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# **It's Slippery Out There': Outsider's Perspectives of the Navigational Skills of African American Undergraduates in a Predominantly White Midwestern University**

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***Abstract:*** *In this qualitative research study conducted at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest USA, thirteen successful African American college students were interviewed about their in-class and out-of-class experiences at the institution. The research focus was how they were experiencing college and how they were navigating the higher education terrain. The results provided evidence of an exclusionary curriculum, racial and microaggressions, verbal abuse, problematic psychosocial environment and yet the defying of the odds to survive and thrive.*

## **Introduction and Overview of the Problem**

Recruitment and retention of minority students is an important conversation in higher education today. It must be noted that several predominantly white institutions have demonstrated tangible interest in recruiting minority students. Minority groups currently constitute 25 % of the overall population of the USA and it is projected that before the year 2015 one-third of the population will consist of individuals culturally and ethnically different from the white majority (US Census Bureau, 1993). Increasing numbers of minorities are now enrolled in higher education reflecting changes in the cultural and ethnicity profiles in the US population. Unfortunately, too often minorities are not completing college despite being recruited to institutions of repute. Clearly, recruitment is one thing, retention is another. It is alarming that in predominantly white institutions, 70% of Black students do not complete baccalaureate education, in comparison to 20% non-completion rate in historically black institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). There is also knowledge that the national college dropout rate for blacks was 20-25% higher than that for whites in the decade of the 1990s (Steele, 1999).

Often times explanations of the problem of the retention of minority students, especially African American undergraduates are offered and inferior academic preparation of black students prior to their enrolment in college is the alleged singularly most important culprit for this sorry state of affairs. However, there have been suggestions that academic concerns are not the most important in the high rate of attrition of black students (Echols, 1998) and certainly cannot be the only reason (Steele, 1999). It must be noted that the experiences of African American undergraduates have figured prominently in research studies utilizing quantitative research design methods on predominantly white campuses. These studies have paid much attention to the academic difficulties of this group of minority students (Echols, 1998, Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, Smith & Chance, 2004). Findings from these studies coalesce around some common themes, for instance the high attrition rates of African American and other minority groups such as Latinos. From these studies African Americans undergraduate students' attrition rates are higher than that for whites. African Americans also have lower cumulative grade point averages and persistence to graduation was abysmally low. These findings beg for further

explanation and it is for these reasons that the nonacademic concerns must be carefully examined.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to investigate the in-class and out-of-class experiences of undergraduate African American traditional-aged college students who were on a “success” path at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Midwestern USA. The study provided a unique perspective since it was conducted by an outsider of the African American community, a Jamaican researcher. It provided the opportunity for the voices of the participants to be heard.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives and Relevant Literature**

A constructivist conceptual framework or epistemology guided the study, legitimating the importance of lived reality. A constructivist approach seemed appropriate for this study because emphasis was placed on the participants’ construction of the meaning they made of their own personal experiences with in-class and out-of class experiences (curriculum), the nature of the context in which these experiences were situated and their evolving understanding of self.

William Pinar’s (1975) ideas about curriculum partly provided the theoretical considerations that were used to link some of the concepts in this paper concerning student’ experiences with curriculum. Pinar’s ideas were encapsulated in the concept of “currere.” Currere focuses on educational experiences of the individual as reported by the individual. It is an understanding of curriculum framed as autobiographical text. It is phenomenological; exploring students’ lived experiences and their interpretations of those experiences. From this perspective, there is a focus on introspection and hermeneutics, curriculum becomes something encountered and the student immerses her/himself in trying to understand the encounter.

Using the lens of critical theory provided the scope for the hermeneutical investigation of the lived experience (mentally documented texts) and texts generated from the interviews to be investigated from a perspective in which emancipation and transformation were deemed important. In using critical hermeneutics as one of the theoretical perspectives, this paved the way for the interpretive process to investigate how various forces and assumptions have been reproduced, embedded and informed in-class and out-of-class experiences. Van Manen (1990) argued that meanings are often hidden and must be brought to the surface through reflection. By using critical hermeneutics as one of the theoretical perspectives, space was created to unveil hidden meanings that served the interest of the socially and politically powerful (Ricoeur, 1980; Prasad, 2002). Thus, the interpretative process was oriented to not only analyzing texts as abstracted, formal entities, but also analyzing the socio-historical contexts in which they were embedded. It is from this articulated lived text that more analysis and interpretation following the traditions of hermeneutics and critical theory took place to get a more textured understanding of the experience. In this regard, hermeneutic phenomenology was pressed into service to “bring explicitness out of implicitness, to unveil the essence of the lived experience of a few, which allows for insight into the possible lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 96).

## Research Design

This was a qualitative research project employing phenomenological approaches. Thirteen African American research participants who were considered “information rich” were purposively selected. In phenomenological research, major selection criteria for participants include the subject’s experience with a particular phenomenon and the ability to communicate it (Kuckleman Cobb & Nelson Hagemaster, 1997). The criteria to be a research participant (interviewee) required that individuals be information-rich, self identified as African American, full time, and traditional-aged student in this Midwestern PWI. These persons were also students who were in their junior or senior years, hence having at least two years experience in navigating the educational terrain of the university.

It was important that significant care was exercised in developing trust to facilitate a meaningful interviewer/interviewee relationship. This ensured comfort as the relationship was deepened and paved the way for a truly dyadic conversational relationship to be realized. Although racially African Americans and Afro-Caribbean persons have much in common, the cultures are different. It was anticipated that access would be readily available but as will be shown in this paper, this was an understanding that lacked complexification.

Research participants were identified by employing snowball sampling techniques and by recommendation of knowledgeable personnel in the student affairs and academic affairs areas of the university. The data was collected with use of two semi-structured conversational interviews lasting for approximately one hour in each instance. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do African American college students experience in-class and out-of-class activities?
2. What is the essence of the college experience for African American undergraduates on a predominantly White Midwestern state university?
3. What are the common structures underlying the experiences of African American students in-class and out-of-class experiences?

Analysis of the data was continuous and ongoing. Attentiveness and deep listening characterized the data gathering phase of this research. There was a thorough review of data after each interview, transcribing, and multiple re-reading of transcripts. The stages of analysis were not linear. At each stage revisions were done as deemed necessary and examination and re-examination of the data proved worthwhile. Further key approaches in phenomenology were employed including bracketing, horizontalization, organization of data into meaningful clusters and determining the categories through coding and then elevating themes that emerge.

## Findings

The findings suggested that the students’ experiences were multifaceted and multilayered. It was clear that students in this study, for the most part coped admirably with the traditional academic side of the curriculum. They indicated that apart from the inability to adequately deal with some professors teaching style and personal inconsistency with studying, they were able to cope satisfactorily with the rigors of the traditional academic side of the curriculum. Various teaching learning activities were engaged. There were the traditional lectures which continued to be problematic in some courses. Unfortunately the teachers and textbook did not reflect much of the African American reality and so the issue of African American cultural experiences and the psychological fortifications that come through immersion

in the study of ones own intellectual forbears, progenitors and icons in the ethnic scholarship was missing. There was therefore need to integrate more minority cultural realities in the teaching learning domain since this was not adequately facilitated in the classes. Academic life in this regard continued to be essentially Eurocentric. They had to traverse an academic terrain that was wittingly or unwittingly exclusionary.

They had to contend with racial microaggressions and verbal abuse. This called on their resilience occasioning the expending of psychic energy and extending of the self to cope. The experience of racism clearly suggested that the educational environment was not totally welcoming and supportive of African Americans as. These experiences consisted of discrimination, stereotyping, verbal assaults, and treatment that suggested that the African Americans had major deficits as persons. It was indeed 'slippery out there' for the students to borrow a terminology from Jamaican popular music hence the need for thoroughgoing college navigational skills. These navigational skills were employed both inside and outside the classroom.

The students also described experiences in which they defied the odds. Hence surviving and thriving became an apt metaphor that captured the contours of the experience. Respondents described the importance of investing in the Black community, utilizing the networking opportunities, fellowshipping with friends, family and faculty, and developing disciplined approaches to life as important in the quest to survive and to thrive despite it being so "slippery out there."

Describing college as a place where their lives were sculpted, and where they were sculpted for life captured the totality of the college experience. This theme was expanded through descriptions depicting college as a place that allowed for the defining, refining, and redefining of the self. They also encountered and came to value diversity, benefited from immersive learning and were challenged to balance their lives, and to learn to manage their lives as efficient stewards. An important concept and life skill that meant a lot to these students was therefore stewardship.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

The socialization process in college was highlighted as preeminently valuable. It can be framed in terms of what or what Delors (1996, p. 6) referred to as the "learning to be" phase of college life (in essence, preparing for life in the society as individuals). All the research participants gave voice to the role college played in their academic and social development; however there was unanimity in the belief that it was the social preparation which was more meaningful and which was sculpting their lives in multiple ways. College for these participants was like the enactment of rites of passage, preparation for adult life and taking their place in the society. This understanding underscores the enormity of the psychosocial needs of these students and possible other college students. There was clear evidence that Black/minority students do have some problems on predominantly white campuses. References to microaggressions, verbal abuse and even the exclusionary nature of the educational commons are signposts to underlying concerns that are troubling. In this regard navigating the college terrain became a slippery slope that one could careful climb with the appropriate climbing gear. On another level one could experience tremendous difficulties in climbing this slope without the necessary climbing gear and adequate preparations. The fact that so many African Americans have not done well in college especially PWIs is a case that merits systematic inquiry and it is clear that non-academic

variables must be examined. In fact, the non-academic variables have been implicated in a very prominent way as contributing to the attrition rates for African American on predominantly white campuses (Echols, 1998). A major concern of this research was how these documented texts (the various experiences of in-class and out-of-class experiences) were informing the college experience.

This study, done with successful Black students at a PWI showed that success was linked to the quality of the in-class and out-of-class experiences. Hence the navigational skills for the educational terrain proved important. Indeed, success in institutions of higher education has been demonstrated to be linked to the quality of the campus experience (Echols, 1998). In a meta-analysis, Echols reviewed 113 studies and was able to show that a number of academic, social, family and institutional factors were associated with academic success. The studies in the meta-analysis were done over the period 1970-1997 and over 1500 institutions were represented and involved more than 46,000 students. Several minority groups were involved in these studies, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans and others. Echols also found that Tinto (1975, 1987) theory regarding the importance of social integration on campus was powerfully validated, it was a highly significant predictor variable. Certain negative experiences or non-integrative variable such as loneliness, isolation and alienation were positively correlated with withdrawal from college. Clearly, positive experiences or integrative experiences supported and enhanced minority students' ability to thrive and survive in college and the research is pointing to the importance of these considerations for persistence (Echols, 1998).

African American students must learn to negotiate racialized contexts on predominantly white campuses. The relative visibility or hypervisibility of these students has been noted (Davies, Smith & Chance, 2004). In this study, Black students were often expected to explain aspects of the black culture. In other cases, students felt a sense of responsibility because of the lack of numbers of Black students or felt that way because of their inability to appropriately navigate the environs. Developing the navigational skills and learning effective stewardship have certainly been shown to be important. The psycho-social atmosphere of the entire educational space has figured prominently in these findings and it is important for educational achievement. Further, in this study community building opportunities were celebrated and underscored as part of the navigational apparatus for surviving and thriving in college. Black spaces were not only supportive, they were also opportunities for telling counter stories that positioned the majoritarian culture and experience as normative and sidelined the experiences of African American. In this regard, they were also recuperative spaces, serving a very important psychosocial need. Indeed studies have shown that in PWIs, where there are hundreds of Black students, a sense of community is engendered when space is created for black students to come together for fellowshiping and sharing experiences (Davis et al., 2004, Echols, 1998).

In looking at the experiences and particularly the problems of African Americans in PWIs, a number of explanations have been proffered to account for these problematic conditions. For instance, there is the oft repeated argument of weak academic preparation, and the fact that there are few role models on campuses that these students have to emulate. Cuyjet (1997) found that blacks often arrived unprepared to handle the demands of college. The tendency to bifurcate the college experience is well known. Steele (1999) found that there are much stereotypes about Black students under preparation academically for college. The social preparation is often undervalued. In this study the navigational skills were extremely important and the Black spaces were supportive and recuperative places that assisted the students to negotiate the educational terrain. It is also known that feelings of isolation are troubling for African Americans on PWI

campuses and some are inundated by feelings of helplessness and a sense of unfamiliarity with the terrain of higher education rendering many students incapable of navigating the terrain successfully. The inability to navigate and negotiate higher educational landscapes successfully has problematic results. Students are embedded in layered social systems and the result of this is that they experience these educational sites in strange ways, in fact as uninvited guests and often rendering some immobilised (Davis et al., 2004; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, Smith & Chance, 2004; Echols, 1998). The research is clear that neither persistence nor progress toward identified goals have yet occurred at satisfactory levels for African-American students. This study and others are pointing to a seeming emerging consensus that the nonacademic variable ought to figure more prominently in the research (Davis et al.; Lewis, Ginsberg, Davies, Smith & Chance; Echols).

### **Conclusions: Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

The finding that elevated the use of the Black community organizations and networking opportunities as counter and recuperative spaces and particularly the importance of body pedagogy in those spaces has value for ongoing research. Further, in negotiating college, students had to balance their lives, employing folk wisdom or practical intelligences developed from their socialization in their families and the Black community. All of these findings provide fertile ground for further investigation in adult and higher education.

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