurriculars were selected by students, system forces may have still had an effect on the origin and formation of those attitudes and beliefs. Amina notes how "soccer was an issue because ...it wasn't offered at a lot of the predominantly Black elementary schools, whereas when I went to [her predominantly White elementary school] it was offered". A similar "exposure issue", as Amina and Phillip referred to it, seemed to play out with other extracurricular activities, such as Model UN, other academically focused clubs, and certain performing arts activities, in the experiences of other participants.

As noted by Melvin, extracurricular activities are important "resume builders for college", and can have significant impacts on the social and academic experiences of student participants. James Baldwin, who played football in high school and during his first two years at Barrett University, found that sports taught him "quintessential lessons" about "discipline, accountability, responsibility, integrity, hard work...that 'Everything you get, you gotta earn'"...and that every detail matters". Therefore, it is valuable to understand how interactions between system and community forces work to shape student decisions about extracurricular activities in order to make sure that students of all races have a large variety of high quality extracurricular opportunities to explore and learn from.

Racial Demographics in the Classroom and Academic Tracking

Another experience that was greatly shaped by interactions between system and community forces, and one that was reported by every participant in the study, was the experience of being one of few Black students, if not the only Black student, in a class environment. Some participants, such as Phillip and Lonnie Clay and Diane Pitts, experienced this phenomenon while attending predominantly White private schools. Others, such as Amina and Carmen Cafe, transferred within the public school system to predominantly White elementary schools in order to have access to more advanced curriculum. Klyde and John discussed instances at Barrett University where they have noticed that they are one of few African Americans in a given class or major. Many participants experienced being the "only Black kid" in a public school classroom and observed that the academic tracking processes which separated advanced students into their own classes and programs demonstrated and perpetuated educational inequalities between races. As described by Klyde, "as you got older, the classes became even more stratified….even socioeconomically based and race-based. The APs would be like all white and you might have a few other ethnicities in there". Melvin noted how at his school "you could probably count on your fingers how many non-White kids were in the [IB] program" and Symone discussed how she was "academically separated from every other Black person in the school" in her advanced courses. When Carmyn Clarke moved from a predominantly Black area to a new city before beginning high school, she was enrolled in the AP (Advanced Placement) classes. When explaining that all her classmates were White, Carmyn noted that,

"I believed my whole freshman year that there were not that many

Black people at my school….I don't know why I thought that because

I was in Choir and there were tons of Black people in Choir. But

because I was with the people in my classes all day, every day and

they didn't look like me, I just didn't notice that when I was around

people [who did look] like me, I was sat in between two people that

didn't"

Both system and community forces have a role in shaping the way racial

demographics of classes are affected by academic tracking and the resulting

participant experiences of being one of few minority students in their classroom. The

influential system forces include the overall policy and practice of tracking, the

standardized tests and other criterion used to decide who is in each tier, and the

differences in curriculum and resources provided to students in each tier. Additionally,

the socioeconomic status of students' families and respective access to economic and

educational resources influence student experiences and stem from societal system

structure designs and operations. Meanwhile, community forces such as attitudes,

held by students, peers, and family members, about the instrumental value of taking

advanced courses and displaying academic behaviors that promote placement in

advanced courses are also at play. When asked to describe the approach to academics

held by their peers, some participants like Nicole Scott reported that while their

immediate friend group was highly motivated, other peers, including but not limited

to African American students did not seem to be "striving to do the best, or they just

weren't doing the best, for whatever reason". Carmen Clarke explained that in her

small town there was a "really big drug scene and gang scene" and that while some students were motivated to continue attending school during sports seasons, many others saw that they could make more money immediately by dropping out. Meanwhile, James shared that he felt that "in a lot of Black communities, there's a lot more emphasis put on being street smart and, like being able to hold your own in that sort of capacity, than being book smart...being a nerd [can be] a waste of time…", a dynamic that he definitely felt played out in his high school with the students who were bussed in from the nearest city.

Most of the effects of these two sets of forces came from their interactions with each other and the way that their interactions affected student experiences and the nature of the forces themselves. For example, Amina describes how the systemic designation of being in the advanced "Academic Corps" in middle school not only affected future system treatments since students in this group were "automatically assumed to be one of the smart kids who were going to college", but also community factors such as which peers they would spend the most time with and the "development of [their] identities" as academics. Similarly Symone reported frustration with the system process of tracking because it publicly labels students and sends a message to the community that "these are the really good ones and you guys are average", something could affect student self esteem. Symone notes that had she been labeled as "average" she may not have pursued the rigorous academic career that she did. While she did not necessarily benefit specifically from the more difficult curriculum in the Gifted and Talented Program, she feels as though she definitely "benefited from being told that I was like, one of the best". Therefore, by studying

how the system forces and community forces influence the effects of each other, it becomes clear that some of the attitudes held by African American students who were not in advanced classes described by Nicole, Carmen, and James are not inherent or always existent in Black culture. Instead they can be seen as the complex products of various communities constructing responses to the system structures and treatments that were supposedly designed to meet perceived community needs.

The Importance of Human Actors

By including interactions between system and community forces as a focus of my data analysis, I found that a major site and source of these interactions were the individual people creating, navigating, interpreting, and altering both sets of forces, something that was not explicitly accounted for in Ogbu's model. By not studying these fluid, but defining interactions, Ogbu seemed to leave out a whole set of influential factors in student experiences with race and education (Foster, 2008, p. 588). The human actors, specifically the people enacting the system's policies and practices and the people expressing their cultural values and worldviews, play an essential role in shaping the nature of student experiences with race and education and the way in which students learn to interpret and respond to these experiences.

For example, in regards to the phenomenon of academic tracking and its effects on the racial demographics of advanced classrooms, it is important to acknowledge school personnel as agents who influenced student experiences. The interactions between their cultural frames of reference and the system procedures they were responsible for enacting sometimes led to discriminatory practices, such as

setting lower expectations for Black students and causing increased rates of disciplinary actions against Black students.

While Ogbu highly considers the cultural attitudes and beliefs brought to the school environment, he seems to leave White norms unproblematized (Akom, 2008a, p.256). However, the biases some school personnel brought to the school environment through their cultural frames of reference are in fact problematic because they limited student growth, and subsequently academic achievement and opportunities for advanced learning. In one example, Amina recalled a White teacher who told the class it was important for them to get an education so they would not become teen moms, work at McDonalds, or fall into fulfilling the negative perceptions of African American students. Because of these beliefs, Amina believed that his curriculum was too easy, and while he probably meant well and thought of himself as helping students at what he perceived was their academic level, the low expectations he held about his students' capabilities did not allow for them to learn and grow as much as they could have with more challenging material.

Similarly, in regards to discipline, Symone described how the "administration watched [her] older brother like a hawk" when her family moved to a predominantly White school district and an area that Symone described as "really racist". Her brother was frequently in trouble for "any little thing he did" and when the administration "found an opportunity to expel him, he got expelled". According to Symone, "they don't really care about those kids...they would just much rather take them out of schools than deal with them". She also believed that the teachers were not used to working with African American students so, "the Black kids were their

problem children, and the administration was trained to watch them….watch the

Black kids". Christopher had similar experiences with his younger brother who was

often suspended from school, even in situations where he had not provoked the issue.

Christopher explains how "They're not helping him, because it's keeping him out of

school", an action that could keep him from learning the material necessary to place

into an advanced track.

While the interaction of system practices and community views actively

created and enacted by these teachers impacted African American students in a way

that may have contributed to perpetuating the common phenomenon of smaller

percentages of minority students in advanced tracked classes, many participants also

spoke of teachers whose actions positively advanced academic achievement for their

African American students. Klyde speaks to the agency and influence teachers had at

his high school:

> The bad [teachers] would separate the smart ones with the not
>
> so smart ones…they didn't know what they were doin' and they would
>
> crush kids' morale, you know like the administration'd say, "This kids
>
> flippin' out, this kids skippin' class, he's wildin' out", but every kid I've
>
> seen came in and tried at least for the first week and so if they're trying
>
> and not understanding the issue, it's stressful. And I mean for some of
>
> these kids it takes a lot of pride and willingness just to say, "I need
>
> help. I want a tutor", so they say, "I need help" and the teacher's
>
> like...just shits on 'em. Those kids are gonna get mad and they're never
>
> gonna come back, or they'll disrupt the class, or stuff like that, but the

good [teachers] who helped 'em, I've seen kids like start off mad like,

"I fuckin' hate this place, I hate school", never come, skip class, but if

a teacher says, "Look, come to me after class", they'll do fine and love

it. So I mean, it really...if you get a good teacher, that really could

change a lot"

Studying Ogbu's sets of forces as interactive and fluid, instead of static and dichotomous, lead to new findings regarding the role of teachers, as active enactors of policy and their own cultural frames of reference. This is important because it provides a space to analyze the power of teachers to impact students' academic behaviors and experiences with race in educational settings through classroom practices and relationships, the potential for altering larger societal and school policies through individual action, and the complicated, dynamic context surrounding the student attitudes and approaches chosen and utilized by individual African American students towards their education.

Emergent Finding: The Significance of Parents as Human Actors

An emergent finding from my data analysis was the significance of parents in shaping their child's educational experiences and approaches towards academic achievement and racial identity. While Ogbu includes parents' views of schooling and cultural frames of reference in his community forces, he does not establish a distinct role for their actions and relationships in informing student educational strategies, social adjustments, and academic success (Ogbu, 2008, p. 12). By seeking examples of system and community forces in addition to interactions between them, parents'

roles as human actors who create, navigate, interpret, and alter both sets of forces in order to better their child's learning opportunities and model ways in which their children can exert agency over their experience emerged.

<u>Influences on Parent Approach</u>

As noted by John, "your parents' upbringing...sets up how they think". In the same way that my participants were affected by their parents' attitudes and actions, their parents were influenced by the sociocultural environment of their upbringing in addition to their relationships with their own parents. For example, John's mother grew up in Cameroon with 32 siblings, so her father was used to adapting his way of interacting with each child, a practice she noted as effective. While this made her approach towards John's schooling more flexible and empathetic, John's father was influenced by his cultural frame of reference which placed John, the firstborn son, in a role most similar to an "heir". Therefore his father's approach was more "stern and direct" since John was expected to be as successful, if not more successful, than his father.

Joy Brown, who discovered her passion for science after meeting an African American female scientist in middle school, described how before this moment of inspiration, her expectation for herself academically, which stemmed from her parents' expectations, was to pass each class. Joy attributes her parent's approach to her education and the way "education is just not a big deal" in her family to her parent's past experiences with education. Her mother was "encouraged in her family not to go to college" and her father, who attended schools in the process of integrating, had a memorable negative interaction with a White teacher who made fun of his "big lips"

and caused him to hate the social experience of school. When Joy started applying to colleges in high school, she found that her mother did not want to be involved and that, while her dad did not oppose her plans, he could not offer financial support or advice, leaving Joy to "figure it out" on her own.

Diane Pitt's father and his mother, who lived Alabama during Mr. Pitt's childhood, also had some negative experiences with the school system. However, unlike Joy's parents, Diane's father chose to continue his education and pursue a degree as a doctor, even though Diane's grandmother "wasn't so supportive, especially of his medical career". His upbringing also positively affected his approach towards his children's education. Diane explains that he "has been so supportive of every single thing that me, my brother, and my sister do...just because I think he didn't have that". While the parents of participants grew up in different eras and regions of the world, evidence shows that their upbringings and previous personal experiences with race and education shaped their approach towards their child's education.

<u>Influences of Parent Approach on Student Educational Experiences</u>

Parents and their approaches to their children's education were highly influential in the way students experienced schooling. By creating, navigating, or altering interactions between community and system forces many parents were active agents in the success of their children and modeled ways in which students could affect their own experiences. For example, several participants' mothers enacted their cultural frame reference by promoting education as highly valuable and important and working within the school system to ensure that their child was receiving all the

resources they deserved. For example, Amina, Symone, and Carmen Cafe's parents listened to the advice of teachers and followed system procedures to transfer their children to other public schools with advanced programs. Carmyn Clarke explained how her mother "pushed the school to make sure that I was being taken care of in that way…if she had not done that I don't know what kind of kid I would have turned out to be".

Some parents also initiated an interaction between forces by creating a role for themselves in their child's participation within system practices. Many parents, even those who did not have time to read through or did not understand their child's homework, required their child to prove that they had completed their work each night. Lonnie and Phillip's mother, who Phillip described as "very active" in their academic lives, would ensure that homework was totally accurate and that her sons attended school every day, as required by system forces. Other parents bridged community and system forces by requesting their student be placed with a certain educator in the school system or making sure they established a clear relationship with their child's teacher. Symone's mother "handpicked" her teachers so that she and her two brothers would have the same teachers and so that they knew the teacher would be high quality. This alteration of the typical system placement process helped guarantee that the Tillman siblings were all exposed to the same excellent learning opportunities and that their mother could have a positive relationship with their teacher for easier communication and collaboration.

When issues did arise, several parents navigated and altered these system and community force interactions by appearing at the school to work with administration

on the most productive way of continuing. For example, when Lonnie was not allowed to enter into the most advanced math track at his private high school, his parents set up meetings with the administration to discuss the decision and push for his admittance, which he ultimately still did not receive. Similarly, when Amina came home from her predominantly White elementary school and told her parents about an overly strict, or potentially racist, teacher's practices, her mother went to the school to speak with the principal or offered to use system procedures to move Amina to a different school. After Christopher suggested it, his mother used the same strategy to navigate the repeatedly occurring interactions that kept leading to out of school suspensions for Christopher's younger brother and sometimes alter the disciplinary outcome.

Parent's roles as human actors creating, navigating, and altering the interactions between community and system factors demonstrate the significant agency they could exert over the nature of their child's experience with education. Parent's approaches to these interactions also often served as models for their children to take agency in their own educational experiences and demonstrated the way in which some parents were able to uphold the high expectations for student performance found in some community forces, even when system supports were limited.

Influences of Parent Approach on Student Approach to Education

In addition to shaping their child's experiences with education, it is clear that parents and their approaches to education played a significant role in shaping their child's own approach to education through modeling and motivation. When

discussing the difference between his attitude towards school and those who he described as being in the "wrong crowd", Christopher stated that, "people want to follow in the footsteps of their parents, so it just happens that way. You know, they see their parents didn't care about school...they don't think they're capable of doing it, they don't think they're capable of being successful. They don't see where it's going to help them in the long run." Similarly, Melvin described how, "if you're not making a conscious effort to going against what you come from or what your family's standards set up, then, you know, you will normally end up doing whatever they do".

Some participants in this study adopted very similar attitudes about academics as their parents had modeled or wished to instill in their children. For example, Klyde describes how his parents' "approach was just, "You know what you have to do. Get it done. Don't really worry about the grades" and so, according to him, that's just what he does and why he has "such a relaxed attitude" towards school work. Diane attributed some of her internal drive to excel academically to the way her mom encouraged her not to compare herself to others, but instead "work for [her] own potential". Similarly, Phillip and Amina discussed how they adopted elements of their parents' attitudes towards education early in their childhood, so it was as though they had always been a part of their schooling experience. Phillip tells how his "parents from a very young age instilled in [him] a desire to seek education" and how he "learned to appreciate the intrinsic value of education and what it can do for you for opening doors" because of how his parents "just love education and they love learning". Phillip notes that both of his parents have multiple higher degrees and his father is constantly reading the shelves of books that line the hallway to his office and

are stacked in the garage. Amina discusses how, "it was always like, I have to get good grades, I have to go out and sort of make a name for myself, be successful, get a good education and all these lovely sentiments that your parents push on you….and I think from an early age, I sort of adopted them on my own".

Other participants discussed how their parents served a source of motivation in their approach towards academics. Some students were motivated by the incentives, like money or clothing, offered when good grades were achieved, while others were motivated by avoiding the negative consequences established by their parents, such as lack of TV, social, and cell phone privileges, for when academic expectations were not met. Some participants, before even being asked about their parents, named them and making them proud as the primary source of motivation in pursuing academic achievement. One of these participants was James Baldwin whose parents emigrated from Nigeria right before he was born. James discusses the sacrifice and hard work his parents put in for the move and transition to North America, especially his father who "went from being a well-established doctor in Africa to having to do odd jobs in Canada til he could take the test" and redo his medical residency in the United States, and how they served as James' "biggest motivation" to be "academically driven...and do as well as [he] could".

Influence of Parents on Student Racial Identity Formation

Another way in which parents influenced their child's educational experiences and approach was through modeling ways of interpreting and altering interactions between system and community forces related specifically to race. For some parents, who Andrews (2009) identifies as "race-conscious", academic achievement and race

were highly interrelated (p. 306). According to Andrews (2009), "This type of parent strives to raise children who have a self-concept that not only gives high salience to race and black culture but also is aware of racial barriers to his or her success and develops strategies for resisting racism" (p. 306). By providing a "counternarrative about black achievement" and framing racial challenges in a motivational way, parents played a role in shaping the development of participants' racial identities and the way these identities affected their interpretations of educational experiences (Andrews, 2009, p. 306).

Many participants described the way in which their parents modeled being aware of and taking pride in their racial identity. Nicole reported that her dad, who was "big on race", enjoyed reading and talking about race with his family, and said that if her "dad wasn't in the picture….I don't think that I would be as aware of certain race related things". Similarly, Carmyn Clarke described her dad, who was a participant in the Million Man March in 1995, as "very focused on Black empowerment, Black pride, Black people all the time" and the reason "we continue to be culturally Black" even after moving from the predominantly African American neighborhood where she grew up. The parents of the Clay brothers, "raised us to be proud of who we were, they taught us Black history…they made sure that we knew about the civil rights movement and slavery and different leaders within the African American community". Additionally, their father's church celebrates Black History Month by singing the National Black Anthem and wearing dashikis every Sunday. As noted by Phillip, the curriculum at his school was "very Eurocentric", so his parents, as did the parents of several other participants, responded to this system issue by

providing the cultural "counternarrative" that highlighted racial pride and Black success.

Parents also influenced their child's approach to educational tasks by acknowledging racial barriers and discussing ways of overcoming them. For example, John's father, who had encountered racism while working at the International Monetary Fund, would openly discuss race and "straight up tell him….to turn it into [his] strength…use it as fuel and motivation to be actually twice as better, and twice as smart". James's parents made sure that he understood that, "as a black kid, there's not as many safety nets...no one else is gonna help you through this, so you need to be on top of it because they'll very easily let you fall to the wayside if you don't" and that the "easiest way" of "being equal" was to stay strong academically. The Clay parents held a similar point of view, according to Phillip, who said "they told us we had fewer opportunities than our peers to mess up, so that was communicated to use so we had to always perform well". Lonnie also added that his parents would tell him that because he was one of few Black students in the school, "you may be the only Black person this child ever meets so just make sure that the impression that you give to them about yourself and your race and your family is a good impression". By discussing the salience of race in American society and the challenges their children could face in their pursuits of success because of it, parents were able to shape the way their children interpreted these interactions between system and community forces and understood their agency in altering their nature and products.

Parent Approach and Influences as Dynamic and Unique

Just as with racial identity, the role and approach of parents to their child's education, and the way students interpreted and incorporated these influences into their own academic approach and racial identity, are dynamic and unique phenomena that are constantly redefined due to the decisions of human agents and their evolving socially constructed realities.

In response to new interactions with and between system and community forces, as well as to their child's unique personality and educational experience, many parents adapted their attitudes and strategies to meet the needs of their children. For example, Lonnie describes how his parents responded to the changes in his educational experiences as he moved through different grades and how they emphasized new perspectives and practices for each period. For example, in elementary school, his parents told him to "Be a good student...and behave well" while in high school they told him to "get A's". Amina also noted a shift in her parent's approach to her education and shared how "they didn't realize until...I started doing well in school that it was important for me to do well in school". Several participants also discussed how each of their parents used different strategies to encourage academic achievement with each of their siblings and how they learned from and improved upon the strategies they used with older children before tailoring them to their next child. It is important to recognize the dynamism of parents' approaches in order to give them full agency as sources of meaning construction, decision making, and effective action, not just receivers of system forces and replicators of community forces.

Similarly, the way students received and chose to incorporate influences from their parents changed throughout their educational experiences and was unique to each individual. Carmen Cafe, who was also highly motivated by the money and clothes her parents would give her if she earned an A, explained how her relationship for her family helped produce and increasingly intrinsic motivation for academic success. She told how,

> …it got to a point where I knew I needed to be successful and I needed
>
> to make them proud, so therefore I would do whatever it took.
>
> So...whatever I have to do to get good grades, I'm doin' it, because I
>
> know my mom's going to be proud of me and my dad's going to be
>
> proud of me and my grandmother..so that's what started to motivate
>
> me as I got older.

John Doe explained how at first he felt as though his parents "smothered" him and "tried to push this drive to succeed" on him. He explained that, "at first I rejected it, but when I matured, and found out the basis of what they were trying to do, I more willingly accepted it because I could see that it was really just for my benefit".

The way in which Joy and Christopher constructed meaning around their parents' role in their academic lives demonstrates the unique agency students use to develop their own experiences and realities. While Joy stated that her mother's role in her education presented "a lot of obstacles" due to her gambling addiction, impatience, and disinterest in Joy's college aspirations, Joy sought motivation from other sources, including peers, teachers, and her faith, and consciously chose to pursue her passion for science. While Christopher described how many of his peers

wanted to "follow in the footsteps of their parents" and how this led many to see less value in engaging academically, Christopher himself found that his parents "definitely shaped how [he] was as a student". However, while his earlier comment may suggest that Christopher would make the same decision as his mother to not pursue a higher education degree or potentially engage in the selling of illegal substances like his imprisoned father chose to, Christopher chose to respond to the advice of his father who said "Make sure you don't do the things I did. Make sure you're focusing on your academics" instead.

Participants exerted a similar extent of agency over the ways in which they constructed a role for their parent's racial views in their own construction of racial identity. As discussed earlier, the Clay parents attempted to instill racial pride and overcoming racial barriers as sources of academic motivation for their children. However, while Lonnie did choose to construct race as one source of positive motivation to engage academically, he noted that the main drive behind his high achievement was "predominantly the fact that I wanted to get a good job". Nicole and Carmyn Clarke also adopted elements of their parents' racial views, but found that they had to adjust for "generational differences", but in unique ways. Nicole noted that her father grew up in a more segregated society so she found that he noticed race far more often than she did. Meanwhile Carmyn, whose mother who had had more overtly racist interactions with White people as a young woman, found that her mom thought of race as more "interpersonal", while Carmyn thought of it as a "systematic" issue.

By studying the ways in which parents created, navigated, interpreted, and altered the interactions between system and community forces related to education and race, their significant role as active agents in the shaping of student approaches toward academic achievement and racial identity was made apparent. Tied with deeper analysis that elicits the individualized and dynamic nature of these processes, a more nuanced and empowering understanding of parental and student attitudes and behaviors emerges than the often static and deterministic conclusions produced by Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model. Recognizing the flexibility and agency of parents and students to respond to environmental influences and human relationships by constructing their own educational and racial realities, transforms academic achievement from a calculable outcome of system and community forces into an intentional, attainable accomplishment.

The Phenomena of "Acting White" and Oppositional Culture

Despite the fact that expressive factors, which included the idea of "acting White" and subscribing to an oppositional frame of reference, were only a part of the application of Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological Model to minority education experiences, these two concepts attracted the most mainstream attention. In this section I will address three of the main theoretical debates that came out of academic and popular discourse related to the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture phenomena and were previously identified in the literature review. These questions include:

1) Does the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture exist in African American students' educational experiences?

2) If yes, how much do these two related concepts affect academic

engagement?

3) If yes, what are factors that influence the occurrence and nature of "acting

White" and oppositional culture?

In answering these questions, I will continue to emphasize the importance of

studying the interactive, dynamic nature of the system and community forces that

shape these phenomena and the way in which human actors create, navigate, interpret,

and alter their influences. Additionally, I will speak to the diversity found within the

lived experiences of students' interactions with the idea of "acting White" and

oppositional culture and how this speaks to the heterogeneity found in the Black

population as well as the agency of individuals in determining the nature of their own

unique experience.

1) Does the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture exist in African American students' educational experiences?

After analyzing participant responses regarding their experiences with the idea

of "acting White", all of the participants mentioned having encountered the term

during their educational experiences. Many of the participants responses echoed the

findings of Fordham and Ogbu. However, their responses also present a more diverse,

individualized experience with the phenomena and its dynamic uses and meanings.

For example, in the article written by Fordham and Ogbu in 1986 about the

"burden of acting White" at Capital High, the authors describe how the oppressive

treatment of African Americans as a homogenous racial group spurred the

development a strong sense of collective identity, "fictive kinship", and an

oppositional cultural frame of reference (Fordham and Ogbu, 2008, p. 596-603).

According to their definition of the phenomenon, the response to this homogenous

maltreatment was equally as unvarying: The singular "Black community" labeled

"certain forms of behaviors…[are] *not appropriate* for them because those behaviors,

events, symbols, and meetings are characteristic of White Americans. At the same

time they emphasize other forms of behavior...as more appropriate for them because

these are *not* a part of White Americans' way of life. To behave in the manner

defined as falling within a White cultural frame of reference is to 'act White' and is

negatively sanctioned" (Fordham and Ogbu, 2008, p. 599).

Participants did describe experiences with "acting White" that would support

the validity of Fordham and Ogbu's definition. Lonnie described how he understood

"what it meant to be Black and what it meant to be treated differently and...what

responsibilities came with [his] being Black….the main thing about being Black is

looking out for other Black people". John described a similar sense of collective

identity and fictive kinship:

So, like, I definitely notice that Black people in a community tend to

group with one another. They tend to almost like form a circle...like

form an outward facing circle. When you form an outward facing

circle, no one's lookin' on the inside, but you can see from every single

angle on the outside. That way you'll like stay together, you can kinda

pinpoint if anything is going wrong in any direction and you adapt to

that situation. So...it's almost like, we all have each others' backs and

we all have to have each others' backs because no one else will look

out for us.

When discussing the idea of "acting White", John adds:

If just one person in the outward facing circle, like you know, left the

circle or if they decided to turn around, it's like you don't have our

back any more. You are...(sigh),it's almost like you're a traitor.

Carmen Cafe adds that an oppositional "vibe" commonly felt by Black individuals in

her town is "anti-White in a sense", especially in regards to authority figures, and that

"just doin' what you're supposed to do" is considered a "White" behavior. Amina

also noted that "acting White" "encompasses a lot of things...but it's almost like

you're not resisting...like you're playing into their hand type thing". These examples

demonstrate some participants' experiences with collective identity, fictive kinship,

and an oppositional cultural frame of reference that could contribute to the labeling of

some behaviors as White and therefore aversive to one's social standing in a minority

community.

<u>"Acting White" and Oppositional Culture: A Dynamic and Diverse Existence</u>

While these participants and others did not provide responses that were

specifically contrasting to Fordham and Ogbu's definition of "acting White", their

descriptions of the phenomena demonstrated more individualized and dynamic

meanings and uses of "acting White" than those presented in the 1986 study. While

Fordham and Ogbu (2008) did acknowledge that "not every member of the minority

group feels this way", they still framed each student's participation with the

phenomenon as the extent to which the individual adopted or was affected by a static,

monolithic construction of "acting White" or oppositional culture (p.599). Instead my

findings demonstrate that each student not only chose the extent to which they

interacted with these related phenomena but also the way in which they defined their

meanings and applications based on each context in which they were encountered.

For example, variation in meaning and use of "acting White" was particularly

noticeable when participants described the different human actors who utilized the

term. Most participants who had been accused of "acting White" reported scenarios in

which it was used by their Black peers to make fun of them or, as described by

Christopher, "call you out on it, or give you a bad rep for it….it's sort of that negative

connotation that comes with it. You feel like you're gonna be alienated from your

own race". Many of these participants noted that language, music and movie

preferences, recreational and extracurricular activities, amount of care put into

schoolwork, and, in Carmen Cafe's school, "just by being Black and smart" could be

behaviors that could elicit a negative accusation of "acting White". However,

participants also reported experiences where the same behaviors led to accusations of

"acting White" from their Black peers, but in a positive or joking context. Amina

describes how she "had friends that would say it to [her] and it would be like, 'You're

acting white, but it's going to get you somewhere in life'". Nicole explains how, "for

other Blacks who are told that they act white, if we are talking about it or joking

about it, they aren't as serious". Other participants discuss how family members also

used the term differently, sometimes involving a definition that associated higher

socioeconomic class with "acting White", but mainly using it in a joking or mentoring

context.

While Diane reported that she had only heard Black people make accusations of others "acting White", other participants such as the Clay brothers, Symone, and James mainly encountered the term when it was used by White people, even though all five of these participants attended predominantly White high schools. In these instances, the behaviors labeled as "White" were similar to those named by other participants, but the use of the term was less of a suggestion that the accused student thought they were "better than" other Black people. Instead, as noted by Lonnie, a White person's use of the term suggested that the accused was not acting according to the White person's "imaginations and fictions of what a Black person was". Symone found that in general, while "Black people are….not ok with you being the Whitest Black person, White people are more comfortable when you're not that Black".

As evidenced by these examples, the definition and use of term "acting White" varied greatly due to factors in local contexts, such as school demographics, and to factors in situational contexts, such as the specific human actor verbalizing the term and their purpose in utilizing it. Therefore, it is important to understand that while the idea of "acting white" and oppositional culture is commonly existent in student experiences, it emerges in diverse and dynamic forms that change based on the constructed reality of each instance in which it is encountered.

2) If the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture do exist, how much do these two related concepts affect academic engagement?

While most participants reported an association between the idea of "acting White" and behaviors related to academic achievement, none of the participants accused of "acting White" expressed lessening the effort they put into their education

because of it. While Nicole stated that the accusations, which were mainly related to her social experience, were "hurtful" and that she saw how they could make someone "stop doing whatever it is that's making people say that [they] act White", she explained that the accusations did not affect her. Nicole chose to reject the idea that there are "certain characteristics that are defined for White people, or defined for Black people" and explained that her way of operating in an educational setting was, "just who I am...So I wasn't going to change that just because someone said I was acting a certain way".

For Nicole and the other participants, their internal motivation and self-assuredness were more significant influences on their approach to education than the potential "burden of acting White". When asked about her approach to education, Joy responded that, "I realized at a young age that I was passionate about science and I loved academics, even if people made fun of me for it. I still loved it so much that I was gonna pursue it and I was determined". Joy's ultimate goal of becoming a doctor fueled her "inward fight to go on despite social pressures and stuff". Carmyn Clarke explained her encounters with the idea of "acting White" and how it was a

> …weird place of self-definition...a lot of people of my race would
>
> have said that I act White, but for me, I'm not….I'm just being myself.
>
> I've always liked the things I guess stereotypical White people
>
> like...and I grew up in a Black community….White people had nothing
>
> to do with me liking those things, they're just things that I like!

Similarly, Phillip noted that no matter who was using the term, "the context was always the same. It was always Black being inferior" and that is why he, "didn't

assign too much value to it because that's not how I view Blackness". Because of the agency held by these participants in defining and assigning meaning to the idea of "acting White", they also held agency over the role accusations of "acting White" could play in affecting their educational experiences.

From the "Burden of Acting White" to the Skill of Social Versatility

When asking participants themselves about the role they choose to construct for the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture in their education, it becomes clear that the effects of these concepts are not always negative, as implied by Fordham and Ogbu's description of the phenomenon as a "burden" that requires "coping mechanisms" (2008, p. 593).

For example, Christopher demonstrated what Fordham and Ogbu (2008) label as "coping" by "maintaining a low profile", a behavior that could be detrimental to his academic success (p. 615). As described by Christopher, he "didn't participate in class a lot" meaning that, "the only reason you would know that [he] was smart was because the teacher would call [him] out" by telling the class that he had gotten the highest grade on an assignment. However, when Christopher was asked why he chose to take this approach, he explained that it was not because he was afraid of negative social sanctioning for the emphasis he chose to place on academics, but because "when the teachers started callin' [him] out then you have extra pressure to help people who were struggling and things like that" (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986, p. 615-616). While some of four the "high-achieving" students from Capital High represented in Fordham and Ogbu's study (2008), may have avoided academic behaviors because they were not valued by their peers, in Christopher's individual

experience, he chose to limit his peers' awareness of his academic success because his abilities and knowledge base were highly valued by his peers (p. 615-616). Christopher also turned this demand from peers into something noted positively by his teachers in his college recommendation letters, who praised his willingness to "help people who were struggling in their academics" and make study guides for his friends. While Christopher did report that he was accused of "acting White" and, in college, "acting Black", the terms did not affect him "too much" because, as he states, "I was always strong. I always knew I'm acting the way I want to act, so I didn't really care what other people said about me. I know [for] some people, it will affect them. But I was just one of those people, I'm going to act the way I want to act." Similar positive academic effects of the idea of "acting white" and oppositional culture can be seen by participants, like Carmen Cafe, Diane, Phillip, and Carmyn Clarke, who were aware of the negative stereotypes associated with Black students' academic performance and motivated to oppose these mindsets and "prove 'em wrong".

Fordham and Ogbu additionally focus on the negative social effects of the idea of "acting White" and the related social "coping mechanisms" (2008, p. 612). Described as "cloaking activities", such as "lunching" or "clowning", Fordham and Ogbu (2008) reported that students would attempt to hide the fact that they cared about and engaged in academic activities by acting "crazy" or like a "comedian" in social settings outside of the classroom. Many of the participants from Barrett University did mention acting differently in a classroom context and with different peers, including Carmyn Clarke who explained that, "when you were in the classroom,

you were as White as you can be, but then when you were in the hallway, you could do whatever you want. It depends on what friend group you're trying to be in in the moment". However, the way Carmyn and the other participants described the experience of "code-switching", or as Carmen Cafe termed it "style-shifting", was as a social strength that added to their popularity within the school and once they got to college.

Melvin described how being in the International Bachelorate (IB) classes at his school created a situation in which, "You almost kind of needed two selves, you know, when you're with the more academically inclined kids and when you're with the kids who are not. ….because common interests and just the way you communicate and all that is different. It's almost like a "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" type situation where you have to make a conscious effort to not necessarily change yourself, but adjust how you're communicating". However, this skill made him very popular within the school and helped him attain a large number of leadership positions. He described how despite being involved in extracurricular activities that were not always "cool" according to the stereotypes of his high school, "you can make it look cool" because "it's not necessarily what you do, but how you do it".

Carmen Cafe describes how when she was talking to students of different races, her "style of talking change drastically….depending on who I'm with, depends on what I talk about and how I talk about it. But I know if I'm in a mixed setting, I have like a style where I can just be versatile and talk about anything and people will understand what I'm saying". Carmen's "social versatility" coupled with hard work

helped her become both student body president, an accomplishment that required a

large amount of peer support and approval, and her high school's first African

American valedictorian, an accomplishment that required caring a lot about

academics. Carmen ability to reach both positions, which Fordham and Ogbu's work

would suggest as highly incongruent, demonstrates how her understandings of the

racial stereotypes and the idea of "acting White" allowed her to skillfully navigate the

system and community forces present in the context of her high school in a way that

earned her social and academic success.

Participants have continued to construct positive effects from interactions with

the idea of "acting white" and associated racial stereotypes by continuing to use their

social versatility skills in college. Klyde describes how interacting with so many

types of people taught him lessons that were "deeper than the books" including the

idea that "Everybody's different. You can't put people in a box. You gotta treat every

person differently in any situation or anything". He says his high school experiences

may not have prepared him fully for the academic challenge of college, but that,

according to Klyde, it "prepared me for Barrett University for being social, like

dealing with problems". Carmyn Clarke explained how she will change the way she

interacts with Barrett University's predominantly White student body, sometimes by

"joking" about her Blackness to show them that, "I can move between worlds, and I

can read things in different ways, and this is me showing you that I can do that so that

you know I'm not a threat to you".

The experiences described by participants in this study in which they have

chosen to construct the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture as phenomena

that do not affect or positively affect their academic and social experiences in educational environments should not suggest that the negative impacts reported by participants in Fordham and Ogbu's article were not experienced. However, by studying the effects of the idea of "acting white" and oppositional culture as defined by the individual student interacting with them, it is possible to see how the students exert agency over their realities and construct positive strengths and success out of what Fordham and Ogbu define as a "burden".

3) What are the factors that influence the occurrence and nature of "acting White" and oppositional culture?

As previously discussed, the educational experiences of students are shaped by a variety of factors, especially interactions, often caused by human actors, between system and community forces. The studies discussed in the literature review discussed the the racial demographics of the school, peer norms, and students' relationships with teachers as contributing factors in the occurrence of the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture (Bergin and Cooks, 2008, p. 163; Farkas, 2008, p. 334; Ferguson, 2008, p. 290; Valenzuala, 2008, p. 503-504).

While these three factors were reported by Barrett University participants as influential in shaping their educational experiences in general, a significant influence on the definition of "acting White" mentioned by nearly every participant was media representations of African Americans, often based on historical stereotypes. When asked about why they thought the behaviors they had listed as being labeled "White" received that distinction, participant responses often included an interaction between how Black life was represented in mainstream American media the definition of what

was seen as "White" and "Black" in their school context. Joy explained how when she was

> In middle school, there became this like all of those ideas of what
>
> Black meant came from like the media and music...like a lot of my
>
> friends who were Black males, they decided that 'Oh, I'm gonna be a
>
> rapper. Or I'm going to be a football basketball player.' Those ideas
>
> really started to shape people's ideas of who they were in middle
>
> school.

Phillip, who is the leader of his historically Black fraternity's mentoring organization, discussed how middle schoolers enrolled in the program also directly connected media portrayals to the often negative stereotypes they encountered in school and expressed that they "weren't pleased by that and it was hurtful".

> Other participants discussed how interactions with media shaped the cultural frames of reference held by their peers and teachers of other races. Christopher explained how,

> …sometimes they just single out a certain group, you know, and then
>
> they sort of paint that [as the] picture of how a Black person is
>
> supposed to act. And this group is gangbanging or sagging their pants
>
> or something like that and they get most of the TV coverage...if you're
>
> of another race and that's the only type of person that you see, you
>
> know, you're going to expect every Black person to act that way.

Lonnie Clay encountered similar interactions between system and community forces in respect to his White classmates' construction of what was "White" and "Black"

and how they used those understandings to assign meaning to Lonnie's actions in school. Lonnie discussed how,

> Black was foreign to them to a certain degree, and so they had all
>
> these visions of what a Black person was or what the media portrayed
>
> them as and so that's what they accepted. That's what they knew, and
>
> uh, they knew Black before they knew a Black person and because of
>
> that...they thought I was acting White.

The Key Factor: Student Agency over Interpretation and Action

Interactions between the system forces, community forces, and human actors, as exemplified by the role of media in shaping the commonly binary definitions of "Blackness" and "Whiteness", are important factors that influence the occurrence and nature of the idea of "acting White" and oppositional culture in the educational experiences of African American students. However, as demonstrated by the findings of this study, the most important factor affecting the role these phenomena play in educational settings and outcomes is the agency of the individual in interpreting their meanings, uses, and effects.

The nature and extent of system and community forces and the human actors the student is exposed to is highly based on external environment. However, the cultural frame of reference through which the student interprets these stimuli, while largely shaped by interactions with external structures, ideas, and people, is internal. When we recognize the individual student as the source of their own constructed reality, their internal subjective framework

becomes both the endpoint and starting place of the interactions that make up their educational experiences. With this understanding, we are able to recognize the clear significance of system structures, community values, and human actors in shaping student experiences with race and academic achievement, while maintaining respect for the agency of the student and their ability to create their own dynamic and unique way of exchanging knowledge with the world.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In conclusion, I will discuss two of the unanswered questions from the literature review. First, I will relate the finding of this study to the fourth major debate that arose from Ogbu's work, *What is the best way to study the culture and academic achievement of minority students?,* and discuss the question about whether the effects of the phenomena regarding race and education encountered by many African American students are significant enough to be considered in policy decisions.

In regards to analyzing research approaches, it is important to determine the purpose of the study and the best way to meet that purpose. While Fordham and Ogbu both set out to study identity and community values, their methods neglected the primary source of these constructions, the individual. Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological model recognizes the important stimuli produced by system and community forces, but seems to miss the actors that operate in the middle and create, navigate, interpret, and alter the interactions between them. When this model is used to analyze the academic achievement of African American students, it seems to relay an overly simplified story of inputs and outputs, leaving room for the researcher or reader to use their own cultural frame of reference to assign meaning to the results.

By using social constructivism to study the interactions between the sets of forces, recognize the agency exerted by the human actors who are both the site and source of these interactions, and directly ask individuals about the diverse, dynamic, and unique processes they use to assign meaning to their experiences, researchers can elicit and construct a more complicated, and more empowering, picture of the phenomena associated with race in the classroom. As an individual who seeks to

collaborate with individual students, families, school personal, and community members to initiate interactions with system and community forces that will promote the academic and personal success of all students and who seeks to explore and utilize avenues for changing the inequalities and challenges experienced by African American students in particular, this methodology provided the best way for me to study minority educational experiences.

As evidenced by the findings of this study, race does play a role in the educational experiences of African American students. However, because of the dynamic, constructivist nature of student experiences with race, identity, and academic achievement in the classroom, it will take macro-level policies and broad ideological shifts *in addition to* the applied agency of individual human actors, including the students themselves, to create a reality in which all students achieve the success they have defined for themselves.

Limitations of the Study

Keeping in mind the critique of Fordham and Ogbu's overextension of their findings and subsequent implications as applicable to all member of the Black race, I will set clear parameters for the results of this study.

First, while the sample used in this study included students from diverse familial, educational, and regional backgrounds, it was also limited by its size of fourteen participants and the fact that all participants choose to attend the same university. Additionally all students in the study could be characterized as "high-achieving", given their accomplishments in high school and acceptance into Barrett

University. While this allows for increased analysis on how individuals create their own success, the study's results could have been more robust if students of varying academic performance were included. The sample was also made up of only Black students. With a sample including students of multiple races, a less dichotomous representation of race and a richer description of the "acting White" and oppositional culture phenomena could have been produced. Additionally, the age of the participants, while helpful in easing ethical concerns, could also be seen as a limitation because students were at least one year removed from their grade school environments.

Methodological limitations also restrict the parameters of study results. While social constructivist methodology focuses on the subjective experiences of participants, the results of the study will always be limited by the fact that they are presented by the researcher. Therefore, the researcher's bias in the development of the research structure and interpretation and presentation of results limits access to the raw, subjective experience of the participant. Additionally, data collection was limited by the fact that each participant was interviewed only once and for only one to two hours about experiences that occurred throughout years of their life.

The study was also limited because I did not pursue additional models, such as Cross's Nigrescence Framework or other identity formation schemas mentioned by authors in the literature review (Spencer and Harpalani, 2008; Tatum, 1999; Andrews, 2009). While this choice was made partly out of time constraints of the research period, comparing other models to Ogbu's Cultural-Ecological model could have led to more solutions-based critiques of his framework. The study also did not fully

address the critique of many of Ogbu's works: a negligence to perform rigorous analysis on the impact of system factors (Foster, 2008, p.588). With a longer timeframe and additional foresight, this study could have been improved through collection of data specifically related to the neighborhoods and school systems in which participants attended school, in addition to structural questions that asked participants directly about the influences of macro-level and institutional factors in their educational experiences (Merriam, 1998).

Impacts on Future Research and Practices

After completing this study, I not only have a richer understanding of the research topic, but also of the qualitative research process. I would be interested in using these methods to further pursue some of the emergent findings from this study. For example, the evidenced significance of parents could be analyzed more deeply by conducting interviews with the parents of study participants in order to learn more about their approach towards their child's education and compare the way they describe their approach to the way their child represented it. Having a better understanding of parent perspectives would be helpful in my future role as an educator with an interest in working collaboratively with parents as fellow stakeholders in their child's academic success. Additional qualitative research regarding teacher bias in the classroom would also lead to a better understanding of how teachers' roles as human actors in students' educational experiences affect academic achievement.

Because of the experience of conducting this research and analyzing its results, I will seek to learn and employ individualized teaching practices that will encourage students to interact with a variety of knowledge sources and act upon their agency in creating their own success.

Appendix A: John Ogbu's Cultural Ecological Model, (Ogbu, 2008, p.12)
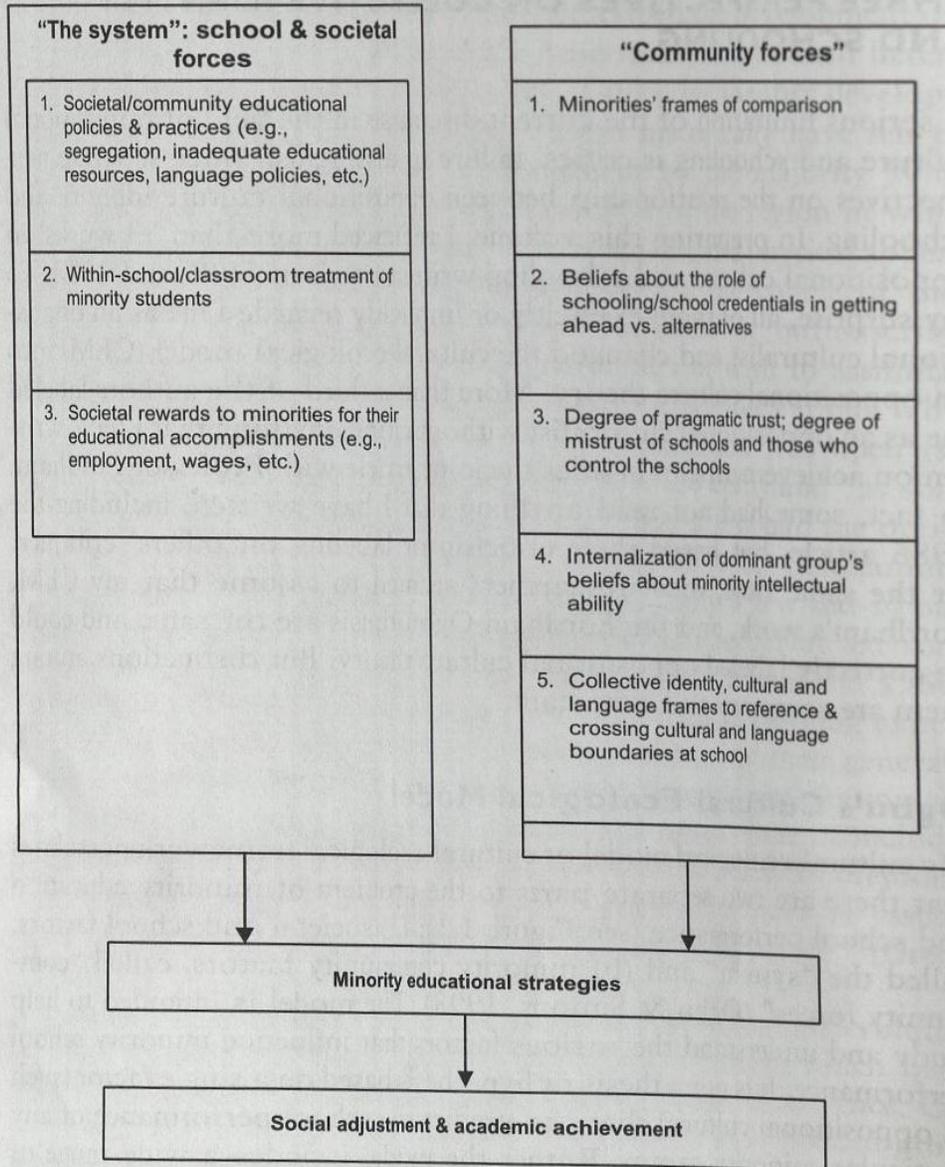
12   John U. Ogbu

"The system": school & societal forces
1. Societal/community educational policies & practices (e.g., segregation, inadequate educational resources, language policies, etc.)
2. Within-school/classroom treatment of minority students
3. Societal rewards to minorities for their educational accomplishments (e.g., employment, wages, etc.)

"Community forces"
1. Minorities' frames of comparison
2. Beliefs about the role of schooling/school credentials in getting ahead vs. alternatives
3. Degree of pragmatic trust; degree of mistrust of schools and those who control the schools
4. Internalization of dominant group's beliefs about minority intellectual ability
5. Collective identity, cultural and language frames to reference & crossing cultural and language boundaries at school

Minority educational strategies

Social adjustment & academic achievement

Figure 1.2 A two-part problem requiring a two-part solution.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

**African American College Students' Experiences with Race and Academic Achievement
Consent Form**

Barrett University

The general nature of this study entitled "Towards an Understanding of the Relationship Between Race and Academic Achievement in the Lives of African American College Students" conducted by Mary Grech been explained to me. I understand that I will be asked to answer a series of interview questions regarding my experiences with race and academic achievement and the role of parents, peers, and teachers on this phenomenon. There are no potential risks associated with participation in this interview. My participation in this study should take a total of one 1 hour session, but I may be asked for a follow-up interview. I understand that my responses will remain confidential and that my name will not appear on any materials associated with the study. My name will be replaced with a randomly assigned pseudonym in the presentation of results and only Mary Grech will be aware of the true identity associated with the pseudonym. I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and that I may discontinue participation at any time. There are no perceived risks associated with this research project. I am aware that I may report dissatisfaction(s) with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the StudentIRB, Dr. Monica Griffin, 1-855-800-7187 (toll free), or mdgrif@wm.edu. I am aware that I must be over 18 years of age to participate in the study. My signature below signifies my voluntary participation in this project and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____

_____

 Date   Signature of Participant

_____

                                                 Print Name

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH THE APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY BARRETT UNIVERSITY STUDENTIRB (Phone: 757-221-3966) ON [INSERT DATE].

If study subject has any questions in regard to this project, please contact the Principal Researcher directly:

Jamel K. Donnor

jkdonnor@wm.edu, (757) 221-6202

NOTE: Additional procedures concerning informed consent, along with additional sample consent forms, can be found in the Guidebook of Policies and Procedures for Research Involving Human Subjects on the Protection of Human Subjects Committee web site.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

<u>Warm-Up Questions</u>
1. Where are you from?

2. How did you decide to come to Barrett University?

3. What is your major and what would you like to do after college?

- Read the purpose of the study to the interviewee, and let him or her know that I will be asking a series of questions related to the purpose, and they have the right to discontinue participation or not answer a question at any time during the course of the interview.

<u>Interview Questions</u>

1. Describe what you were like as a student before coming to BU? Why did you use this description?
2. What role did your parent(s) or family members play in shaping you as a student?
3. What role, if any, do you think race or racism played in your parent(s)'s or family's approach toward your education? How do you know this?
4. How would you describe your peer group academically? Why did you decide to use this description?
5. What would you say was your group's overall attitude to school? What about academic achievement?
6. What role, if any, do you think race or racism played in their approach toward education? How do you know this?
7. What role did teachers play in shaping your educational experience? Do you think they treated all students the same? How do you know this?
8. Could you describe when you first became aware of your race? What role if any do you think it played in your approach toward school or academic achievement?
9. Have you ever heard of the idea of "acting white" and if so, can you describe it for me?
10. If the answer is yes, were you ever accused of "acting white" because of your approach toward education? By whom? Why do you think the person chose to call you "white" or use this term?
11. That is all the questions I have, is there anything else you want to add that we did not cover?

- Thank the interviewee for their participation and time. Provide with contact information.

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