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Failure was not an Option: The Lived Experiences of African American Male Graduates in Doctoral Programs at Historical Black Universities and Predominantly White Universities

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Keywords: adult learning; African American male doctoral graduates; Africentrism
critical race theory; HBCUs, PWIs, success indicators-selfethnic reflectors; coping mechanisms

Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative case study was to compare the lived experiences of African American male doctoral graduates from historical Black universities (HBCUs) and predominately White institutions (PWIs), their encounters with racism, and factors that contributed to the overall success for their attainment of a doctoral degree.

Statement of the Problem

Various forms of racism are among the most pressing and complex issues faced by African American males in American higher education (Harper, 2012). The impact of intellectual, institutional, and individual racism experienced by African American males on a daily basis are sometimes overlooked. The motivation for this study came from my own personal experience of being an African American male doctoral student, and being a product of predominately White academic institutions after my third grade elementary school integration; an experience that has become a politically and socially systemic engaging life-journey, and speaks to the factors that contributed to my overall educational success. The “life-journey” I speak about has also heightened my awareness and concern about the minimal amount of research conducted by past scholars regarding the African American students’ doctoral experiences, in particular the African American male who attended a historically Black university (HBCU) or a predominately White institution (PWI).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks of Africentrism: coping mechanisms, selfethnic identity, and the theory of selfethnic reflectors (Colin, 1989), and the tenets of Critical Race Theory: marginalization-isolation, racial oppression, and microaggressions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pg. 167) informed this study and were used to analyze the data obtained from the interviews. The participants in this study were asked questions about their experiences with racism, and the factors that contributed to their overall success for earning a doctoral degree.

Research Design

In that this qualitative study focuses on gaining an understanding of how African American males made meaning of their actual lived experiences and encounters with racism while pursuing a doctoral degree, and identifies and analyzes the factors that promoted their success at both historical Black universities and predominately White universities, an interpretive

research design was chosen for this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 582; Henderson, 2001, p. 67). The four research questions that guided this study were:

- What were the key factors that contributed to the academic success of African American male doctoral students at two different types of institutions?
- What racist encounters did African American males experience while in pursuit of their doctoral degree?
- What culturally grounded coping mechanisms did African American male doctoral graduates use to deal with the challenge of racism?
- How and in what ways did racism play a role with the development of intraracial or interracial relationships at historical Black universities and predominately White universities?

Findings

The major findings derived from the data were that: (1) some forms of covert and overt racism continue to be evident at PWIs, and not as much at HBCUs for the participants interviewed; (2) effective coping strategies were developed over time, as it is critical to maintain a positive mental psyche and remain focused; and (3) failure was never an option from the very beginning of the participants academic journey, which is a standard of excellence and a key aspect of an African-centered paradigm.

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