10-14-2022

Hidden Identity: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Black Male Identity Development at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Therron Rogers Ph.D.

Donald Mitchell Jr., Ph.D.

Hidden Identity: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Black Male Identity Development at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Therron Rogers
Rush Medical College, therron_rogers@rush.com

Donald Mitchell Jr.
Molloy University, dmitchell1@molloy.edu
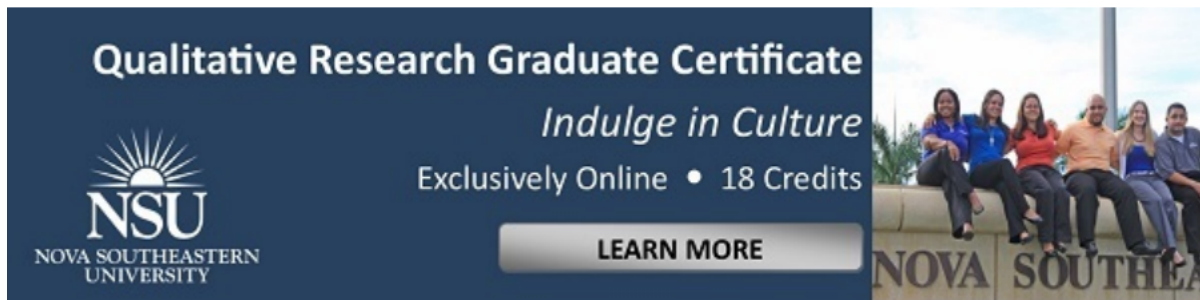
Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr

Part of the Higher Education Commons, Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, and the Student Counseling and Personnel Services Commons

Hidden Identity: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Black Male Identity Development at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Abstract

Identity development models for Black males are limited, particularly within the context of higher education. Within this qualitative study, we used constructivist grounded theory to develop a theory of Black male identity development at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). We were guided by the following research questions: (1) How do the experiences at a historically Black college or university influence the identity development for Black males? (2) What externalfactors influence identity development for Black males who attend a historically Black college or university? Eight Black males participated in this study, each completing series of semistructured interviews. Derived from the interviews, a four-phase identity development theory emerged. The four phases of Black male identity development at HBCUs are: (1) acknowledgment of Black male identity, (2) understanding of differences among Black males, (3) creation of professional identity, and (4) transition into Black male role model. Our theory highlights how HBCUs offer unique spaces for Black male identity development that continues through adulthood. We close with recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords

Black males, constructivist grounded theory, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, identity development

Creative Commons License

Hidden Identity: A Constructivist Grounded Theory of Black Male Identity Development at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Therron Rogers[1] and Donald Mitchell, Jr.[2]
[1]Rush Medical College, Illinois, USA
[2]Molloy University, New York, USA

Identity development models for Black males are limited, particularly within the context of higher education. Within this qualitative study, we used constructivist grounded theory to develop a theory of Black male identity development at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). We were guided by the following research questions: (1) How do the experiences at a historically Black college or university influence the identity development for Black males? (2) What external factors influence identity development for Black males who attend a historically Black college or university? Eight Black males participated in this study, each completing series of semistructured interviews. Derived from the interviews, a four-phase identity development theory emerged. The four phases of Black male identity development at HBCUs are: (1) acknowledgment of Black male identity, (2) understanding of differences among Black males, (3) creation of professional identity, and (4) transition into Black male role model. Our theory highlights how HBCUs offer unique spaces for Black male identity development that continues through adulthood. We close with recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords: Black males, constructivist grounded theory, historically Black Colleges and Universities, identity development

Black males have been the subject of U.S. higher education research across various areas including retention and graduation, mentoring programs, as student athletes, extracurricular participation, academic success, and explorations using anti-deficit and counternarratives to document their experiences (e.g., see Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Brooks et al., 2013; Collins et al., 2017; Glenn, 2004; Harper, 2009; Harper & Davis 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015; Talbert, 2012; Wood, 2012, 2014; Wood & Williams, 2013). Still, research concerning Black males in U.S. higher education continues to evolve as U.S. historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) remain critical in educating Black males in the 21st century.

HBCUs are institutions that were established in the United States before 1964 with the sole purpose of educating Black Americans (Patterson et al., 2013). The contributions of HBCUs to U.S. higher education are numerous, including the early access they provided Black Americans and other underserved populations to a higher education in the 19th century (Mitchell et al., 2014). Today, HBCUs continue those contributions; for example, by proportion, HBCUs graduate more Black males than predominantly white institutions (PWIs). As proof, during the 2019-2020 academic school year, just over 12% of bachelor's degrees awarded to Black men came from HBCUs although they represent 3% of U.S. colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a, 2020b). Given the contributions HBCUs make in educating Black males, scholarship exploring the ways they have been academically successful at HBCUs continues to grow (e.g., see Robert Palmer's scholarship). Nevertheless, much more can be explored concerning Black males' experiences at HBCUs.

One area that can be further explored for Black males relates to their identity development as they enroll, persist and graduate from these institutions (Jackson, 2012).

Higher education is a place where students tend to explore, find, or solidify their identities (Fries-Britt, 2000). When students enter higher education, they are provided opportunities to figure themselves out and explore what they want to do as they matriculate toward graduation (Stephens et al., 2012). More specifically, for Black students, racial identity development is important during college development in the United States. Cross et al. (2002) define Black identity as "the passing down from one generation to the next the learned experiences and identity activities that facilitate Black adjustment and humanity under conditions often framed by race, racism, and the proactive dimensions of Black culture" (p. 94). Given the significance of identity during students' higher education experiences and the limited scholarship on Black male identity development at HBCUs, we set out to explore this phenomenon, which is why we have titled this study, "Hidden Identity."

The purpose of this study was to use constructivist grounded theory to develop a theory of identity development for Black males attending HBCUs. More specifically, we explored the process of identity development for Black males and what institutional factors at HBCUs influence their identity development. Exploring the identity development of Black males at HBCUs can help inform future scholarship on Black males as well as provide practitioners guidance in supporting Black males as they persist towards degree completion. The following research questions guided the study: (1) How do the experiences at a historically Black college and university influence the identity development for Black males? (2) What external factors influence identity development for Black males who attend a historically Black college or university?

Literature Review

Black Males at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Research documenting the experiences of Black males at HBCUs has proliferated in recent years highlighting both academic successes and challenges. Palmer et al. (2010) found that racial homogeneity, or being around other Black males, and supportive faculty and peers contributed to academic success for Black males who entered an HBCU through a remedial admissions program. Likewise, Palmer and Gasman (2008), Palmer and Maramba (2012), and Palmer and Young (2009) found that supportive faculty and staff, being engaged on campus, and personal responsibility were important to the academic success of Black males at HBCUs. The themes of supportive faculty and staff is consistent for high-achieving (i.e., a grade point average of 3.0 or better) Black males as well, although outcomes associated with peer relationships are mixed because high-achievers can sometimes feel like they are being judged by peers (Goings, 2016). In addition to on-campus support, familial support is also documented as significant for academic success (Palmer et al., 2011). While understanding the academic success of Black males at HBCUs is critical, understanding their challenges is vital as well.

In Palmer et al.'s (2010) study, the authors found insufficient financial aid, pride that prevented asking for help, and problems at home or in their local community impeded academic success for Black males at HBCUs. Because of insufficient financial aid, Palmer et al. (2009) noted Black males may have to work full-time jobs which can present academic challenges. Hesitancy to use campus resources to improve academic success is also a challenge faced by Black males at HBCUs (Palmer et al., 2009).

As research on Black males continues to emerge, documenting their experiences at HBCUs will continue to remain critical (Palmer et al., 2009), and as we noted earlier, going

beyond documenting their experiences and offering models to help explain their identity development is vital to offer Black males more holistic support during their experiences.

Identity Development and Black Males in U.S. Higher Education

While various Black identity theories have been developed by researchers (e.g., see Jackson, 1975; Sellers et al., 1998; Thomas, 1971), Cross's (1971, 1991), and eventually, Cross and Fhagen-Smith's (2001) Black identity development theory might be considered the most notable Black identity theory used by higher education and student affairs scholars and practitioners. Cross and Fhagen-Smith outlined the identity development of Black people in the United States as they progress through their own understanding and realization of what it means to be Black in the United States during adulthood. It is what they called *Nigrescence,* or "the process of becoming Black" (Cross, 1991, p. 147).

While Cross's theory is well recognized in higher education, it has not fallen without some criticism. For example, Constantine et al. (1998) noted the recognition of other sociodemographic identities within the theory could be useful. Further, they wrote, "Some current models of Black racial identity have tended to assume that all Black Americans perceive and experience racial issues similarly" (Constantine et al., 1998, p. 98). Put another way, what Constantine and colleagues might be arguing is exploring identity development at the intersection of identities (e.g., race and sex) and within certain contexts (e.g., HBCUs) might provide more holistic explanations of identity development.

One example of why intersecting identities and context matters in the exploration of Black males' identity development in higher education settings is Mitchell and Means's (2014) theoretical consideration of Black gay and bisexual men's experiences at PWIs in the United States. Mitchell and Means theorized that Black gay and bisexual men might constantly move through various consciousnesses because of their multiple marginalized identities (i.e., Black in the United States and sexual orientation in primarily heteronormative spaces). While the influence of identity and racial identity on the experiences of Black males in U.S. higher education settings is often explored (e.g., see Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Collins et al., 2017; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2015), proposed models to help explain their identity development warrant further attention, particularly for Black males who attend HBCUs.

Method

Given our aim to propose a theoretical consideration of Black male identity development, we selected a constructivist grounded theory as the research design for the study. Introduced by Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theory is the third generation of grounded theory as it acknowledges that researchers' values influence the facts they intend to identity. Grounded theory as a qualitative method also provides researchers the ability to develop theory from data with flexible guidelines (Charmaz, 2014).

Although there is flexibility in the grounded theory process, there are specific steps that must be taken when conducting a grounded theory study. Like other qualitative research designs, constructivist grounded theory studies start with the initial research questions (Charmaz, 2014). From the research questions, researchers then recruit participants for their study which leads to the data collection process. Initial coding begins during the data collection process which can begin to create new data. Once the initial coding has been completed, the research moves to focused coding and the development of themes, which help the researcher to identify a theory. The final step in this process is the write-up of the theory. Progressing through grounded theory may seem like a linear process, but the researcher may fluctuate

between data collection and theory building several times prior to advancing to the write up component of the theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Participants

Prior to recruiting participants, we received Institutional Review Board approval. Our study included eight participants, which we found adequate as we saw evidence of data saturation. Like purposeful sampling, criterion sampling was used to qualify participants for this study, meaning participants had to meet certain criteria to apply. The criteria were based on the major tenants of the research questions. The following criteria qualified participants for this study: (1) participants attended and were graduates of HBCUs, (2) the entirety of their undergraduate coursework was completed at an HBCU, (3) they self-identified as Black or African American, and (4) they self-identified as male. In addition to criterion sampling, we used snowball sampling to recruit participants. Snowball sampling is a recruitment method where participants connect researchers to additional individuals who qualify for the study.

Using our personal and professional networks, which included social and professional organizations consisting primarily of Black males, we recruited participants through emails, text messages, and social media posts. Once participants contacted us expressing interest in the study, we asked them to complete participant information sheets to provide background data for each of them. The data collected from the information sheets helped inform follow-up questions and explore future questions throughout the study. The information collected included the participants' years graduated, college majors, college grade point averages, the number of years required to complete their bachelor's degrees, their household incomes growing up, their college first-generation statuses, and whether they had Black male role models outside of their families. Participants completed the information sheet voluntarily and could exclude any information they were not comfortable sharing.

Prior to their initial interviews, we provided participants an informed consent document via email. We also read through the informed consent document at the beginning of participants' first interviews. While all participants remained in the study throughout its entirety, we informed them they could remove themselves from the study at any time for any reason. We use pseudonyms for each participant to bolster confidentiality for each participant.

Participant demographics. The participants came from diverse backgrounds. They graduated from HBCUs between the years 1989 and 2010. Their grade point averages ranged from 2.3 to 3.97 on a 4.0 scale. Participants took anywhere from four to seven years to complete their undergraduate degrees. Four participants identified as first-generation college graduates, which means their parent(s) or guardian(s) did not complete an undergraduate degree. Their household incomes while growing up ranged from $20,000 to $79,999. Six of the eight participants lived on campus during their college experience and those who lived on campus did so for at least two years. Every participant attended graduate school after receiving their undergraduate degree, with half of them pursing their graduate degrees at an HBCU. Six of the eight participants reported having a Black male role model outside of their immediate family.

Data Collection

In addition to the participant information sheets, we collected data through semi-structured interviews with each participant. We thought collecting data through interviews was the most realistic and appropriate approach for data collection as participants were reflecting back on their lived experiences. Each interview consisted of predetermined interview questions and lasted approximately 60 minutes. We designed the interview questions to explore participants' journeys through their identity development as Black males. More specifically,

the questions targeted the participants' perceptions of what it means to be a Black male and how attending an HBCU influenced their personal identity development as a Black male. To ensure the questions developed addressed the research questions, TR conducted a pilot interview with DM since DM met the selection criteria. After completing the piloting processes, we removed some interview questions as they did not solicit responses that addressed Black male identity development. The interviews included questions like, "When did you first begin to identify as a Black male?" Another example question was, "Would you say your experiences of being a Black male at an HBCU is comparative to your experiences of being a Black male outside of an HBCU? Why or why not?"

We conducted an initial interview with each participant and one follow-up interview either face-to-face or via phone totaling 16 interviews. Follow-up interviews also consisted of predetermined interview questions to ensure all participants were asked the same questions, as recommended by Charmaz (2014). The initial interview helped to develop initial codes regarding Black male identity development at HBCUs. The follow-up interviews helped to expand upon the initial codes that emerged from the initial interview and explore the possibility of more codes. An example question for the follow-up interviews was, "How have you effectively managed code switching in the professional arena?" We included this question since code switching emerged as a code during the initial round of interviews. Our multistage interviewing process is an example of theoretical sampling, where initial data collection and analysis informs what data are collected in future rounds of data collection (Charmaz, 2014).

Data Analysis

With constructivist grounded theory studies, Charmaz (2014) expresses the importance of beginning initial coding at the start of data collection, and that coding continues throughout the entire research process, so data collection and analysis happens simultaneously. Our initial coding process included organizing the data into broad categories. From there, we transitioned from initial coding to focused coding. Focused coding is "a sequel to initial coding in which researchers concentrate on the most frequent and/or significant codes among their initial codes and test these codes against large batches of data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 343). During the focused coding process, we organized more frequent codes from the initial coding process to form themes and subthemes. Finally, we used themes and subthemes that emerged to develop a grounded theory of Black male identity development at HBCUs.

Our data collection and analysis processes highlight how we, as the researchers, served as research instruments and helped shape the study. Given our roles in the data collection and analysis process, we found it important to highlight how our positionalities, which Ravitch and Carl (2015) define as the researcher's role and social identity with regards to the research location.

Researchers' Positionalities

TR: I am a Black male. I am a father, son, and brother who continues to explore all of my identities and their intersections. As a college graduate, I attended predominantly white institutions throughout my educational career. As one who identifies as a Black male, I felt a connection to the participants in this study and understood the experiences Black males shared as they progressed through college. However, I was able to remain open minded as my college experience and attending a PWI was different from the participants as they all attended HBCUs. During the study, it was important for me not to compare my experience in college to those who are participated in this study, and I had to

remind myself of that throughout the data collection and analysis process. I did not have a personal relationship with any of the participants.

DM: I am a Black male. I am also a father, son, and brother, among other identities. I attended an HBCU during my undergraduate studies and majored in chemistry even after my high school counselors said I was too smart to attend an HBCU. Unfortunately, I held those views about HBCUs because of what I was told by those who were influential in my life. Still, after being offered full scholarships at HBCUs, my mom asked me to reconsider my decision about where I would attend college and I ended up at Shaw University, an HBCU in Raleigh, NC. I could relate to the participants' experiences throughout given my lived experience and had to monitor my biases throughout the process to ensure we told their stories, not mine. I personally knew one of the participants.

Together, our positionalities informed our interests in the study, our approach to the study, our interactions with participants, and how we analyzed the data. While we acknowledge our positionalities were important in how we co-constructed the findings and eventual theory presented with the participants, we employed several techniques to improve the trustworthiness of the study to center the participants' voices and experiences.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness ensures the researcher takes steps to accurately portray participants' responses in their research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2015). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) identify four areas for trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (see Bloomberg and Volpe for full descriptions of each trustworthiness criterion). To bolster trustworthiness within the study: we (1) present an audit trail within the study, which is presenting enough information for someone else to replicate the study; (2) conducted member checks, which included having participants review transcripts to ensure their words were accurate and the theory to see if it matched their lived experience; (3) journaled to monitor our thoughts and biases throughout the study; (4) analyzed the data using a process of checks and balances, which included analyzing the data independent of each other and then discussing our analyses together as well as comparing our proposed theory to existing literature to ensure we were interpreting the participants' voices accurately; and finally, (5) provided rich, thick descriptions of the data to support the themes, subthemes and eventually theory that emerged.

Findings

This section presents the themes and subthemes from the interviews providing evidence to support a theory of Black male identity development at historically Black colleges and universities. The four overarching themes that help inform the theory are: (1) acknowledgment of Black male identity, (2) understanding of differences among Black males, (3) creation of professional identity, and (4) transition into Black male role model

Acknowledgment of Black Male Identity

Each participant was asked to describe what it meant to be a Black male and when they began to identify as a Black male. From the descriptions of what it means to be a Black male, a common theme of pride emerged from the participants. Given this common theme, we asked participants in a second round of interviews what it meant to be a proud Black male and when

they began to feel proud to identify as a Black male. The following sections reflect the six subthemes that emerged from the participants responses.

To be a Black Male is to Be…

It was important to hear each participant describe what it meant to identify as a Black male. Overall, participants described being a Black male as being connected to family, spirituality, ancestors, and strength. John noted:

> [B]eing a Black male just means, number one, I'm a man of strength. I think, based off our heritage and things that we've gone through over a number of years, I've just noticed the strength of Black men overall is particularly strong. I see a lot of Black men in terms of like trying to overcome a lot of resistance and being resilient, and basically just trying to make a strong mark in today's society.

Oscar placed his description of being a Black male on a spiritual level, but also agreed with other participants on the importance of there being strength and a connection to their heritage. Oscar described a Black male as:

> [T]o be God. I'm to see myself as the first and I'm the originator of all. That's just some information that I've come across later on in my life, because when I was younger, I wasn't too much of aware of the rich history that we actually have as descendants of Africans.

Brandon defined being a Black male within the larger context of the world. Brandon stated:

> To be a Black male is to live with, lived through, at least a by dimensional reality of navigating life with the...obstacles presented by race. And to be Black in America is to be often oppressed or sometimes hunted… but then Black men also struggle with issues pertaining to class and often disallows to flourish economically to be hired as for certain jobs. And so, to be a Black man is to attempt to navigate society, walk, carry into the appendages that race and class confers up on us and sort of be a Black male in America is, to every day be confronted with the reality of the necessity of navigating the society that is tilted towards your destruction.

Participants agreed being a Black male required strength and connection to the history of being Black in America and descendants of Africa. While the oppression of being a Black male was recognized by the participants, there was a positive component associated with being a Black male. Once participants were able to define what it meant to identify as a Black male, they then recalled when they began to identify as a Black male.

I Became a Black Male…

Having the definitions from each participant of what it means to be a Black male, we wanted to know when each participant began to identify as a Black male. The timeframe of identification varied among the participants, but each participant could recall when he was able to identify as a Black male and the context as to how he recognized his Black male identity.

Eric recalls his experience of realizing he was being treated differently at the age of five. Although he thought this experience was normal, he was informed by his mother that his experience was influenced by his race. Eric recalled:

> As early as five years old, I realized I was being treated differently than other kids. And not necessarily just because I was a Black kid but because I was a taller Black kid. I'm playing soccer at five years old and my mother had to literally bring my birth certificate to the game every week because people would constantly question my age. And whereas you could understand and say, "This kid is abnormally tall." But on the other hand, they're saying, "These Black kids," and this is how my mom presented it to me like, "They think I would bring my child here to just dominate some other younger kids. Like I'm a cheater, we're cheaters, we're this and that."

Mike also realized in elementary that things were not the same with him as it was with everyone else stating, "I went to a predominantly white elementary. So [I] did notice that there were not too many people with skin tone and look like [me]." Tre had a similar experience living in the South:

> I grew up in the South, so I say at least kindergarten. You knew that in kindergarten, preschool, you knew that you were different… I mean we was always different. You stood out and you wanted to be better. So, I guess it's something that at early age has always been there.

For other participants, attending a predominantly white school provided them with experiences they needed to recognize themselves as a Black male. Kenny's Black male identity was influenced by being able to complete what he called "Afro-centric" courses. This helped him to develop a sense of pride and increased knowledge about who he was regarding his Black male identity:

> I've always been a Black male, but I think really getting into what it means to be a Black man, I would say high school, tenth grade year. My ninth-grade year I went to a Catholic private high school which was a mixed population but majority white. I went there and I went to some public school. So, the public school, I'm not sure how the public school got teachings from the Afro-centric perspective… I think from there really developed a sense of pride, sense of history, knowledge about self, community. That's really where I fully got in tuned with what it means to be a Black man.

Tre's father also helped him to understand what it meant to be a Black male:

> I say early on, probably at least, probably like 10. Ten years old. My father used to work for a Japanese corporation. So, he explained me the difference between different nationalities and the way of life. So, I think that's one of the things that stuck with me from 10 years old.

Participants were each able to identify when they acknowledged their identity as a Black male. Each participant was able to clearly recognize this identity being formed at a young age. While each participant experienced their identity recognition in different ways, each identity was acknowledged based on external factors. For many it was a parent or a teacher

who helped them to see what it meant to be a Black male; for others, it was the experience of being exposed to a specific environment or situation. When participants recognized they were Black males, they also recognized there was another step in the process of developing their identity: pride in being a Black male.

Proud to be a Black Male

With participants beginning to identify as a Black male at a young age, this helped to create a sense of pride among all the participants pertaining to their identity. Participants were asked to define when they began to be proud in their identity and whether this pride was influenced by attending an HBCU. The common theme regarding pride was that it developed at a young age and was enhanced through attending an HBCU. Mike recognized his father for helping to develop his pride in being a Black male:

> I would say in high school, there's not necessarily a particular event or thing, it just, I would say even before that, that was something that was always just reverent to me and my brothers and I…[M]y father was the first person that ever told me about Marcus Garvey. I didn't know or learn about Marcus Garvey in school until 12th grade, but my father was the first one to expose me to Marcus Garvey years before that… I feel that's what made me become a proud Black man.

While Mike's father was given credit for developing their pride, attending an HBCU helped to enhance his pride by seeing Black professionals. Mike stated, "Yes, a lot of it is influenced by, it's in the HBCU because you can see Black professors, a Black president and provost, people in higher positions that you didn't see in other places." Mike was not the only one whose pride was influenced by external factors at a young age. Brandon also developed his pride at a young age that was influenced by national external factors. Brandon stated:

> I think it was kind of woven in me from a kid. I took notice of men from the nation of Islam standing clad in suits, in bow ties on street corners [in my hometown], selling papers. I took notice of the way that Louis Farrakhan articulated his thoughts, his passion, his depth of insight, his ability to interpret world events over and against history, over and against sacred theological traditions of Christianity and Islam. When he would, when his speeches would come on television, and there was a certain pride to watching a Black man do that… So, when you talk about, when did Blackness become impressed upon me, from a kid.

Pride in identifying as a Black male was consistent across the board for all participants as no one stated any regret or anything they would wish to change about being a Black male. This response given by Tre would sum up how the participants felt about being a Black male: "I wouldn't want to be anything other."

A Proud Black Male is…

After explaining their pride in being a Black male, participants were asked to describe characteristics of a proud Black male. Common themes were self-awareness, connection to the community, and the willingness to help others. John described the importance of knowing who

you are and understanding the negative events do not shape your identity as a proud Black male. John stated:

> I think it just means to be a person that's fully aware of himself and just being aware of your position and knowing everything that comes with it and embrace it. The negative as well as being aware and proud of the positive…Like I'm proud of the things that go well as a Black man. And I'm also aware of those things, negative things that have happened to me, but those negative things don't define me. They may have molded me and pushed me to this point of where I am now, but they're not the things that define me.

Oscar also gave his response with the importance for Black males to reach others through mentorships while remaining confident in who he is by stating, "I'd definitely say like a mature, confident, a man of integrity. I think one who, I guess willing to mentor and help others. I think also one who [is] sure who they are as a person."

Eric took his response a step further by incorporating the requirement for the Black male to give to the community. Eric explained a proud Black male is someone who reaches beyond themselves in order to help the community in which he resides. Eric stated:

> Proud Black male. Outstanding citizen in the community. Well respected professionally and personally with an extensive network. I think your network is your net worth, and, if you're proud and you are being the man that you're supposed to be, your network should be vast. And so, I think for a Black male you need to be a good father. You need to be a good worker and contributor. And the type of person that people seek out for assistance. And they're comfortable with seeking out for your assistance. And you take pride and assisting others. And a father of all, not just, "Oh, this is my child." Any room I walk in and there's kids in there, I feel like the father, and I accept that responsibility to be that. And I think as a proud Black man accepts the responsibility of everybody.

To be proud to be a Black male requires a sense of self-awareness, according to the participants in this study. That self-awareness addresses both the positive and negative impact of being a Black male. As the self-awareness is developed, participants in this study recognized the importance of making sure they connect with others and embracing their community.

Attending an HBCU Put the Icing on the Cake

Each participant within this study recognized their identity as a Black male prior to enrolling into an HBCU. Although they identified as a Black male prior to enrollment, participants stated the influence enrolling into an HBCU had on their identity and how they began their development moving forward. John discussed how his HBCU experience was foundational to his identity development as a Black male. John explained:

> I would say it was one of the most foundational experiences that I ever had. You know, that brought me to be in the person I am now. Again, I wouldn't have ever known that there were other things even possible outside of what I knew about Black people at that time until I went to HBCU.

Alton added to the conversation about being able to see other Black faces in leadership providing a positive experience for him while he was enrolled in their HBCU. Alton stated:

> For me, it was good. Because again, being surrounded by, basically, just us at the time. [My HBCU] wasn't just an HBCU, it was completely still Black. The only white faces on [my HBCU's] campus was a couple of professors. All the students at that time were Black.

Seeing Black faces in leadership was an important factor for the participants. For Oscar, it was not just the Black faces in leadership that helped him to develop additional pride in being a Black male, but it was the experience of being around other educated Black males and the environment that fostered their success. Oscar explained:

> I would say just the overall experience. Just allowed me to pride myself as a Black man. But not only that, interacting with other individuals who attended HBCUs near mine was also an eye opening thing in terms of, hey, even though society does not really value African Americans or especially Black males, being in that environment where there were so many educated Black males like myself it just made me understand how, I guess how talented we were, how educated we were, how bright and intelligent we were despite what the media and society tries to portray about African Americans.

Being enrolled in an HBCU provided unique experiences for all the participants while helping to expose them to Black leadership in executive positions. It also allowed them to be in an environment surrounded by other Black males who were working towards the same goal of success. While the positivity is there for each of the participants, it is important to not overlook the challenges faced by Black males attending an HBCU.

Recognition of Challenges

There are also negative experiences that Black males go through while they are enrolled at an HBCU that influence their identity development. Alton acknowledged the role an HBCU has played in his professional life. The lessons that were taught to Alton helped him to understand that when he was exposed to society beyond his HBCU, he would need to work harder for everything he earned. Alton stated:

> I wouldn't have worked harder for everything that I got than I think some of the other people around me. It wasn't just being [at an HBCU] in general. And I still see that occasionally, now, where you have to be twice as smart to get half as far. That was one of the harder lessons to learn. But at the same time, you have to be twice as smart to get half as far, and still not act like you are twice as smart.

To overcome those challenges, Alton realized it is important to know who he was and what he could do. He stated, "[Y]ou have to know what you're about, you have to know yourself, you have to know your ability, and you have to be humble about it. You get a lot further that way, sometimes."

While Alton's challenges occurred after he graduated, other participants' challenges occurred while they were enrolled in school. Although they were able to be in an environment where majority of the student population looked like them, Tre recalls a time when he was

reminded that, although he was enrolled in college, he was just another Black male in the broader community. Tre explained:

> It was a time I was in a grocery store, and it was this older white gentleman and he was talking to me and he asked me why I was there and I told him cause I go to school and he said the little Black school on the hill. So, I can always remember that and that made me think of, they just look at us, we ain't really that important.

This section of findings focused on the recognition of identity by Black males who attend an HBCU. This recognition of identity included the development of pride in being a Black male and being able to describe what that pride looks like for Black males. Attending an HBCU helped to enhance the identity development for Black males, but this enhancement was not free of any challenges. On campus, race was not a significant factor to Black males, but in the community at large, Black males continued to battle stereotypes and racism.

Understanding Differences Among Black Males

Assumptions are made in the media that all Black males are alike. These assumptions have power on younger Black males as they begin their own personal identity development. For participants in this study, there was a sense of shock when beginning their courses at an HBCU. Seeing other Black males provided them the opportunity to dismiss the assumption that Black males come from similar backgrounds. John's perspective was changed when he started classes at his HBCU:

> I really thought we were all are the same as Black men until I actually, until I attended an HBCU and that's when I knew that we all came in different shapes, sizes, colors, different classes. We had different beliefs. Up until that point, I believe[d] every Black person was a Christian. Everybody came from a one parent home and everybody didn't have a lot of money…They had, they all came from the same, pretty much the same socioeconomic class unless they were a celebrity…when I got to [my HBCU], I started to see that there were people that were different. They had different points of views.

Alton was able to notice the positiveness of Black males on campus as well:

> On campus to be around that many Black men, more confidence instead of watching what happens when you got beat down, because there were a lot of kids I went to school with that I knew were smart, they knew they were smart, but they didn't get treated that way, and they didn't get those expectations, and then live down to those expectations. And I got to watch that. It didn't really trigger until I got to [my HBCU] and saw all these confident Black men.

While other participants stated they were not exposed to the diversity of the Black male until they enrolled into college, Kenny stated he was used to this diversity and seeing other Black males in positions of leadership at a young age through the schools he was enrolled in. Kenny stated:

> I think I was used to that. All throughout elementary school, for example, I went back and forth from private to public schools, but they were always majority

Black. So, I saw affluent Black men and I saw those who were from lower socio-economic status. Middle school, I went to a pretty urban middle school where I had varied socio-economic backgrounds. High school, I went to a Catholic private high school so affluent, middle-class, upper-class and then from there I went to a public school that was majority Black with lower socio-economic status.

Understanding the differences among Black males helped to influence the identities of those who attended an HBCU. This "understanding of self" that many participants referred to helped to provide opportunities for Black males to be who they want to be. This included the development of a professional identity for each participant.

Creation of Professional Identity

Participants discussed the development of a professional identity that was aided by their experiences at an HBCU. This professional identity was developed with an unexpected training the participants would go through during their time at an HBCU. Black males were able to develop their professional identity without having to focus on race. This allowed them to discover who they are while embracing their professional image. The participants were able to reflect on what it means to be a Black professional. This reflection fostered another subtheme that emerged which is code switching. Included in this section are the six subthemes discovered.

Unexpected Training

Attending an HBCU provided participants the opportunity to learn life lessons and receive unexpected training from the educators who provided their learning. Much of this training took place in the classroom in addition to their academic content. Oscar discussed how his professors provided his unexpected training in the classroom setting. Oscar stated:

I had a few professors that would spend half the class talking about how much we needed to take certain things seriously or how the world perceived us to be and how much of a threat that we were to society. And because of that, there would be certain narratives or certain perspectives about me as a Black man and stuff like that…At that moment I just realized how much more seriously I had to take all those opportunities in order to make sure my life from that point on was successful.

John had a similar experience of building his confidence and being able to figure out who he was in order to build confidence. John explained:

[F]rom the terms of learning you know it is possible to do more, you can do more. You do have the abilities to do more. But that's, to me, I think it's just the stage, it's like stages and I think it's a stage, a step that I had to take to get to a certain level before I could really open my eyes to the struggle. I had to have a higher level of confidence and knew that there was, there is a network and a community that people that are out there who are, you know, in high positions that can help me and assist me and guide me through the fight or the struggle or whatever the case may be.

Alton discussed the expectations that were given to him while he was enrolled at his HBCU. These expectations helped to provide additional support beyond the classroom. Alton stated:

> [W]hile I was at my HBCU, I was living up to expectations that were attainable, but I had to fight for them. Once I left the HBCU, if I didn't watch myself, my only option I had was to live down to expectations. Because the same expectations did not exist outside of that school. You walked on that campus, you're going to do well, you're going to succeed, you're going to do better than you thought you could do, we got your back… you learn how to navigate in the real world, not just in the classroom. It makes a big difference.

While Black males enrolled into the HBCU for education, they also received additional training on how to become Black male professionals. This training was not limited to a career development class but was infused in the academics they received throughout their time at the HBCU. Being able to grow as a professional on campus was beneficial as they were able to develop their professional identity without having to worry about race.

Removing Race from the Process

Opportunities for Black males were not lacking at an HBCU. These opportunities allowed for Black males to compete with the rest of the campus for leadership positions or other endeavors without having to worry about race. Oscar compared how the campus life differed from society when it came to racial identity. Oscar stated:

> I guess at HBCU, race didn't really play a manner. So, when opportunities came up or things were happening on campus, whether it was good or bad, we knew race didn't play a factor in the whole scenario. Whereas in society, it feels like that's always on my mind, whether or not did I get a job because I was Black, am I not getting a promotion on my job because I'm Black. So those types of things.

Eric also talked about the difference of being on campus and how Black males are viewed on campus versus how they are viewed in the community. Eric explained:

> On campus, you have this notion of where, you're going places and you're about to do major things. Well when you leave campus immediately and go back out in to the community, you still get that similar look to anybody else that's your age that's your complexion out in that society and they can't look at you and tell that you go to an HBCU, you're on your way to doing something major with your life. [T]hey just see another Black kid, another Black man, and as much as we knew we were doing something great, when we went out into the community they looked down on us and they still had that same snide look at us, even though they know we're college students.

Alton discussed how it was easy for him to become comfortable on his campus as race was not a factor. Alton explained the only competition you have on an HBCU campus is proving to yourself you can do something. Alton said:

> Being a Black man on campus was a hell of a lot, still is, a hell of a lot more comfortable. And that helps with your confidence level with everything else that you do. That helps with learning how to navigate outside of the university…you don't have anything to prove to anybody. Except maybe, you always have much more to prove to yourself. I'm not good enough to do this. I have the ability to do that.

This growth and knowledge of self was another subtheme that emerged in the data: being able to figure out who you are and what your place was in society.

Know Who You Are

Knowledge of self and knowing who you are was a common theme among all participants. Participants stated they were able to figure out who they were and grow into the professional they felt they should be. For Oscar, becoming a confident Black male in the corporate setting was derived from attending an HBCU. Oscar explained:

> I work in corporate America and I think one of the things that I continually find is that, there's still that, even though I'm confident in who I am and confident about my abilities and skills and this that and the third, I still feel like there's some, because I am Black, there is some hesitation to act a certain way or present myself in a certain way because I'm Black…Because I'd definitely say, although I am confident in who I am, I do find myself being a little bit more reserved than my counterparts because of those types of narrative that I've seen some other Black males face, whether it's on my job or just out in society and period.

Mike explained how when you are out in the community, it is important to understand that you are representing more than just yourself. Mike stated:

> The main thing I would say is always knowing who you are and knowing that you represent more than just yourself. You know, professors used to always say, you never know who's watching. You don't do anything that your parents or grandparents wouldn't approve of. So, keeping in the back of your mind, you know that you'd be quiet as a church mouse at work, when you get out of work, you'd be a crazy man. So, if you just hold yourself accordingly at all times, you don't have to worry about doing anything that would disrespect who you are and who you represent.

Participants placed an emphasis on discovering who they were while they were enrolled at an HBCU. This discovery helped them to enhance their identities as Black males and begin to embrace the expectation of professionalism that came with attending an HBCU.

Embracing Professionalism

When we asked the participants how they were able to separate their professional identities from their personal identities, participants stated they did not feel they needed to separate the identities. Participants attributed this lack of need to separate their identities to their enrollment at an HBCU. Oscar discussed how his professional and personal identities were intertwined, stating:

I think a lot of my professional identity [and] personalized identity are kind of intertwined and linked that I don't think they had to teach me too much about each of my identities because like I said, I think they both were already like intertwined.

John talked about professionalism being a language that is used in America. John identified this as a cross cultural language and is not limited to one particular group. John stated:

Professionalism is the universal law in America and is spoken the same way no matter the culture. So, I learned how to be more professional when I was in college, so my interaction with white people or Caucasians is a lot easier because I knew how to speak the language of being professional.

Participants understood their professional identity was not something they needed to change to make others feel more comfortable. Embracing this part of their identity allowed them to develop more confidence in who they are as a Black male.

Black Male Professional

During the first round of interviews, we felt it was important to ask each participant what it meant to be a Black male. A common theme amongst the participants was to be professional. To gain clarification, we followed up in the second round of interviews and asked the participants to describe what they would consider to be a professional Black male. Alton shared his thoughts on Black male professionalism where he stated:

When you said that, I was about to answer the way you asked the first way, and I still will, with professionalism, with that sense of pride, with that knowledge of self. Because if you don't know who you are, anybody can tell you who to be. And that's not a good thing in any case. If you don't know who you are, even if you can't put it in words, if you don't know who you are, somebody else is going to tell you who you are, and they're usually wrong.

Brandon's point of view towards the Black male professional was to transform the idea of what a professional looks like in the eyes of others by providing swag, or confident demeanor, into his professionalism. Brandon stated:

To be a Black male professional is to not simply be at the top of my game, not simply to be sharp intellectually, not simply to press the boundaries of my field and try to expand it, but to bring some class to it, to bring some swag to it, to bring an edge of aristocracy, if you will, to it. Yeah, and I think that's always what makes Blackness, kind of sets Blackness apart, because Black folk are not just professional, but they infuse some swag into their professionalism.

The swag that Brandon communicated is to help Black males to stay on top of their game. Tre talked about the importance of Black males to work harder than their counterparts when they are in the professional realm to stay on top of their game:

I hear that they say you have to be twice as good now. Now, I think you have to be three times as good. You understand. It's understood that you are not going

to be playing on the same level. But with knowing that, with knowing that, you still have to be able to be best you can be.

Participants noted being a Black male professional requires one to operate at a higher level. Respect was a quality participants acknowledged as important for a Black male professional to possess. Competing against stereotypes consciously and unconsciously and working at a higher level than their counterparts was a requirement for Black male professionals as articulated by the participants. Participants were able to articulate their viewpoint of a Black male professional based on the leadership they saw and what they learned while enrolled in an HBCU.

Code Switching

While discussing the Black male professional during the first round of interviews, the term "code switching" was brought up by several participants. In the second round of interviews, we asked participants to describe what code switching meant to them and how they were able to manage code switching in the professional arena. Since the participants were able to develop their professional identities without having to think about race, participants did not feel code switching was connected to trying to change one's race identity but being able to adapt to situations. John described code switching as being able to adjust when in a professional arena:

> Well for me, code switching is just basically being able to just work in a professional arena and speak professionally in that specific arena. To me, I don't call it talking white. I don't call it talking Black. It's just being able to communicate a specific way in a specific setting. The same way that I'm going to speak with my family and my friends is not how I'll talk when I'm in a professional setting.

Mike described code switching as being an imposter and changing who you are as a person to fit your environment. Even though Mike recognized code switching and defined what it meant to him, he explained he does not code switch anymore as he is content with who he is as a person. Mike continued:

> I just feel that, as far as code switching, for the clothes that I wear, things like that. I still got the same type of style at work and outside of work, you may laugh, giggle, at jokes that you may not necessarily get the reference to. To me, in the beginning I feel like code switching was prevalent. But now, once you get a little bit more comfortable where you are, you just feel that, I don't think I would do as much code switching. I'd just be who I am, and you got to take me for who I am.

Code switching was described to be an important asset to a professional Black male. Being able to conduct themselves differently according to their situations allows the Black male professional to be able to operate effectively in any arena. Since race was not a factor within an HBCU context, they were able to develop code switching naturally, not having to think about the racial makeup of the settings they were in.

Transition into a Black Male Role Model

Participants reported the transition to a Black male role model began while enrolled at an HBCU. Their HBCU enrollment allowed participants to be exposed to role models on campus that provided an impression of what a role model looks like. From their exposure to role models on campus, participants discussed what qualities are needed for Black males to be role models as well as what lessons needed to be taught to the next generation of Black males. This section includes three subthemes.

Exposure to Role Models on Campus

During the initial interviews, we asked participants who on campus had the greatest impact on their identity development while they were enrolled at an HBCU. Each participant was able to identify someone who has had an impact and served as a role model when they were enrolled. Role models varied from the president of the institution to administrative assistants. Oscar recalled his relationship with the president and vice president of his school, stating:

> I actually had a very strong relationship with the president of my school at the time and also the vice president and then a lot of their support team, I had a very strong relationship with. In fact, I would say my sophomore year, the vice president of the school actually paid for my education…I found most of the people that I had the strongest relationships with were female professors as opposed to Black male professors. Whereas, I think it would have been good at that point in time in my life to have some strong Black male presence to kind of help and shape my environment as I was growing and developing. I'd definitely say it was an administrator on campus who definitely was kind of like my mother on campus or whatever. I would say she had the greatest impact in terms of like, she was the one who helped me find my first internship.

For Eric, it was a childhood coach to whom he gave credit for being his role model. This coach was the reason he attended an HBCU, and he felt they were the most influential Black male outside of his family. Eric stated:

> I'm going to have say my childhood coach. He had, outside of my father, because my father, I always idolized my father, but outside of my father, that is the most influential Black male that has ever been in my life.

While it is common for the role models to be someone in a position of leadership or authority, Kenny saw role models in his peers:

> Definitely. A fraternity…. That was a good part of maturing me I would say. That was the first time I really had older men in my environment. In high school and in my neighborhood we were always the same age. The majority of us had problems so were not learning from each other, it wasn't really someone older to look up to. That was the first time, I really had somebody to look up to and direct me in the right direction so that was a good experience.

It is important to recognize that the role models participants identified were both male and female and worked in various capacities at their universities. For participants, it was not

necessarily the position of the role model, but what information they could gain from the role model. These relationships helped to shape the transition into a role model for participants.

Qualities of the Black Male Role Model

At their current points in life, all the participants recognized their positions as role models for the next generation. Given this status, participants were able to identify what they felt were important qualities in being a Black male role model. Brandon explained having the connection to history as an important quality for Black male role models stated:

> I think a connection with history, I think a commitment to the way that our ancestors have come and understanding that who we are and what we do, no matter the arena, it is a continuation of the seeds that they have sewn and what they've already planted, and we never can afford to lose sight of that. We never can afford to think that we have arrived.

Understanding who you are was also a quality Mike saw as being important in addition to transparency, honesty, and respect. Mike stated, "I'll say one of transparency, honesty and respect. One of Black pride, first and foremost, one who represents self-will, but one of caring." For Eric, having patience and understanding were qualities he felt were important when working with the younger generation of Black males:

> Patience and understanding. I understand the teen that people are saying are out of control. I understand the teen that they're saying, you're going to be a criminal your whole life. And as an athlete and becoming an athlete, after being labeled such, I know the athletic side of it where people... The kids that people see promise in and see benefit in. So, I have that understanding of all sides of the coin. And so, whatever that young person needs, whatever kind of guidance that young person needs, I'm qualified to give it to them.

These qualities were derived from the experiences participants had with their own role models and also their current status of serving as role models. As they served as role models, they were able to connect with others through using the qualities they have identified. This helped participants to identify lessons that should be taught to the next generation of Black males.

Lessons for the Next Generation of Black Males

After hearing the stories from Black males about their transition into becoming a role model, we thought it would be important to hear what lessons the next generation of Black males needed to know as they grew in their Black male identities. One of the common lessons to be taught was knowing history. Alton talked about the importance of improving the knowledge of history, but also understanding there is no such thing as being a carbon copy and to continue to develop into the person you are meant to be:

> The knowledge and acknowledgment of my history and of our history… So it's a matter of teaching the next generation, this is what happened, this is what can happen and get them to understand it, teach them to learn from our mistakes and there's certain things you just don't want to find out for yourself…The only other thing really is to try, there's no carbon copy way to do it. It's just find out

who you are, what is it you want to do? So that you might say, I want to be like somebody, but realize you can't be that somebody else. Then you've got kids, "I want to be like Lebron," "I want to be like Michael." That's fine. But what is it about that person that you like? And that's what you strive for. Cause you look characteristics, you're not trying to be a carbon copy.

Brandon also felt history, specifically Black history, is important to teach to the next generation of Black males. Brandon also added the need to learn about dignity as well:

I think history, I think, and not just white history, but Black history. History helps you interpret the present in a more robust way. I think it's important to teach the importance of the elements of dignity, and when I talk about the elements of dignity, I'm talking about the performance of elements of dignity. So Black men especially, and Black people in particular, have held onto dignity in the face of unrelenting disregard.

Tre felt it was a responsibility to guide the next generation "to the ancestors" who came before them order to help continue their legacy. He explained: "We have a responsibility first to guide them to our ancestors…we not here because of what, anything we'd done. It's all because those who came before us, and we have to carry on that legacy."

Participants did not attain the lessons they felt needed to be delivered to the next generation until they enrolled in an HBCU. For some participants, this information was given to them, and for others, they had to figure this information out on their own. Regardless of how they received the information, all participants felt it was necessary to pass it along through their positions of being role models to the next generation. The themes and subthemes presented informed the theory of Black male identity development at HBCUs.

Theory of Black Male Identity Development at HBCUs

The following four phases explain Black male identity development at HBCUs: (1) acknowledgment of Black male identity, (2) understanding of differences among Black males, (3) creation of professional identity, and (4) transition into Black male role model. Phase one occurs prior to the enrollment into an HBCU and is the foundational phase for the remaining phases. As the remaining phases can begin in any order, the first phase must be achieved before phases two, three, and four are developed. Phases two and three occur during the enrollment at an HBCU. Phase four is also initiated while enrolled in an HBCU but continues to develop after graduating from an HBCU. Figure 1 depicts the four phases.

#### Phase One: Acknowledgment of Black Male Identity

Black males who enroll at HBCUs do so with the understanding and recognition of their identity as a Black male. Acknowledgment of this identity occurs at a young age and is typically connected to an event that has transpired in their lives. For some Black males, this event may resemble a form of oppression by someone from the dominant culture. An example is being enrolled in a predominantly white school and becoming aware of the microaggressions that occur within the school. For other Black males, acknowledgement of their Black male identity is connected to a Black male they admire.

During the acknowledgment phase, there is an appreciation of being a Black male, which manifests through pride in one's identity. This pride can manifest in different ways and

is fostered further upon their enrollment into HBCUs. Learning who Black males are and where they come from are specific ways HBCUs help nurture this pride.

Figure 1
Theory of Black Male Identity Development Theory at HBCUs
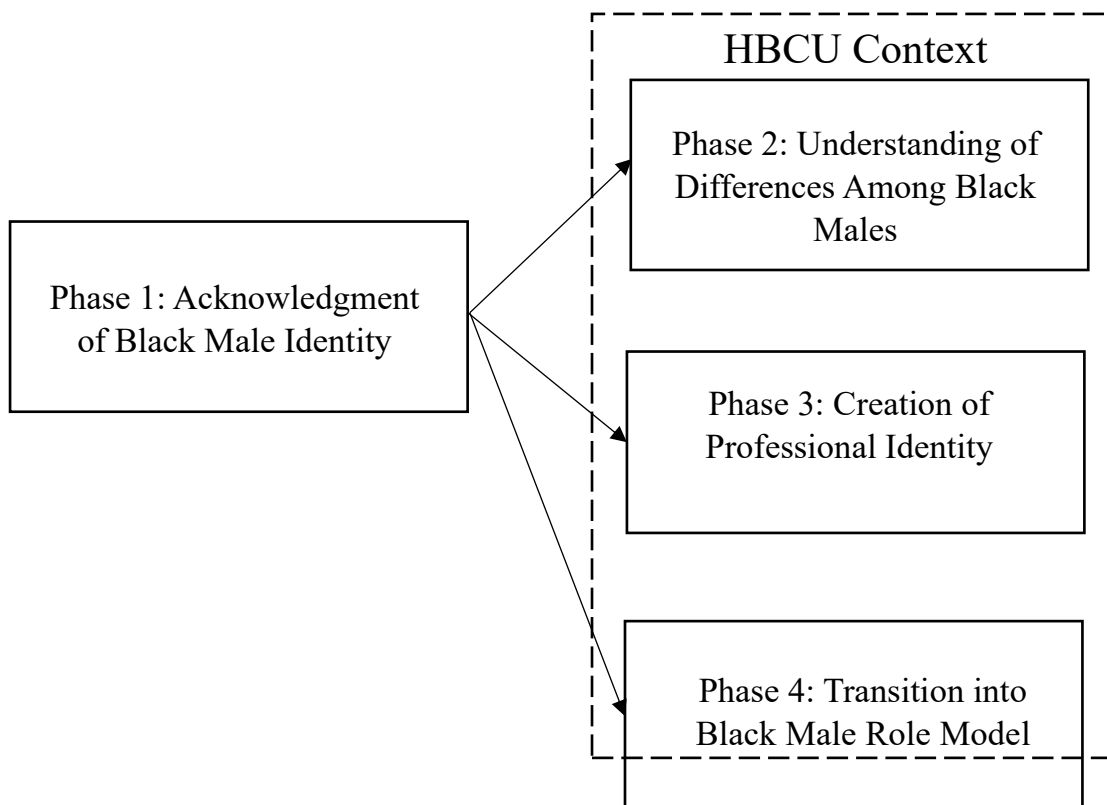
Note. Authors' image.

Phase Two: Understanding of Differences Among Black Males

Recognizing the differences between Black males is a simple yet important phase. Depending on neighborhood demographics and parental occupations prior to enrolling into college, this phase could occur early in the Black male's life; however, this phase usually occurs during the first year of college. For Black males who have not been exposed to the diversity within the Black male community, their first year enrolled an HBCU will come as a cultural shock that not all Black males are the same. The diversity amongst Black males at HBCUs is important as it allows Black males to explore who they are personally and begin to formulate their own identity.

Knowledge of self is critical to the Black male identity development on campus and is a process that occurs throughout all phases of identity development as Black males continuously seek to discover who they are and how they choose to present themselves. During this phase, specifically, the knowledge of self is increased as Black males begin to question who they thought they were prior to enrolling at an HBCU and whether this is their authentic selves. For some Black males, they realize they have tried to fit in with different crowds and finally recognize who they connect with more. Others begin to dig deep into who they felt their identity was and expose the areas in which did not correlate with their authentic selves as a Black male. Seeing other Black males embrace their differences and go against Black male stereotypes provides a sense of comfort for Black males at HBCUs to accept their identity.

Phase Three: Creation of Professional Identity

Professionalism is a quality possessed by Black males who attended an HBCU and developed during enrollment at an HBCU. The first step in this phase is exposure to professional Black males in leadership. Black males at HBCUs are able to see and appreciate Black male leadership early in their college tenures. This exposure provides Black males insight of what it means to be a Black male professional and how a Black male professional might carry themselves. It is important to note Black males who attend HBCUs also gained value by connecting with Black people regardless of sex or gender. Generally, the lessons learned when creating the professional identities were positively influenced by professionals who identified as Black.

Creation of an authentic professional identity is done without regards to race for the Black males on an HBCU campus. At most HBCUs, the student population is predominantly Black, so Black males can pursue leadership positions on campus without the worry or hesitation they will not receive the position due to their identity as a Black male. Seeing other Black male leaders also gives them the confidence to bring their true self into the leadership position.

Included in this phase is unplanned training that occurs in the classroom at HBCUs. Professors incorporate guidance of how to navigate society professionally into their curricula. Being able to have these discussions helps to incorporate professionalism into the identity of the Black males. Completing this phase in college provides Black males the ability to limit their code switching in the professional arena and they become more confident with who they are and what they bring to the table after graduation.

Phase Four: Transition into Black Male Role Model

Transitioning to being a Black male role model is the final phase for the identity development of Black males who attend and graduate from HBCUs. During this phase, Black males take the lessons they have learned throughout their life and begin to share them with the next generation of Black males. This phase begins as Black males are exposed to their own role models while enrolled at HBCUs. These role models do not have to identify as Black males; they just have the best interest of Black males in mind.

Discussion

Stories told by the participants helped us to develop a four-phase theory for Black male identity development for those who attended HBCUs in the United States. Specific to HBCUs, scholarship has grown related to the academic success of Black males (e.g., see Goings, 2016; Palmer & Davis, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Maramba, 2012; Palmer & Young, 2009; Palmer et al., 2009; Palmer et al., 2010). For example, Palmer et al. (2010) found that racial homogeneity was a positive factor for Black males' academic success. We also found racial homogeneity to be a positive factor for Black males at HBCUs, but in our case, we found it was beneficial for Black male identity development. Black males were provided the opportunity to be involved on their campus without having to consider race and racism to be a challenge within the immediate context. Given the positivity associated with racial homogeneity, the participants were more connected to campus and regularly applied for internships, ran for campus student government positions, and connected with institutional leaders.

Regarding the connection with institutional leaders, we found that Black males not only connected with leadership but saw them as role models. Our finding supports the findings of

Palmer and Maramba (2012) who found that authentic caring helped to promote Black male success on the campus of an HBCU. Palmer and Maramba also found the leadership on the HBCU campus promoted curricula that incorporated real world experiences. These findings from Palmer and Maramba are also supported as Black males in our study noted they were taught life lessons by professors and saw this as part of their Black male identity development.

Even though the participants attended institutions where most of the student body resembled them racially, they were still targets of racism when they were in their communities at large. Aligning with Harper's (2009) findings, Black males can experience both racism and success while they are enrolled in college. Where this study is different from Harper's study is that our participants noted they did not have to center racism while they were on their HBCU campuses but did as they navigated broader communities that included white people as the majority population, and this shaped their identity development in a unique way.

External factors were important for Black male identity development as well. Palmer et al. (2011) identified family as an external factor that influences Black males' academic success. The connection to family was present in our study as well. For example, families influenced how early the participants began identifying as Black males. Their early self-identifications as Black males were significant to their identity development later in life, particularly as related to their enrollment at an HBCU.

Finally, another external factors important to highlight is oppressive experiences at a young age that helped participants acknowledge their Black male identity. While this exposure was different for each participant, it was enough for the participant to know they were being treated differently. Once they began to reflect on what was different, they acknowledged their identities as Black males.

Implications for Practice

Given the influence HBCUs have on Black male identity development, it is important for HBCUs to intentionally promote and encourage Black male identity development processes. Allowing Black males opportunities to dig deeper to discover who they are may help them as they transition through the proposed phases of our identity theory. Faculty and staff should be encouraged to develop meaningful relationships with Black males on campus and must be provided with the necessary resources to do so as our study recognizes the importance of campus relationships at HBCUs as Black males progress through phases of identity development.

Beyond fostering and supporting strong relationships on campus, HBCUs should also be intentional in the ways they encourage the Black males on their campus to take advantage of the opportunities on campus while racism might be viewed as less significant within the immediate context of their experiences at HBCUs. Encouraging Black males to participate in leadership roles and other organizations on campus helps Black males develop professional identities that improve confidence as they enter the workforce and move through society. As their HBCU experiences help reduce the need for code switching, Black males build their confidence and bring their authentic selves to the table no matter who is in the room. Their authenticity allows them to advocate for other Black males who have not had similar experiences developing their Black male identity or who are still developing their professional identity.

Finally, HBCUs should consider how they are being intentional in recruiting Black males from diverse backgrounds. As stated by the participants, it is vital for Black males to know and understand there is diversity amongst the Black male community. Diversity within the Black male population helps other Black males see that it is okay to present their authentic selves because they see and learn Black males are different.

Recommendations for Future Research

The theory developed from this study could be used as an initial theory for Black male identity development at HBCUs. Another area of exploration could be a theoretical consideration explaining how Black males who attend a predominantly white institution develop their identities. As other identity development theories for Black males within higher education are explored, it would be beneficial to compare them to advance the scholarship on Black male identity development in higher education and to assist practitioners in supporting Black males.

Finally, as scholarship surrounding Black males in higher education continues to emerge, it is important to acknowledge their identities are not limited to race and sex or gender. As recommended by Boyd and Mitchell (2018), other identity intersections should be explored to nuance the understanding other social identities (e.g., sexual orientation, income, religion) have on Black males' identity development. The more scholarship that explores Black males' experiences and identity development, the better the chances institutions will be able to recognize their structural deficits and be more equipped to serve Black males holistically.

References

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Brooks, M., Jones, C., & Burt, I. (2013). Are African American male undergraduate retention programs successful? An evaluation of an undergraduate African American male retention program. *Journal of African American Studies*, *17*(2), 206-221. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-012-9233-2

Boyd, T. B. H., & Mitchell, D., Jr. (2018). Black male persistence in spite of facing stereotypes in college: A phenomenological exploration. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(4), 893-913. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3124

Charmaz, K. (2014). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Collins, J. D., Suarez, C. E., Beatty, C. C., & Rosch, D. M. (2017). Fostering leadership capacity among Black male achievers: Findings from an identity-based leadership immersion program. *Journal of Leadership Education, 16*(3). 82-96. https://doi.org/10.12806/V16/I3/R4

Constantine, M. G., Richardson, T. Q., Benjamin, E. M., & Wilson, J. W. (1998). An overview of Black racial identity theories: Limitations and considerations for future theoretical conceptualizations. *Applied and Preventative Psychology, 7*(2), 95-99. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-1849(05)80006-X

Cross, W. E., Jr. (1971). Toward a psychology of Black liberation: The Negro-to-Black conversion experience. *Journal of Black Psychology, 5*, 13-31.

Cross, W. E., Jr. (1991). *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American identity.* Temple University Press.

Cross, W. E., Jr., & Fhagen-Smith, P. (2001). Patterns of African American identity development: A life span perspective. In C. Wijeyesinghe & B. W. Jackson (Eds.), *New perspectives on racial identity development: A theoretical and practical anthology* (pp. 243-270). New York University Press.

Cross, W. E., Jr., Smith, L., & Payne, Y. (2002). Black identity: A repertoire of daily enactments. *Counseling Across Cultures*, *5*, 93-107.

Fries-Britt, S. (2000). Identity development of high-ability Black collegians. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *2000*(82), 55-65. https://doi.org/10.1002/TL.8206

Glenn, F. S. (2004). The retention of Black male students in Texas public community colleges. *Journal of College Student Retention, 5*(2), 115-133. https://doi.org/10.2190/GYEU-WWER-N8W7-XTBK

Goings, R. B. (2016). (Re)defining the narrative: High-achieving nontraditional Black male undergraduates at a historically Black college and university. *Adult Education Quarterly, 66*(3), 237-253. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713616644776

Harper, S. R. (2009). [N-word] no more: A critical race counternarrative on Black male student achievement at predominantly white colleges and universities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 22*(6), 697-712. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903333889

Harper, S. R., & Davis, C. H., III. (2012). They (don't) care about education: A counternarrative on Black male students' responses to inequitable schooling. *Educational Foundations*, *26*(1), 103-120.

Harper, S. R., & Quaye, S. (2007). Student organizations as venues for Black identity expression and development among African American male student leaders. *Journal of College Student Development*, *48*(2), 127–144. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0012

Hotchkins, B. K., & Dancy, T. E. (2015). Black male student leaders in predominantly white universities: Stories of power, preservation, and persistence. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, *39*(1), 30-44.

Jackson, B. W., III. (1975). Black identity development. *Journal of Educational Diversity, 2*, 19-25.

Jackson, B. W., III. (2012). Black identity development: Influences of cultural and social oppression In C. L. Wijeyesinghe & B. W. Jackson III (Eds.), *New perspectives on racial identity development: Integrating emerging frameworks* (pp. 33-50). New York University Press.

Mitchell, D., Jr., Almanza, A., Hilton, A., & Spraggings, B. (2014). Still happening, yet still problematic: The 21st century Du Bois and Washington debate. *The National Journal of Urban Education and Practice, 7(*3), 186-197.

Mitchell, D., Jr., & Means, D. (2014). "Quadruple consciousness": A literature review and new theoretical consideration for understanding the experiences of Black gay and bisexual men at predominantly white institutions. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, *5*(1), 23-35.

Palmer, R. T., & Davis, R. J. (2012). "Diamond in the rough": The impact of a remedial program on college access and opportunity for Black males at an historically Black institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *13*(4), 407-430. https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.13.4.a

Palmer, R., & Gasman, M. (2008). "It takes a village to raise a child": The role of social capital in promoting academic success for African American men at a Black college. *Journal of College Student Development, 49*(1), 52-70. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2008.0002

Palmer, R. T., & Maramba, D. C. (2012). Creating conditions of mattering to enhance persistence for Black men at an historically Black university. *Spectrum: The Journal of Black Men*, *1*(1), 95-119. https://doi.org/10.2979/spectrum.1.1.95

Palmer, R. T., & Young, E. M. (2009). Determined to succeed: Salient factors that foster academic success for academically unprepared Black males at a Black college. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *10*(4), 465-482. https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.10.4.d

Palmer, R. T., Davis, R. J., & Hilton, A. A. (2009). Exploring challenges that threaten to impede the academic success of academically underprepared Black males at an HBCU. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(4), 429-445. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0078

Palmer, R. T., Davis, R. J., & Maramba, D. C. (2010). Role of an HBCU in supporting

academic success for underprepared Black males. *Negro Educational Review*, *61*(1-4), 85.

Palmer, R. T., Davis, R. T., & Maramba, D. C. (2011). The impact of family support for African American males at an historically Black university: Affirming the revision of Tinto's theory. *Journal of College Student Development, 52*(5), 577-597. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0066

Patterson, G. C., Dunston, Y. L., & Daniels, K. N. (2013). Extreme makeover: Preserving the HBCU mission through service learning pedagogy. *Journal of African American Studies*, *17*(2), 154-161. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-011-9192-z

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2015). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. SAGE.

Sellers, R. M., Smith, M. A., Shelton, J. A., Rowley, S. A. J.., & Chavous, T. M. (1998). Multidimensional model of racial identity: A reconceptualization of African American racial identity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *2*(1), 18–39. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0201_2

Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). Unseen disadvantage: How American universities' focus on independence undermines the academic performance of first-generation college students. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *102*(6), 1178–1197. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027143

Talbert, P. Y. (2012). Strategies to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates. *Journal of Developmental Education*, *36*(1), 22-24.

Thomas, C. W. (1971). *Boys no more: A Black psychologist's view of community*. Glencoe Press.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2020a). *Digest of Education Statistics.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_322.20.asp

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2020b). *Digest of Education Statistics.* https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_322.20.asp

Wood, J. L. (2012). Leaving the 2-year college: Predictors of Black male collegian departure. *Journal of Black Studies, 43*(2), 303-326. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934711424490

Wood, J. L. (2014). Examining academic variables affecting the persistence and attainment of Black male collegians: A focus on academic performance and integration in the two-year college. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *17*(5), 601-622. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.733687

Wood, J. L., & Williams, R. (2013). Persistence factors for Black males in the community college: An examination of background, academic, social, and environmental variables. *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men, 1*(2), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2020.1171628

Author Note

Therron "T. Jai" Rogers, Ph.D., is the student support services manager at Rush Medical College in Chicago, IL. therron_rogers@rush.com

Donald "DJ" Mitchell, Jr., Ph.D., CDE®, is vice president for diversity, equity, and inclusion at Molloy University in Rockville Centre, NY. dmitchell1@molloy.edu

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Therron Rogers, Medical Student Affairs, Rush Medical College, 600 S. Paulina St., Chicago, IL 60612. Email: therron_rogers@rush.com

Article Citation

Rogers, T., & Mitchell, D., Jr. (2022). Hidden identity: A constructivist grounded theory of Black male identity development at historically Black colleges and universities. *The Qualitative Report, 27*(10), 2251-2277. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5718